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Moving the body to feed the brain

Premium content

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A group of seniors gathered in a church hall in Annapolis Royal recently with the goal of moving their bodies to feed their brains. They came to do the brain dance, a movement technique which dance enthusiasts say reorganizes the neurological system and increases blood and oxygen flow to the respiratory system and the brain.

The September event was hosted by the Company of Angels Dance Projects, which held two similar classes in 2016. All three sessions were led by instructor Anne Marie Cabri, founder of Cabri Dance, in Toronto, who also serves as an artist educator for the National Ballet of Canada's education programs.

Cabri is one of the few qualified teachers of the brain dance method in Canada. In an interview after the class, she said she learned the technique from Ann Green Gilbert in Seattle, Washington, in 1999.

Green Gilbert developed the brain dance from a method she called brain compatible dance, while considering the needs of all different types of learners.

"In 1999 there was a lot of focus in schools on children with ADHD and learning challenges for the regular classroom teacher. And, then in 2000 she coined this term brain dance, based on eight movements which are full-body co-ordination patterns," Cabri said. "Eight movements were chosen because Anne was working with a lot of doctors and therapists who were working on studying children in their first year of life and how they move and how that later is seen in their learning abilities." Green Gilbert believed research showed music and movement changes the brain in people of all ages. However, her work with M.S., Parkinson's and dementia patients showed the Brain Dance method can be especially helpful to seniors.

Randy Glynn of the Company of Angels Dance Projects was one of the 14 participants in the recent brain dance class. The seasoned choreographer and dance teacher joined the other participants, some of whom had little dance experience, as they walked, ran, glided, twisted and turned in all directions, making their way from one end of the hall to the other in almost continual motion, for an hour. They moved singly, in pairs and small and large groups. All the while they were led by a high-energy and enthusiastic Cabri. "When we get older there are a lot of things we just don't do anymore, like spin or go big and small, or walk sideways," Glynn said in an interview. "I think the brain dance goes through the system of movement that a child goes through, so seniors in the brain dance class are just regrooving that pathway. And, that's healthy."

Cabri agrees. "If the movement patterns are not enlivened on a regular basis they will disintegrate. And we rejuvenate it in a movement class like this for instance, and it can be

strengthened to be an active pathway.”

Cabri went on to explain that two of the movement patterns, which provide tactile and vestibular stimulation, are especially beneficial to seniors because they are lacking in daily life and common exercise programs.

“The result of focusing on them is that it will improve ability to interact more fully with the world and people around them. Once we have tactile stimulation, our nerves naturally regroup and go through a calming down effect afterwards. The calming down is what strengthens our system, including better visual fields. The use of eyes and focus can encourage dormant neck and head movements, which can get very set in a downward gaze with seniors.”

She said a strengthened vestibular system allows us to navigate our surroundings more easily and allows us to take up more space and live more fully.

“When our vestibular system, our balance, is strong confusion is not so great. People with dementia often feel their head is swirling with disconnected thoughts. Exercises in dance class that offer a challenge to balance, both on and off, encourage and strengthen the body’s ability to settle more quickly once being out of balance occurs. It is through experience of this movement connected to conscious thought that makes the difference.”

Cabri also added that enjoying and moving to the music adds to the experience.

“In a dance class you also have the music to feel. It gives you a lot of nourishment, to exercise that. “

That was the case for Terry Roscoe, who was a participant in all three brain dance classes. “I have a lot of dizziness, so the spinning we did in the movements was helpful. It increases your tolerance for the ability to move without having dizziness. “I’d recommend it to anybody. It just makes you feel more alive.”

Glynn also referred to a 21-year study of seniors aged 75 and older, conducted by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. He said the study showed social dancing was found to be the only physical activity offering protection against dementia. “Social dance requires micro decisions because it requires you to lead and follow. You have to make hundreds and hundreds of very quick decisions which is the link between the mental and the physical. No other activity came close, not cycling, rowing, running, crosswords or reading.”

For years, geriatric specialists have referred to data they say investigates the correlation between memory and movement. They report that research shows dancing exercises brain muscles and movement interaction processes several cognitive functions, which assist in defeating dementia.

“There is a very important role for exercise in preventing the progression of dementia or in improving someone’s cognitive function if they have dementia,” according to John Obied, a geriatric specialist in Australia. “We are realizing the importance of exercise and that it’s just as important a part of the treatment as any medication the doctor could prescribe,” he said in a 2012 television interview.

Kenneth Rockwood is a research scientist with the division of geriatric medicine at Dalhousie University. In an interview he said, “Living and active lifestyle is associated with a lower risk of dementia in late life, even among people who would be at increased risk of late life dementia as a consequence of their family history.” He said research shows that if we could delay the onset of dementia by five years at the population level we probably could reduce by half the number of dementia cases that exist.

The recent brain dance in Annapolis Royal was Doug Brown’s first chance to try the technique. “I’ve just been feeling stale mentally lately. So with different movements, I know they free up different things in me emotionally and mentally. I thought I’d give this a try,” he said. “As we get older, for whatever reason we don’t spin, we don’t do things, because of fear or a lack of opportunity. So, for me this is an opportunity to rekindle some movement in my life and see what it did to my brain.”

So, how did the brain dance experiment work for him? “For me it was more of a mental exercise than a physical exercise,” he said with a smile after class. “I loved it. It makes you feel good and you leave smiling.”