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## The dance 'movement' making a big difference for people with Parkinson's

Anita Beaumont  
Latest in Health

THEY come for the fitness, stay for the fun, and return for the good company.

Now a group of people with Parkinson's Disease want to encourage others to enjoy the buzz and the benefits of regular dancing.

Dancer Jessica Conneely teaches Dance For Parkinson's classes, modeled on the Dance For PD program developed in New York, twice weekly in Charlestown, south of Newcastle.

But in light of World Parkinson's Day and NSW Seniors Week, she is hosting a free community class at Lake Macquarie Performing Arts Centre, Warners Bay, from 10am on April 11 for any seniors interested in trying a class.

"Research is now telling us that dancing in particular – as an exercise intervention for Parkinson's – has physical, cognitive and social benefits," she said.

"People with Parkinson's find it tricky with their balance and gait, so the sequencing of the movements we do – from sitting through to standing – address those specific needs that they have. Cognitively, it helps with their processing and reaction time, and the physical benefits on top of that.

"People with Parkinson's can feel very isolated once they are diagnosed, and from there they can have all sorts of issues with anxiety and depression as well. We have a cup of tea after class – the socialisation is just as important as the exercise."

Newcastle architect Brian Suter, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease about three years ago, said as well as medication, regular exercise was recommended to slow symptom progression. He was diagnosed after two medic friends, on separate occasions, commented on his gait.

Mr Suter, now 81, was shuffling, and he was not swinging one of his arms when he walked.

"One of the things with Parkinson's is that you can struggle with balance – most of us find it hard to co-ordinate, but this kind of movement and dancing assists you on that level," he said.

"The classes are wonderful. You may have a disease that is incurable, but you come along and you see there are people who are going through the same kind of thing, or who may even be worse off, and it is reassuring. We are not alone. We have all become like a big family."



Let's dance: In chairs, supported, or standing, people with Parkinson's want others to know about the local dance classes that are improving their fitness and introducing them to new friends. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

He said the people at the classes was a mix of those with Parkinson's, and their carers.

His wife, Kay, attended each week too.

"Some people might think of Parkinson's as a death sentence," he said.

"But it's not. You can still live a good life, and with facilities such as this – there is some really good help and support available out there."

Ms Conneely, who runs Dance 4 Wellbeing, plans to start a third Parkinson's class in the upper Hunter area towards the end of the year.

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Newcastle architect, Brian Suter