

Study: Dance enhances identity negotiation and strengthens group identity in Parkinson's disease

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A recent study by the University of Eastern Finland and Balettakademien Stockholm found that performing in a dance company

and being involved in its activities play a significant role in the identity and disease-related identity negotiation in people with Parkinson's disease.

Performing in the dance company and sharing the process of performing with others created a strong group identity for the [dancers](#) with Parkinson's disease. The dancers' experiences of watching and being watched provided them with novel ways of expressing themselves and being seen without their identity being associated with Parkinson's disease.

Earlier studies have focused on dance interventions in group settings, i.e., [dance classes](#), aimed at rehabilitation and social participation. They have shown that dance is a promising form of adjunct therapy for patients with Parkinson's disease.

In people with mild to moderate Parkinson's disease for example, dance has led to significant improvements in balance, gait and functional mobility. The new study, published in *Nordic Journal of Dance*, focused on the significance of dance as a performative art form in Parkinson's disease. The study involved eight dancers from the Swedish Kompani Parkinson dance company, which performs both in Sweden and abroad. The dancers completed an online questionnaire and most of them also participated in a focus group interview.

The dancers considered cohesion, division of responsibilities, [peer support](#), acceptance and trust as essential aspects of functioning within the group. The study suggests that membership in the company and group identity also enabled the dancers to negotiate their [personal identity](#).

"The group offered trust and [social support](#) in a way that was not based on cognitive or physical ability, but on embodied expression. For the

participants, this was something new and significant," says Senior Researcher Hanna Pohjola of the University of Eastern Finland.

For the dancers with Parkinson's disease, the novel [group identity](#) provided an opportunity to negotiate an embodied identity that was tied to artistry—not to Parkinson's disease. Although the disease sets its limits on what the body can do, the dancers were not limited or confined by art, allowing them to rediscover themselves.

"Being a part of the group and performing as a member of the company also allowed the dancers to change their perception of the self. Being a dancer and having expressive capacity were seen as something without limitations, allowing people to grow and develop despite possible functional limitations."

The study was conducted as part of the Narrating through Dance in Life Fractures project. The project examines the experiential and psychosocial consequences of dance in different life transitions.

More information: Hanna Pohjola et al, Performing With Parkinson's: Leaving Traces, *Nordic Journal of Dance* (2023). [DOI: 10.2478/njd-2023-0011](#)

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

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