Dance for people living with Parkinson's disease: recommendations for meaningful, sustainable community programmes

DANCE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH PARKINSON'S DISEASE

Recommendations for meaningful, sustainable community programmes

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What makes a dance programme for people living with Parkinson's disease sustainable?

1

Dancer satisfaction

Dancer experience should be the priority of any programme. If dancers are not satisfied, they will not want to continue participating over time.

2

Teamwork

Having a team of facilitators and administrators helps reduce workload and maintain programme continuity.

3

Stable funding

A dance programme is more secure if it receives financial support from more than one source.

4

Community links

Forming relevant relationships with other community groups, arts institutions, and healthcare practitioners ensures that programmes are relevant and trustworthy.

Tips for meaningful dancer engagement

Be mindful of the environment

When choosing a dance location, consider both accessibility and the overall feel of the space. Verify that there is ample parking, and that the toilets are close to the dance space. Check that there are ramps and/or elevators (if above ground level).

Ideally, select a space that also feels pleasant or 'special' in some way—an uplifting environment can add meaning to the dance experience and spark creativity. Dance programmes can take place in community halls, museums, local arts centres, or any number of settings.

Keep the dance space consistent week-to-week. Where possible, offering an online option in addition to in-person classes can increase access.

Set the tone

Deciding to join a dance class can be a big step for some. Offering trial classes can give people a chance to experience the programme before committing.

Keep the atmosphere fun, accepting, and low-pressure. Ensure dancers have choice in how they participate.

Marking the start and end of dance classes with small rituals (warm-ups, cooldowns, or activities that dancers enjoy, for example) can help groups settle in each week and connect with each other.

Share the power

Prioritise inclusion—it is important that dancers feel safe (both physically and emotionally) and heard. Value dancers' creative input and preference, and welcome feedback.

Include dancers in decision-making (class content, rules and boundaries, music/dance choice) where possible.

Consider having dancers choose a name for the group, and a visual logo or symbol which can be shared in group communications or displayed in the dance space.

Facilitate dancer interaction

Social engagement is a key part of dance programming for people with Parkinson's. Create space and time for dancers to chat before, during, or after class. Also consider creating a digital communication channel that dancers can opt-in to, like a group text or Whatsapp, and organising special events like parties and optional dance performances.

Include a few dances or activities where dancers can connect physically and move synchronously as one group (circle dances, for example).

Keep it rewarding

Overcoming challenges, experiencing new things, and feeling a sense of accomplishment are meaingful parts of the dance experience for people with Parkinson's. It is important that dancers feel appropriately challenged—material should not be too easy or too hard. Empower dancers to make progress in their own way by making appropriate modifications or adding any necessary supports. Recognise achievements, growth, and progression.

Experimenting with other roles or identities, either through class activities or (optional) performance opportunities can be rewarding and prompt self-reflection.

Keep it fresh

Variety is important when it comes to maintaining interest over time.

Sources of variety might include gradually introducing new choreography and music, creating themed or special sessions, inviting guest artists or facilitators, or creating optional public performance opportunities.

Self-reflective questions for dance facilitators

Ultimately, the quality and enthusiasm of the dance facilitator can determine whether people want to continue attending a programme over time.

Starting a dance programme for people living with Parkinson's disease can be immensely enjoyable and fulfilling, but it is a commitment that should be taken seriously. Before committing, consider reaching out to other practitioners to learn about their experiences. It is important to think about whether the work is a fit for your personality and long-term goals. Consider the following:

- Do you enjoy working in a 'helping' capacity, supporting and encouraging others as they work towards their goals?
- Do you enjoy working in group social environments and with older adults?
- Are you willing to work flexibly (e.g. adjusting your pace and plans if needed)?
- What are your motivations for starting this programme?
- Could you envision yourself still wanting to do this work a few years from now?

Building a team

Having a team supports programme sustainability because if one facilitator leaves or takes a break, the programme can still continue with another instructor. With more facilitators, classroom assistants, and adminstrators, a programme can be expanded and reach more people.

There are often behind-the-scenes organisational tasks involved in running a community-based dance programme (like applying for funding, responding to dancer queries, promoting the group, etc.) Having a team of facilitators and/or adminstrators creates a sense of social support and distributes the workload. Team members can facilitate classes together and share ideas.

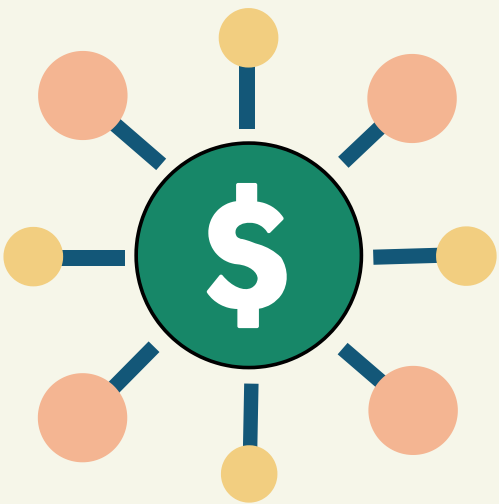
Aim to build a reliable team with diverse skillsets.

Securing funding from multiple sources

Programmes with only one funding source are at risk if that funding unexpectedly discontinues. Programmes are most secure if they draw financial support from more than one source.

Finding funding can be a time-consuming process. Here are a few avenues to consider:

- Grants from local and national bodies (municipalities, arts councils, community health organisations).
- Collaborations with local Parkinson's charities and organisations.
- Fundraising through performances or other events.
- Class fees (if charging class fees, ensure that the amount is reasonable to participants, and consider offering a 'hardship fund' for anyone experiencing financial difficulty).



Forming community links

Partnerships with relevant community organisations can play a significant role in establishing your programme's credibility.

Communicating with Parkinson's associations and charities helps ensure that your programme adequately supports the needs of the local community. These organisations can help spread the word about your programme, and in some cases, offer financial or organisational support.

Collaborating with well-known arts institutions like dance companies can add an element of prestige and create opportunities for dancers to engage with the wider arts community. Partnering with universities or healthcare bodies can also increase a programme's trustworthiness.

Want to learn more?

The research that informed the recommendations in this resource can be found here:

Senter, M., Clifford, A.M, and Ni Bhriain, O. (2024) 'Using theory knitting to conceptualize social phenomena in the design and evaluation of dance programs for people living with Parkinson's disease', *Evaluation and Program Planning*.

Senter, M., Clifford, A.M., O'Callaghan, M., McCormack, M., and Ni Bhriain, O. (2024) 'Experiences of people living with Parkinson's disease and key stakeholders in dance-based programs: a systematic review and meta-ethnography', *Disability and Rehabilitation*.

Senter, M., Ni Bhriain, O., and Clifford, A.M. (2025) 'You need to know that you are not alone: the sustainability of community-based dance programs for people living with Parkinson's disease', *Disability and Rehabilitation*.