



Dancing To Ease Symptoms Of Parkinson's Disease

Local Classes Combine Research, Dance Expertise

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BOSTON -- Research has shown that exercise can help ease the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, and a new class being offered only in New York and Boston is showing that dancing can benefit patients, too.

"This is a disease that's characterized by rigidity, by smallness of motion, by a quiet voice," said dance instructor Naomi Goodman, who teaches the dancing and movement class at the Jewish Family & Children's Services in Waltham, Mass.

The moves are alternatively soothing, loud and even sultry. But each step in the class is designed with a purpose, to ease the symptoms of life with Parkinson's disease.

"Listening to music with a beat sort of just let the disease melt off of them," said Goodman.

"A lot of what we're doing has to do with balance," said Nancy Mazonson, an occupational therapist who helps oversee the class.

"When we're doing anything like wading in the water and making believe we're putting one foot in the water, that requires a great deal of balance," she said.

The classes are a collaboration between dancers from New York City's famed Mark Morris Dance Group, and neurology researchers at Boston University.

"Some of the exercises you're seeing here in the background help to increase flexibility, joint mobility," said Terry Ellis, Ph.D. The Boston University professor and researcher has spent years studying how exercise can improve the quality of life for Parkinson's patients.

"So, they (patients) can walk, they can keep up with people while they're walking. They can get out of bed easier, they can stand up from a chair easier," Ellis said.

Ed Rudman has had Parkinson's for 11 years. He was pivotal in bringing the class to the Boston area after he discovered firsthand how dancing eased his symptoms.

"I never thought I could dance and I'm really grooving it now," Rudman said.

"I feel better. I feel stretched out and looser" after leaving class each week, said Vicky Weiss, a former physical therapist who was diagnosed four years ago. It was news that did not come as a total surprise, she said. Her father also had Parkinson's.

"Parkinson's is a tough disease," said Rudman. "A lot of people suffer depression with it, and, I just want to see people smile."

"I'm still cognizant of the needs that this particular population has, but when they're in this class with me they're not people with Parkinson's, they're my dancers," said Goodman. "And they are extraordinary, they really are."

The JF&CS in Waltham also runs Parkinson's family support groups. All of their programs are open to the general public, regardless of religious affiliation. A new session of Parkinson's dance classes will begin in August.

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