

Dance and movement have broad benefits for the physical and mental health of all age groups.

Ida Levine shares her perspectives and experience.

The COVID pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to the Arts, including the Dance world. Social distancing has made it difficult to perform and convene large audiences. For the most part, our UK theatres have remained dark, and many performers have been deprived of their livelihood.

At the same time, the pandemic has presented serious physical and mental health challenges. If there ever was a time to keep your immune system healthy and protect your physical health, this long winter of the pandemic is it. Fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to threats such as the pandemic – and affect both physical and mental health. Added to this, there are significant changes to our daily lives such as restrictions on movement in response to the spread of the virus. Faced with working from home, temporary unemployment, home schooling children and lack of contact with family members, friends and colleagues, our mental health is at greater risk.ⁱ

Can Dance be a solution? Can Dance enterprises help address these physical and mental health challenges?

There is increasing evidence that Dance and movement have broad benefits for the physical and mental health of all age groups. Whether it is young people, busy professionals or older people and retirees. Studies indicate that regular physical activity such as Dance improves the immune system's surveillance against pathogens and reduces the chances of getting sick or dying from respiratory illnesses.ⁱⁱ Dancing also can increase feelings of positive mood, such as happiness and vigour, and reduce feelings of negative mood, such as frustration, depression, and tension. It helps make us more satisfied and happier with life - and feel less anxious and depressed. There is good quality evidence that dance impacts on the wellbeing of our young people – a group at particular risk during the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Dance organisations are already out in the community delivering social programmes. The Royal Academy of Dance's significant community outreach programmes have continued online during the pandemic. They include Step into Dance (in partnership with the Jack Petchey Foundation). This is the UK's largest inclusive dance programme and reaches over 6000 state secondary school students annually across London and Essex – many in deprived areas. RAD's Dance for Life-Long Wellbeing project evolved into Silver Swans – a ballet programme for older learners to improve mobility, posture, coordination, and energy level. Silver Swans classes provide social interaction for older people who are isolated, lonely, and underserved. Finally, RADiate brings dance to SEN children, including those on the Autism Spectrum and with behavioural, emotional, or social difficulties, and/or on the Child Protection Register.

The performing companies such as the Royal Ballet, English National Ballet and Northern Ballet also have innovative social programmes offering dance and dance skills to underserved communities and addressing health issues such as Parkinson's.

But more than ever, it is time to think big. There are opportunities for social entrepreneurship – and bringing a commercial eye to using dance to improve people's lives and delivering solutions at scale. Whether it is community enterprises or "social prescriptions," this is a further avenue for dance organisations and dancers to explore. They have shown how they can benefit communities as an extension of their Arts charity activities.

Can a further step be taken to put these to the forefront as part of social businesses contributing to health, wellbeing, and a levelling up across the UK during these difficult times – while at the same time providing new opportunities for dancers and dance organisations? I would welcome suggestions and thoughts from our creative and innovative IWF UK members.

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ⁱ World Health Organisation, [Mental health and COVID-19 \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-and-covid-19)

ⁱⁱ The Washington Post, "Health: To boost immunity, forget 'magic pills.' Focus on sleep, exercise, diet and cutting stress." Christie Aschwanden, Jan. 30, 2021

ⁱⁱⁱ See, e.g., <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/sport-dance-and-young-people/>;
<https://whatworkswellbeing.org/practice-examples/dance-to-health/>