

## On Today's International Dance Day, We Are Dancing Away Psychological Stress of Isolation

*"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." Pablo Picasso*

About half a year before the pandemic and worldwide lockdowns, I conducted research at the University of Derby, UK, which was dedicated to the exploration of the influence of dance on embodied self-awareness and wellbeing. The research was included into a paper, which we have later submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal. Nobody could foresee at the time of the research how differently we will dance just a half a year later, and how differently we will celebrate today's [International Dance Day](#): April 29<sup>th</sup> 2020 will probably go down in the history of dance as a very unique day.

Due to the pandemic and imposed total or partial lockdown measures throughout the world, many people live in isolation. It's a needed life-saving measure that requires resilience: long-term isolation may lead to the development of the symptoms of psychological stress and mental health disorders, which is why the lockdown was called by the World Economic Forum (WEF) [the world's biggest psychological experiment](#). There is a way to prevent and counter these symptoms: dance. It will not only bring in motion your body and mind, but boost your energy, mood and joy of living. [As Dr. Kimerer LaMothe wrote](#), dance helps develop creativity, flexibility, and resilience, particularly helpful skills today.

In the [research](#), which provided many practical implications on dance as a clinical and wellbeing intervention, I dealt a lot with partner dance. The possibilities for practicing partner dance are currently narrowed to close family members and partners, who have already been living together. But dance can be wonderfully practiced alone as well, and several research findings provided evidence for a big positive effect of such practice, too.

Dance is relaxing, enjoyable, and helpful for learning about new aspects of self. It contributes to the development of the positive body image, body esteem, and self-esteem in general.

Dance is also [one of the ancient ways of healing](#). Indigenous cultures have long used dance as one of their main healing practices, intuitively uniting body, mind, and soul. Dance is effective in countering anxiety, depression, and loneliness: through dance, chemicals like endorphins and serotonin are being released, which improves your mood and reduces stress.

In a [systematic review](#) of creative arts interventions for stress management and prevention that included dance, more than 80% of the studies reported a significant reduction of stress-related

hormone cortisol in the participants. The recent extensive [WHO Health Evidence Network report](#) and our own research findings provided further evidence that dance is an effective stress coping mechanism and plays an important role in improving health and wellbeing.

[As Dr. Peter Lovatt states](#), “a single 90-minute session of Caribbean dance has a sufficient impact on metabolic and cardio circulatory systems to potentially improve health”. Research is being confirmed by the practice. Dance schools and teachers show all over the world: where there is a will there is a way. From [Europe](#) to the [US](#), dance schools of Latin dances adjusted creatively to the current time and provide opportunities for practicing dance at home. They offer live classes and online tutorials in salsa NY style and salsa suelta, a solo form of Cuban salsa, rumba, lady and men style, etc. It doesn't have to be a long session: a short but regular sequence of 10–20 minutes is already an effective workout. In a touching video, it was even [reported](#) about physicians and nurses dancing away stress in protective clothing during a rare moment of a break.

Shaking off stress, fears, and worries with drum is another way of dancing and coping, whether it's drumming yourself or literally shaking your body to the drum music. [Rhythmic music stimulates basal ganglia](#), the part of the brain connected with movement, which is also associated with habitual behavior, cognition, and emotion. One of the great ways of practicing it is Afro-Cuban dance that is danced to the drum music and has elements of storytelling and playfulness. In my work, I have also experienced powerful community drum sessions, like those during a global conference of the [Women's International Networking \(WIN\)](#).

Currently, it's entirely ambiguous whether conferences can take place in-person any time in the near future. I was invited to present an abstract of the research at several academic conferences. Some of them expected very soon from now needed to be cancelled, like the [Annual Conference of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology](#), a section of Division 5 of the American Psychological Association. We hope that we will come together at the international conference [Movement: Brain, Body, Cognition](#) at the Sorbonne University in Paris in September.

[Scientists think](#) that we are now just at the beginning of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, expecting recurrent outbreaks and a resurgence in contagions as late as 2024. But as an African proverb says, no matter how long the night is, the morning is sure to come, even if it will be a different kind of a morning. The time will come when the conferences will take place in-person, movement will occur not only at home, and dance will be practiced not just alone but in sharing its healing power, joy, and flow with the others.

Until then, we are adapting, or using the Gestalt term, “creatively adjusting” to our current moment. Maya Angelou, a talented and highly creative poet and civil rights activist, who had an incredibly challenging life and experienced traumatic events, loved the famous song with the following refrain: “And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance.”

Natalia Braun, MSc



Natalia Braun, MSc in Psychology from the University of Derby, UK, member of The British Psychological Society (BPS), Certified Assessor BPS TUOA & TUOP, Certified Professional and Gestalt Coach. Member of the American Psychological Association (APA), APA’s Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP) and International Society of Critical Health Psychology (ISCHP). Natalia spent many years

in journalism and the business world before transitioning into professional psychology. She lives in Switzerland and is engaged in applied psychology, research, writing, and embodied practices. [www.y-coaching.org](http://www.y-coaching.org)