



Dance has traditionally been regarded as a performing art of expression and entertainment, while some may also praise it for its many physical and mental health benefits. Here, two doctors share their respective journeys into dance, and how it has benefitted them in more ways than they had first expected.

Text and photos by Dr Deva Priya Appan

Dr Priya is an associate consultant with the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health. She aims to raise awareness about the experiences of individuals with mental health disorders and reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness through dance. She strongly believes that clinicians should care humanely for vulnerable populations, and that humanities education is essential to developing empathy.



Bharatanatyam is a 2000-year-old South Indian classical dance form whose style is noted for its intricate footwork and sophisticated vocabulary of sign language (using hand gestures) or Abhinaya (using the eyes and facial muscles) to portray emotions and tell stories. Having started the art form as a young child, it has been a part of my life for much longer than medicine. However, it had started out

as a hobby and gradually evolved into a serious passion over the years.

I have not quite understood why I persisted with those hours of practice and physical labour. It might be due to the encouragement of my dance teachers or possibly because I felt like I belonged. Perhaps that was why I continued to pursue dance even when I moved to Australia for medical school.





## Medicine and dance collide

It was just a matter of time before these two worlds of mine intersected. While studying a female character for a dance performance, I realised she had low mood with poor appetite and she experienced hopelessness about her situation. The climax of the dance scene was a suicide attempt. Understanding depression and having interacted with depressed patients eased me into the role with conviction. This was when the thought of portraying mental health issues through Bharatanatyam entered my mind.

Midway through my training in psychiatry, I was fortunate enough to have been approached to perform the role of a young woman with schizophrenia in a dance production titled *Finding Dignity*. Again, this was an opportunity to use dance as a medium to raise awareness of mental health issues.

The concern I had about an authentic portrayal of the character brought me back to the patient's bedside. I found myself spending more time with my patients and listening to their stories, something that I had somewhat drifted away from. I learnt that common themes underlie the unique experiences of different patients. For example, they felt bouts of anxiety, anger and fear during their psychotic experiences.

In the process, the challenge was to stay true to patients' lived experiences while portraying them through facial expressions and movements rather than speech. I was worried that it would misrepresent the character if it was not

done sensitively. While in character, I had a glimpse of the stigma my patients face on a day-to-day basis. It was unsettling and a revelation to the doctor in me. This production also helped me to recognise my own emotions and develop self-awareness.

A more recent dance production, *Agathi* (translated as refugee) explores the struggles of a refugee's migration journey. It sensitised me to their experiences of loss, loneliness and anguish, and the resilience and strength that emerges from it. This experience gave me a humanistic perspective of their plight and helped visualise concepts of trauma and resilience.

The ancient Sanskrit treatise on performing arts, the *Natyashastra*, says, "Yatho hasta thatho drishti, yatho drishti thatho manah, yatho manah thatho bhaava, yatho bhaava thatho rasa". It means "Where the hands (*hasta*) go, the eyes (*drishti*) will follow; where the eyes go, the mind (*manah*) will follow; where the mind goes, there is an expression of inner feeling (*bhaava*) and where there is *bhaava*, mood or sentiment (*rasa*) is evoked." Each time I perform Abhinaya, the realisations within me help me delve more deeply into myself and express myself better to attain the mood that I hope touches the audience.

## Looking back

Dance has gifted me with numerous benefits over the years. It has been an effective stress buster for me. The intense and complete focus that I need to draw on during a dance class after a long



day's work makes me forget my other stressors. By applying myself gainfully in dance, I feel relaxed, and it helps me unwind as I navigate my job and family life. Bharatanatyam had also imparted essential life skills such as discipline, multi-tasking, working within a group, finding cohesiveness and advanced planning, all of which are valuable skills to have in medicine!

The practice of medicine is challenging and it can be draining both physically and emotionally, especially in these times. Over time, our compassion and empathy can erode. Dance has helped me remain balanced and stay connected to my patients. Time is precious, but I find it essential to find a passion and nurture it. It is even better if that passion can help us stay on the path we have chosen to help and heal others.

### Legend

1. Playing a character with psychosis in the production, *Finding Dignity*
2. In the role of a refugee in *Agathi*

Text and photos by Dr Mary Yang

Dr Yang is an obstetrician and gynaecologist in the private sector. She is passionate about ballroom dancing. She is also a competitor in Latin American dancing.



I spent almost half a century of my life being academically inclined. In school, I liked and did better in science subjects. I was never sporty and had not learnt any dance forms until the good old age of 51. Yet now, ten years on, I have grown so passionate about dancing that I cannot imagine a life without it.

## Picking up dance

My husband, Dr Tan Yong Seng, was a past chairman of the Active Ageing

Council, and dancing was one of the activities encouraged as part of the wellness programme for seniors. He needed a dance partner to be involved in the programme himself and that was how I began my journey in dancing. My first experience was with seniors at Whampoa Community Club. I may have operative surgical skills, but remembering to shift weight from my right leg to my left while coordinating my upper body



movements and changing directions was more difficult than performing surgery. With persistence, it became easier as muscle memory set in.

We then decided to take lessons from professional dance teachers. Our goal then was to be able to get on the floor and dance the ten different genres of the International Ballroom Style (waltz, tango, foxtrot, quickstep, Viennese waltz, cha-cha, samba, rhumba, jive and paso doble); it took us about five years to achieve that. Plato, the Athenian philosopher, once said that music “gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life”. It is truly the joy of moving to great music that has kept my husband dancing with me all these years.

After dancing socially for five years, I felt that I needed to set another goal for myself. That was when I decided to compete. In dance competitions, it is possible for a student to compete with a teacher as partner. I have been fortunate to be able to find suitable professional teachers, allowing me to compete in this pro-am category in many parts of the world. It is the best kind of holiday. You start with a dance camp to learn new

knowledge, followed by the exhilarating experience of a competition. Some of the big competitions held in historic venues like the Blackpool Winter Gardens are seen as the “Olympics of the dance world” and I have been lucky to experience them personally. I compete with this motto in mind: “I do not try to dance better than anyone else, I only try to dance better than myself.”

Competitive dancing is not a cheap hobby though. You pay for the lessons even when you are training. Taking private lessons from world class teachers across the globe before COVID-19 times were expensive. Those glamorous competition costumes decorated with crystals are costly as well, but designing your own costume can be fun. Whether you do it socially or competitively, you need to commit time for the lessons and practice sessions. You also need to take into account the time spent for massages and physiotherapy sessions to get your body repaired before training again. Some feel that dancing is in every way a sport. The official name for competitive dancing is dancesport, but despite efforts, it has yet to be included in the Olympics. Others including myself still believe that dance is an art form and should not be considered a sport.



### All things good

There are multiple health benefits of dancing. It can help people of all ages stay physically and mentally fit. It improves your cardiovascular fitness and endurance level, increases your muscular strength and tone, helps in your agility, flexibility and coordination, improves posture, balance and spatial awareness, helps in preventing osteoporosis and improves mental functioning. Just like many sports, it is also good for character building. You need determination to learn to perform a figure perfectly. You also need to be in sync with your dance partner and have to learn teamwork. Without self-confidence, you will not be able to perform in front of many judges who are scrutinising you. If you dance socially, it can improve your social skills and lift your mood.

So, my dear doctor colleagues, I hope that some of you might become curious about dancing and will give it a try. I was fortunate enough to discover the magic of dancing. I was not born with an innate talent in dancing, but with passion one can reap its benefits. As Martha Graham says: “Nobody cares if you can’t dance well. Just get up and dance. Great dancers are great because of their passion.” ♦

#### Legend

1. Competition in Florida
2. Dancing is great as a couple activity
3. Dancing like no one is watching

