Parkinson's seems a debilitating disease – but dance can help. **David Leventhal** explains the remarkable success of treating patients like dancers

**Think like a dancer**

Carroll Neesemann surveys the grey-floored studio at the Mark Morris Dance Center with an aquiline gaze and tinge of impatience. An arbitrator with a top New York law firm and a former Marine, Neesemann looks like a man on a mission. On either side of him, Leonore Gordon and Joy Esterberg, fellow members of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, take their seats in black folding chairs with an expectant, excited air. It's Wednesday at 2pm, and 50 people with Parkinson's disease are about to do something many people think they can't: dance.

Dancing isn't something that springs to mind when people think about Parkinson's disease (PD), a degenerative neurological disorder that affects muscle control, balance, and coordination, among other things. But for nearly a decade, people with Parkinson's disease, their caregivers, spouses and partners have been taking a weekly 75-minute Dance for PD class with dancers and faculty members of Brooklyn-based Mark Morris Dance Group as a way temporarily to ease the isolation, frustrations, and impairments of the disease.

The rigorous class (which uses live music) integrates movement from contemporary, tap, jazz and ballet techniques to stretch arms, strengthen legs, engage minds and stimulate imaginations. Throughout, there is no mention of disease, symptoms or tests. Because the class provides 'an unpatronising level of excellence,' according to Esterberg, the participants think of themselves as their teachers do – as dancers, not patients.

For people with Parkinson's, being a dancer for a few hours a week is powerful in helping participants regain physical confidence in their own bodies. 'The fact that our condition is acknowledged but [is] not the focus of the class allows us the dignity of managing that ourselves, and frees us to maintain the illusion that we are dancers,' says Esterberg, a teacher and writer diagnosed with PD in 2003. 'This creative pretending is as powerful for adults as it is for children and contributes to the joy of the class.' Another participant adds, 'this class provides a feeling that my future life incorporates opportunities that will be fulfilling, and therefore empowering.'

The class' benefits go farther than simply transporting participants from a world of chronic illness into one of artistic achievement. Beyond identifying themselves as dancers, participants have learned to think like dancers, and by doing so, they've developed the same strategies that professional dancers use to make sense of challenging movement.

Dance for PD's philosophy of dance for dancing's sake places serious trust in the efficacy of dance training to address the specific physical challenges that people with a movement disorder face. As it turns out, classical and contemporary dance techniques, with their progressive sequential structure and emphasis on qualitative control, balance, coordination, expressive range and sensitivity to music, are particularly effective in helping people with Parkinson's regain a sense of grace and control.

'Dancing allows a body that pisses me off by betraying me to move in ways which reconnect me and my body in a creative and fun way, making
me feel like we're a team again,' said Gordon, a family therapist of 27 years and a resident poet in the Brooklyn public schools who retired in 2008 because of Parkinson's disease.

Olie Westheimer, the executive director of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, had a hunch about the natural synergy between professional dancers and people with Parkinson's, and this led her to approach the Mark Morris Dance Group in 2001 with the idea for the Dance for PD class. Westheimer herself had studied ballet with a graduate of the Royal Ballet School, and understood the powerful effects dance training could have on the mind and body. 'What well-trained dancers know how to do very, very well, is control their movements with cognitive strategies and conscious use of all sensory input,' Westheimer wrote in *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*.

MMDG's Executive Director Nancy Umanoff initially asked my colleague John Heginbotham to lead the class, and I joined soon after. As active teaching artists as well as full-time performers with the MMDG, John and I had taught toddlers through to graduate students, but neither of us had any experience teaching people with a movement disorder. Misty Owens, who joined us after the first year, had an even more diverse teaching background but no experience with Parkinson's. To Westheimer, such splendid isolation from the disease was only an advantage.

‘There were three things I told you and John to get started,’ Westheimer reminds me. ‘I said that persons with PD have a hard time moving their bodies and that they can be easily fatigued, so some of the class should be done seated. And I asked you to teach a real dance class, not a watered-down version.’

Amanda Fogg, who teaches classes for people with Parkinson's in Weymouth, Dorset (UK), believes that the dance focus makes all the difference. ‘The class provides a secure environment for playing and working with challenges which may be physical or cognitive or creative or artistic – and which are enjoyable and fun. Straight exercise modalities can have a high drop-out rate because they can feel punitive or tedious. A dance class can be a richer experience because it involves the whole being.’

Over the years – as the Brooklyn class has grown from nine adventurous students in its first year to more than 60 – John, Misty and I have developed an ‘anything goes’ attitude to our ever-broadening class curriculum. We’ve taught our students modern dance contractions and pas de cheval, tap paradiddles and flamenco stomps, square dancing and excerpts from Mark Morris’ acclaimed work, *L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.

Structured improvisation and physical storytelling play an increasingly important role in the class. Participants spend a part of each session creating their own movements to represent seasons, historical characters, or quotidian scenarios. Just as professional dancers do when they perform Juliet or Carabosse, our students harness the power of their imaginations in the service of movement.

The imaginative and qualitative elements of dancing – the why and how – elicit striking effects in the students, and suggest that these tools form the basis of a strategy that helps dancers embody movement more fully, a notable example mind over matter. ‘I’ve come to realise that unlike other physical endeavours, dance is about the “how”, not just the “what” of an action,’ said Neesemann. ‘You really have to think about how you are doing a movement for it to work as dance.’

Participants experience noticeable physical and emotional improvement during the class, but what happens after they leave the studio? ‘The glow lasts an hour or so,’ wrote one participant, adding ‘self confidence lasts until the next major freeze or fall (three to five days).’

Esterberg said she thinks about what she has learned in the class all the time, and that it has led her to a greater awareness of grace. ‘It is almost second nature now to be aware of posture, position and rhythm. Movement whether I am doing exercises at home or am in the street. Neesemann told me that studying tap, in the class and privately, has given him a movement vocabulary and quality that help him get out of bed with greater confidence. He can attack the floor with an assurance that helps him find his footing to stand up.

Herb Heinz, a musician in his mid-40s who lives in Berkeley, California, takes local Dance for PD classes based on the MMDG/BPG model. He recalls a moment when he had trouble moving toward the checkout line at his local grocery store. Instead of panicking or feeling embarrassed, Heinz said, he decided to *choreograph* his way forward, something he only felt comfortable doing because he’d been in dance class. He was able to transform a difficult moment into a conscious, graceful dance.

The class seems to have the power to transform its teachers as deeply as its students. The program attracts teachers from a wide variety of backgrounds – retired professional ballet dancers, tap teachers, and contemporary choreographers – and over 60 instructors are now part of the Dance for Parkinson's movement worldwide. But all seem driven by the enticing challenges and profound rewards that come from sharing movement with the Parkinson's community.

‘When I was younger, all my striving was towards a physical, technical ideal,’ says Amanda Fogg. ‘Having minor physical difficulties myself, and working with people who have considerable challenges, has really emphasised to me that dance lives within – and that there is always a way of bringing it to light.’

Joanne Duff, formerly Head of Education for the English National Ballet who leads Dance for PD classes in London, said she appreciates that the class deepens her approach to teaching in general: ‘Working with people with Parkinson’s reminds me of why we all go into a dance studio – to enjoy moving together, challenge ourselves in each new class. She adds, ‘We are all learning more and more from the world of science about the different ways people respond to dance. This new information will continue to feed and stimulate my practice – it is both complex and fascinating.’

Professional instructors and PD participants teach and nourish each other week in and week out, and dozens of teachers and students involved in the program confirm that the class has transformed their personal and professional perspectives. ‘Our Parkinson’s group asked me if they could have class in July and August,’ one teacher wrote to me recently. ‘I wasn’t planning on it but I can’t refuse. The look of joy on their faces at the end of the class makes it really worthwhile for me.’

The Dance for PD website is in development at www.danceforparkinsons.org. For more information, contact info@mmdg.org or +1 646 450 3373.