

SQUARE DANCING FOR BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

by Dr. Dave Drum

Are you looking for something that you can do that is fun and healthy? Maybe you've tried hiking, walking, jogging, yoga or any other sundry things but haven't quite found that perfect fit. Here's a great option: Try square dancing!

Square dancing for health? You bet! As a square dancer, you get the gift of good exercise not only for the body and the mind, but also for your spirit. There are several studies that show any dancing is a great way to get and stay healthy. Square dancers are all familiar with the studies that tout active square dancers live an extra 10 years due to the number of steps that are taken while participating in a night of dancing. Anywhere from 2 to 5 miles are put on our bodies during a dance. If this is done regularly, it provides a positive effect of countering cardiovascular disease. This is important, as cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death for men and women. Risk factors of a sedentary life style and obesity being some of the main changeable culprits. Routine physical activity also helps overall joint health by improving muscle mass and tone, and strengthening bone mass by exercising those ligaments and tendons as they pull on the long bones of the legs and arms.

As they say, "if you don't use it, you lose it." Regular exercise is essential for bone and joint health. Of course, don't forget the calories burned during a dance! Being overweight or obese is a MAJOR issue in this country, which by the way, leads to cardiovascular disease, diabetes and joint damage. Burning extra calories is never a bad idea!

Most of us have first or second hand experience with someone we know and love suffering with dementia, and it is a scary thing that we fear can loom in our own future. This added activity of square dancing also helps strengthen the mind. By helping to prevent progression of vascular disease within the brain, there is a lessened risk of stroke or vascular dementia. Also, overall brain function is improved with continued mental exercise, allowing us to "connect the dots", if you will, between listening and responding. Mild cognitive impairment is something that progresses with age, marked with decreased memory and responsiveness. The listening skills required for square dancing serve as a catalyst to improve brain function and help fend off the deterioration of our minds. That can only be a good thing.

There is more to good health than the physical, however. We must not forget the mental health factor. Mental illness comes in many shapes and forms, but a very common condition is that of depression. While depression is a complex issue, one of the causative factors is loneliness. This is different than being alone. One can be around people

constantly and never sever the grips of loneliness. It can lead to depression, isolation and even suicide. Mother Teresa called loneliness “the most terrible poverty.” It increases the circulating stress hormones within the body, and that leads to high blood pressure, a major risk factor for many other diseases. We have a fix for that! In fact, we have a fix for all of the above with square dancing.

Certainly, we shouldn't think of square dancing as a cure all for any of these conditions. But in reality, there is no cure all for any of it with modern medicine, and treating any of the above conditions (and many more) requires a “multi-step” approach. Square dancing can certainly be utilized as one of those steps in maintaining good overall health of our entire being--body, mind and spirit.

How do you get involved with square dancing? The best way is to find a local group. It's no surprise that square dancing is the state folk dance of Tennessee, as there are many groups in this area that would love to help you get started. But don't delay, as now is the time to get your feet wet. Most local groups are offering lessons to get you up and dancing in a square quickly and easily. These lessons usually begin in September, so now is the time to jump in.

Finally, don't think of square dancing as something for the senior crowd or something that you need to have a partner to enjoy. Sure, there are a lot of seniors involved, but it's likely because they've been doing it for decades (see the health connection?). There is a growing number of younger folks trying it out as well. College students, high schoolers and even those younger are seen on the floor. Families may see it as something they can do together as family and get everyone involved. Singles are always welcomed as well because, in square dancing, everyone dances with everyone in the square. Square dancing is a fun and endearing activity that brings with it friendship, companionship, and a way to help our bodies and minds cope with the ever increasing stresses of our day.

You'll never encounter a more friendly and positive group of people. Give it a try and we'll be seeing you across a square in no time!

Dave Drum, PA-C is a practicing physician assistant in East Tennessee and has been practicing for over 28 years. A newcomer to square dancing, he and his wife, Betty, are members of the Claxton Country Squares, and are enjoying all of its healthy benefits, and hope to continue dancing for many years to come.