

HAVE A FLING!

Want the surest route to contentment and health? You'll need a kilt, sporrans, dancing pumps, but not underpants

BY SEAN THOMAS

WEAREN'T KIDDING. According to recent research, all that Scottish reeling and jigging is the best tonic there is for our physical and mental health. Over the last 10 years, Professor Michael Argyle, a psychologist at Oxford Brookes University in the UK, has been investigating the reasons for happiness and wellbeing.

"Our research shows that group Scottish dancing is the pastime that gives the most pleasure," concludes Argyle. It's an opinion confirmed in a UK experiment that found Highland flinging was the best way of achieving happiness from a broad

range of activities. So what is the unique combination offered by all this Caledonian skipping around?

» Dressing up

"The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung had a theory that humans need a 'shadow' – a kind of psychic alter ego," according to social psychologist Victoria Saunderson, who has studied the psychological benefits of wearing a costume.

"It makes sense that we feel trapped in the confines of a single persona and this is particularly true of those people who have

stressful jobs and are expected to be constantly responsible. There's a longing to 'throw off the pinstripes' and do something really outrageous, so you get high-profile lawyers turning tricks with \$10 prostitutes," she observes.

"However, if these people had an outlet, they wouldn't upset the applecart of their lives in such a catastrophic fashion.

"Donning a costume makes Scottish dancing one very good way of being someone else for a while. You could also get the same benefits if you joined a drama group," according to Saunderson.

» Exercise

"It's been established that an hour of vigorous dancing is equivalent to an hour in the gym," advises GP, health author and keen dancer Dr Vincent Forte. "It works all the major muscle groups, but because of the variety of movements, none are worked too excessively. This makes dancing a safe way of toning muscles without the risks of repetitive strain and pulls common with more intensive exercise."

Research from The Mayo Clinic in the US confirms that dancing can burn as many kilojoules as walking, swimming or cycling, which are good alternatives if grooving's not your thing. Attaching pedometers to square dancers, their study

More mental benefits come from the new brain structures dancing creates, says Forte. "Rehearsing and learning the profile of movements builds new pathways in the brain – vitally important when you remember that after the age of 18 we lose 100,000 brain cells every day."

» Communitarity

Researchers at Illinois University in the US recently published their findings on the physical, mental and social benefits of social exercise such as dancing.

Sedentary, but otherwise healthy, dance volunteers met for 40-minute exercise classes three times a week. After six months, those who had maintained the programs

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found participants covered over eight kilometres in a single evening – but they estimate that the greater demands of the Celtic version would almost double that.

Plus, they found other physiological benefits, with the side-to-side moves strengthening weight-bearing bones (tibia, fibula and femur) and helping prevent the loss of bone mass. They concluded that dancing is a positive alternative to aerobics or jogging.

» Mental and overall health

"For starters, research has shown leisure activities boost our immune system," according to Argyle. One US study found 50-year-old men without socialised leisure activities had a mortality rate three times that of peers with them.

"And leisure activities involving exercise, like dancing, have a particularly good effect on mental health," reveals Argyle.

"Dancing is one of the best ways to release endorphins – naturally occurring body chemicals which create a sense of euphoria and wellbeing," adds Forte.

"You get a pleasant high that often lasts for a day or two. And even though there's sometimes a 'downer' when the effect wears off, it just takes a repeat 'dose' to restore the feeling. So be warned: this makes dancing quite addictive."

showed improvements in happiness and life satisfaction and a decrease in loneliness. For those who gave up, on the other hand, happiness levels dropped to below their pre-exercise starting point.

The researchers' conclusions? "Social exercises such as dancing, group cycling, aerobics or team sports are very good at engendering wellbeing," they reported. "However, it's important not to stop the exercise once you've begun. Let's put it another way – you may start to miss your dancing partners."

» Sexual interaction

Good news if you're looking for love: the experts also reckon the social network of a dance class makes it easier to meet members of the opposite sex. People can dance with different partners in an exciting way, without feeling threatened or breaching the boundaries of good taste and intimacy, as may happen at a nightclub or party.

"Pastimes are good for the socio-sexual fabric and dance classes don't have the hostility to individual outsiders which other social groupings tend to produce," according to Argyle.

Strangers are made welcome and studies at Sydney University indicate that social and gender-based divisions are much less important than elsewhere in society. **MH**

Fancy giving Scottish dancing a whirl? January 25 is Burns Night, so dust off your kilt and brush your sporan. Check out the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society's Web site www.rscds.org.au for details on classes and events around Australia.

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