

Circle Dancing and Health - by Jen Larner

When I began teaching Circle Dance, I could see that people really felt that they benefitted from this form of enjoyable movement, not seeing it as just exercise. I had done a lot of previous work in homes entertaining using singing and music, and nearly everyone involved had enjoyed singing along. I decided I would contact all the nursing homes in the area as a way of generating extra income, but also as I felt residents might enjoy the variety of music and the opportunity to move. I had no idea of the extraordinary health benefits.

I discovered a course 'Circle Dance and Dementia' being held in London by Dementia Pathfinders, and went on this. I learned how some dances had been adapted to being done seated for those with mobility issues, and how good strong rhythms really help people get a feel for the music, especially when combined with simple repetitive movements.

I wrote to all 17 nursing homes in my local town. Only one responded, but they were very enthusiastic and I ended up going once a fortnight for 18 months, doing a 50 minute session. A high proportion of the residents had dementia. The manager was very keen on music and movement as a way of motivating and involving residents. I had some very interesting sessions, some easier than others. Once when I was really struggling with a session, getting little response from residents. I abandoned what I had planned and just tried to do ever more cheerful dances with clapping and other strong simple movements, but was very glad when the time was up. During the session I had a message from the manager asking to see me at the end. I thought she was going to ask me not to come any more. To my surprise she commented that she thought it was the best session I had ever done. I said I'd found it tricky. She pointed out that Betty hadn't smiled for a week, and was now doing so, that Jim had been extremely passive for a while now, but had been clapping to the music etc. As I didn't know the residents that well, or their day to day behaviour, I hadn't noticed these small but vital things. She then asked me to double my visits.

There was one resident, with severe dementia, who wasn't involved in the dancing but was sitting the other side of the room. At the end of the piece (Walenki) he walked across and asked if that had been Russian music. When I confirmed it was, he said he had a Ph.D in Russian, had spent a lot of his life there, and talked about it for 10 minutes. Another Greek lady always talked in gibberish (neither Greek nor English) but paused from time to time for you to make 'conversation' with her ("oh, that's nice", "how lovely") before continuing. When I put on a Greek song 'Enas Mythos', she sang along, anticipating what was coming next. It had obviously triggered memories for her. One gentleman, almost entirely paralysed and heavily strapped into a very large chair, would always insist of being in the circle, with his wife making a special visit in to the home on that day to sit with him and hold his hand. He made limited movements to the music with his eyes and sometimes one finger, and 'sang' along all the time. They had loved dancing together, and he loved all the music.

My programme was about 75% circle dance music, and 25% songs that they could sing along to. So 'Catch a falling star' was a favourite, and also 'If I Knew You Were Coming I'd

Have Baked A Cake' and 'Goodnight Irene'. We did actions to these, or I would go round the circle and hold hands with them one by one and sway gently, or get them up on the floor and dance individually.

We did many dances seated, often with the help of a 12m long stretchy plaited velvet band sewn into a circle, so that everyone could hold something that felt and looked lovely, and maintained a circle even if some residents were asleep, or unable to hold hands with their neighbour. This increased hugely the possible movements eg taking the band down to the floor and back up again, or giving a resident the chance to lead the dance by choosing their own movements, or enabling interaction between residents if they wanted to play by pulling the band between themselves!

I adapted dances for those in chairs and wheelchairs, sticking as much as possible to the original dance steps but simplifying them. I would tell them the stories associated with the dances, and where they were from. I often made new dances to music they would know such as carols at Christmas. The standing dances were more of a shuffle, with limited steps, but the fact that they were holding hands gave them confidence and balance, and kept them moving.

I believe strongly that this regular class helped in so many ways. The mental and physical co-ordination needed to carry out simple but repetitive movements, exercise (however limited) to gorgeous music with its strong rhythms and the doing something in community, in a circle, all supporting each other to some extent were all very important. I hadn't anticipated the reminiscence aspect but it was clearly valued strongly.

In addition I have worked with a local stroke group who really enjoyed the dances and music.

I think the reason I got such poor response from a majority of nursing homes (I wrote to all 17 each year for several years, and followed it up with phone calls to the activities co-ordinator etc – offered an introductory half hour session at reduced rate, which some took up) is three-fold:

- a) Cost. Though I felt it was reasonable, homes are really strapped for cash
- b) Organisation. The challenge of getting folks interested (especially as they don't know what Circle Dance is, and if they have dementia), arranging chairs in a circle, finding appropriate space in the home, having a member of staff free to sit in the group - which I insisted on.
- c) Volunteers. Many offer to come and entertain, and homes inevitably say yes to a free and easy resource. However, this is being done to passive residents, and doesn't involve them actively.

This is such a shame, as I see that the physical and mental benefits are huge. Because circle dancing is so adaptable to all levels of mobility, everyone can enjoy and benefit from it.

The benefits of circle dancing are:

- Enjoyment at the time and enjoyment which may be recalled
- Movement and mobility; essential and required exercise
- Emotional and inner well-being, the circle and the type of music
- Relationships; contact/friendship encouraged/stimulated between users. Can provide a shared activity in group of users when some are diagnosed with e.g dementia and some are not
- An activity that does not depend on conversation - for users less able to participate in discussion
- An activity which can be offered to all age groups and abilities
- Can be used at relatives social events; scope for engaging relatives/families in activities
- Culture; the music is multi-cultural for users, carers and staff diversity

Circle dancing is adaptable and Inclusive; both seated and standing dances in a session can involve mixed physical ability users to share an activity, with no need for partners

The dancing, using a wide range of music, provides an enjoyable form of exercise and movement, emphasises relationships, emotional and physical aspects of being and group belonging and links to celebrations and life events.

Making use of rhythm, music, touch and movement for people who may experience difficulty with communication and loss of confidence has been evidenced as promoting their well-being.

It offers the opportunity for a shared activity with partners, relatives and carers. Circle Dance can be used in residential and day settings, assessment units, NHS and voluntary organisation groups with older people, people with learning disability, mental health conditions, and physical disabilities, and at care home social events.

I'd like to end with a few quotes both from managers and users.

- Jen Larner

"The circle dancing has had a real impact on the service users and they really enjoy it and engage with positive outcomes."

Activities Co-ordinator

"The circle dances are very popular and they are proving to be very beneficial on bringing people together who have mixed abilities, which helps to break down barriers between people, encouraging involvement from those who are a little shy."

Unit Manager

“Circle dancing was completely unknown to me until recently. I have found it to be the answer to my love of dancing in a gentle format. It has a social and sometimes emotional element and is interesting to have an insight into the different countries' dances and the historic origins. I believe it gives me gentle exercise to music and it exercises my brain and memory retention as I learn the sequences. This will help keep me active in mind and body which is so important for all of us as we advance in years.” *(Carol)*

“I am not too good with words but one of the benefits for me of circle dancing was after losing a loved one who I used to dance with, being able to dance with no partners was the first way I got introduced to circle dancing. Not only good exercise but a way of meeting people and enjoying the thoughts related to the dancing music and movements.” *(Maureen)*

“Circle dancing makes me feel like I've done a work-out almost without realising it”. *(Clare)*

“I've found that Circle Dancing is gentle, low impact exercise which keeps you supple and slim-ish! I love the music from different countries and enjoy learning their dances and something about other cultures and I particular like to dance to the simple steps of ancient dance, imagining I am one of them! For me, Circle Dance has a spiritual quality and I like the simple gestures that illustrate what the dance is about. Also very sociable! All in all - a winner!” *(Rachel)*