

TAP DANCING

A Step Towards Better Health

by Krystyna Parafinczuk

TAP DANCING IMPROVES YOUR BODY, MIND, ENERGY & EMOTIONS

You can take up tap dancing and watch your body transform right before your eyes within a matter of weeks. The study, practice, rehearsal and performance of tap dancing uses your entire body and makes you think. It makes you smile when you are exerting maximum levels of energy. And you learn to “act” when making difficult steps look effortless – just like Fred (Astaire) and Ginger (Rogers). Yes, you may experience frustrations in the learning process, but more often than not, you’ll tap away feeling refreshed and happy; hence, the phrase “happy feet.”

TAP DANCING RELIEVES STRESS

Let’s start at the top and address the benefits to the mind. Intense focus and concentration are required in a dance class to learn and master tap steps and remember combinations. You can’t worry about your day-to-day problems while focusing on making music with your feet. As a result, you’ll experience *stress relief*. Many believe that stress is the number one underlying cause of illness, disease and death. Take advantage of this *psychological escape* and tap your troubles away at least three times a week and you’ll also train your body to recover quicker from stressful situations!

Stress is linked to the six leading causes of death — heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide.

THE BRAIN GETS TO THINK

The brain is a muscle that gets a workout when learning new steps, trying to assimilate, memorize and recall steps, combinations and dances. All senses are engaged when learning and absorbing new material. Tap dancers develop enhanced observational and analytical abilities enabling them to pay greater attention to details. With repetition, *new* neuropathways (*information highways*) are built allowing the brain to send stronger signals to the muscles. The stronger the signal, the quicker the reaction, the better the technique. You also gain a greater understanding of the musical, theatrical and aesthetic elements of tap dance performance.

THE MIND GETS TO CREATE

The mind has to *think*, but it also gets a chance to *create*. That’s when the brain operates at its *highest level*. Tap dancers create when the style of dancing is rhythm tap or what is now known as *jazz tap*. Jazz musicians *improvise*, which means they spontaneously create music on the spot. Tap dancers, when performing alongside musicians, take turns improvising and trading musical phrases. Tap transforms the dancer into a percussive instrument with a mind! Improvising may be intimidating at first, but teachers begin the process in the classroom with tap games conducted in a circle.

One by one, students spontaneously create 2-, 4-, 8- and 16- count musical phrases with their feet. It’s great *fun!* And studies have proven that activities *need to be “fun” for “learning to occur.”*

Using the mind to *learn, remember and create* becomes more important later in life when concerns about dementia begin to surface. Tap dancing trumps crossword puzzles any day. This could be one of the reasons there are so many senior tap dance companies. Tucson has three: Tucson Prime Time Dancers, Tucson Prunes, and The Wreckettes. There are a few more reasons tap dancing is a hit with seniors – *stronger bones and shapely legs!*

TAP DANCING LEADS TO STRONGER BONES

Since tap dancing is a high-impact, weight-bearing activity, the body seeks out calcium to make bones stronger with each heel-to-toe impact into the floor. Here’s one very important reason for young girls to start tap dancing. *Ten million Americans (80% women) suffer from osteoporosis.* Studies have shown that weight-bearing activities during adolescence (9 to 14 years) can play a significant role in preventing bone loss during menopause.

Girls form 40% of their bone mass during adolescence. While most research studies use sports to determine findings, one can easily see how tap dancing can be substituted.

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TAP DANCING

→ Improves your Mind, Body & Energy

→ Creates Stronger Bones, Heart, Brain

→ Enhances Legs, Buttocks & Emotions

TAP DANCING CREATES GREAT LEGS, BUTTOCKS WHILE BURNING 300-450 CALORIES

Shapely legs and buttocks are the result of dancing mostly on the balls of your feet with relaxed knees. A visible difference can be seen in three weeks if you take a one hour class three times a week. And while you are bouncing, hopping, leaping, flapping and “shuffling off to Buffalo,” you are working your heart and lungs, strengthening your cardiovascular system. Depending on the intensity of the tap workout, you can burn anywhere from 300-450 calories! You will definitely be “breathless” for at least 30 minutes of class and that translates into a stronger heart, greater muscle strength and endurance. *And the increased flow of blood to the brain will help ward off dementia.* The increased blood flow also helps get more oxygen to your muscles so they can work harder.

TAP DANCING IMPROVES BALANCE, DEXTERITY, AGILITY, COORDINATION

Tap dancing is also excellent for improving skills such as *balance, dexterity, agility and coordination.* Tappers need to execute hops and balances with ease on the balls of their feet. Use of the arms and legs, together with spatial directions and formations, require a greater degree of coordination. The very fast speed of tap dancing requires dexterity and increases agility

when dancers strive for precision in performance.

It also increases the mobility of your ankle, knee and hip joints. If you stretch after class, when the body is hot, then the rest of you becomes more *flexible.*

Tap dancers have highly developed *anterior tibialis* (shins) muscles (lots of ankle flexing) and this is one reason they have great balance and can prevent falling. *Falling* is a serious issue for the elderly, especially with fragile bones. Twelve million people over 65 fall each year, and many result in hip fractures. By 2040 they predict 650,000 older people will fracture their hip annually, and 18-33% will die within the first year of their fracture. (*Resnick B, U of Maryland Baltimore, School of Nursing*)

TAP DANCING CREATES PLEASURE, FRIENDS AND ENHANCES SELF-ESTEEM

The best part about tap dancing is that it engages your emotions in many different ways – as many different ways as there are styles of music. Music motivates us to choreograph, to practice, to perform, and to smile. One minute you can be a flapper doing the Charleston, the other a Broadway dancer in 42nd Street putting on a show. And if you become famous like Savion Glover, you could be a tap dancing penguin in the animated film **Happy Feet!**

From a psychological and social standpoint, tap dancing

contributes to your emotional health. You experience satisfaction and pleasure when you master that difficult step or remember a new dance. Your self-confidence builds and you hold yourself in higher esteem. By virtue of it being a tap class or performing group, you are surrounded by like-minded people where you can share stories, classroom dramas and performance blunders! When the performances are successful, you experience euphoria – a “high” -- and that may be the *single most significant motivating factor that will keep you tap dancing forever.*

TRY A TAP CLASS

Tap dancing is a total mind-body experience that leaves you breathless, yet more alive! Search your local dance studios and/or community colleges for beginning level classes and give it a try. Maybe your instructor will allow you to start with hard-soled shoes. Or go for it—get a pair of tap shoes and start *making music ... with your feet!*

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