Women’s experience of 5 Rhythms dance and the effects on their emotional wellbeing

Sarah Cook, Karen Ledger and Nadine Scott  2003
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Introduction

Dancing for Living is a research project funded by the Mental Health Foundation who were given money by the Community Fund for a project called Strategies for Living; this is about exploring alternatives to more conventional methods (psychiatry and medication) to coping and living with mental distress.

This particular piece of research was about investigating 5 Rhythms dance and how it affects women’s mental health. This is a form of dance that moves dancers through 5 Rhythms: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical and stillness as they dance their feelings to the music.

The topic for the research was chosen by one of the research team, who had found it useful for her own mental health and wanted to see if it could benefit others. The research team was made up of 3 women who had all experienced mental distress and used mental health services themselves.

1. The creator of 5 Rhythms dancing was Gabriel Roth who wrote:

“Disease is inertia. Healing is movement. Shamanic work is about dancing from within. If you put the body in motion, you will change. You are meant to move: from flowing to staccato, through chaos into lyric and back into stillness from which all movement comes. If you let your heart be moved, be open to the risk and adventure of feelings, letting them work through to completion, you will change. Tears turn into smiles, anger into embraces….The spirit in motion heals, expands, circles in and out of the body, moving us through the layers of consciousness from inertia to ecstasy. Open to the spirit, and you will be transformed.” (Roth 1989)

Terms

During the research we discussed with the participants what we meant by terms such as ‘mental health’.

It was agreed that choosing terms was difficult as words such as ‘mental health’ are so loaded with different meanings, or when examined, are unclear.

People used different terms in different contexts. ‘Mental health’ was seen as a formal and institutional term, which might be used by people familiar with psychiatric services. Some people felt uncomfortable with the term because of stigma about being mad or being called ‘mental’. ‘Emotional wellbeing’ was a more informal term, and could be about day to day feelings.

We wanted to recognise the importance of our holistic nature and not use terms that split the person into unrelated parts. ‘Mental health’ can be seen as the part, linked to physical health, about dealing with stress in life, looking after ourselves and dealing with people; but it can not be separated from the body and spirituality. Emotions can build a bridge between the conscious mind and the body, reaching into our vulnerable places. How we feel also relates to how our mind works, how we think. Spirituality can also be a unifying factor, helping us become whole.

The other important point made was that being in a complete crisis or a ‘spiritual emergency’, or feeling unable to cope, can be healthy and should not be labelled as wrong, ill or unwell. A crisis or feeling sad may be a time of important change, when we may emerge as a different figure, a stronger person. As one person said:

"Emotional wellbeing and mental health is not about being happy all the time, stable and responsible. Its about being real and alive and having a sense of who I am, and being able to let go of who I am" (Kit).

We could not find one term that was satisfactory to us all but agreed to each use our personal concepts to express ourselves.

This research gave people the opportunity to experience dance and to see if it could make a difference to their wellbeing. This report will talk about the methods used, the people involved and what we found out.
Research Methods

Research Questions.

We had three questions that directed the research:

1. What has been our experience of dancing 5 Rhythms?
2. What effect does 5 Rhythms dancing have on our mental and emotional wellbeing?
3. What helps us to take part?

Study Design

The design of this research project was set up to be participatory: all the researchers, the dancers and the dance teacher both danced and took part in the research. As all three researchers had experienced mental health problems at some time and the aim of the project was to assess and evaluate whether 5 Rhythms could have an impact on emotional health the researchers were the ideal candidates to dance. The overlapping of roles was an initiative that the Strategies for Living project team felt important at breaking down power barriers.

We believe that the results that have been discovered in this project suggest that it's an important initiative to replicate. Combining the role of researcher and dancer made for a more relaxed atmosphere and enabled our participants to be more open and honest with their answers.

There is the argument that to mix the roles of researcher/participant could cloud the resulting report, so to counteract this we actively invited views from the participants that may be different from ours. We did this by employing a range of different research methods so that each person could express her views in a way that suited her. We also tried to involve everyone in each part of the research. We all answered our questionnaire anonymously; we all took turns to answer the same set of questions in our peer pair interviews and we taped the three focus groups where each group was asked the same set of questions and everybody’s answers were taken into account. Lastly and maybe most importantly we sent the draft report to the participants and then held a further meeting, in which we invited

Flowing

I respond easily to the music (Jay)

Favourite flowing can be gentle and happy! (Isolbelle)

Flowing nice and easy, let go of body tensions and physical discomfort and pain (Christine)

Sometimes finding flow is difficult (Ella).

Vivid image I have seen. flowing .. harmony and pure energy – a light, a joy, an explosion of pure energy and being (Flora)
every participant, including the dance teacher, to criticise and comment on our analysis. This feedback was then incorporated into the final report.

**Selecting the participants**

The researcher who won the Strategies for Living Award advertised for co-researchers in local newsletters and venues, familiar to mental health service users. Three women responded and started the training on research methods that was provided by Strategies for Living. One woman withdrew due to personal reasons. She was greatly missed by the others. This left a research group of three, one experienced researcher and two new researchers.

We then invited members of the public to volunteer to come to four dance workshops and take part in the research (see Appendix 1. The Dance Workshop Flyer). We did not invite people as patients of the NHS or as service users. We decided to select women only as we thought it would feel safer and more comfortable to dance in a single sex group, especially for women new to dancing. We placed an advert in “Your Voice” a local magazine about mental health issues. We also used our networks to find participants, such as through First Step Trust Sheffield, (an employment project) and local 5 Rhythms dance groups.

The dancing side of the project was obviously an attraction in itself but this was combined with researching a worthwhile cause - to evaluate/assess an impact on emotional health. Added to that we were able to tell our dancers that the findings of our research would be published with the help of The Mental Health Foundation which was impressive in itself. This meant that we had many enquiries and actually had a reserve list for the 20 places for the introductory workshop.

**Data Collection**

The data we collected came from several different sources, they were:

- Diaries: Each participant received a large note pad in which she could write or draw anything she felt relevant to the research.

- A four page quantitative questionnaire

**Staccato**

A wonderful opportunity to express anger and “nasty” feelings (Ella)

It’s about moving from a child’s tantrum to taking power in the world (Joy)

All of us women walking in staccato across the floor - tall, vibrant, confident, assertive - not to be messed with - sure of our own identities (Flora)

Helps me overcome deep stated emotional pain (Christine)

I’m not really Staccato enough, I don’t like setting boundaries for other people, but I do love dancing it, expressing that clarity and that aggression sometimes (Jay)

I find staccato very difficult, I’m naturally quite passive. I didn’t like it at all (Isolbelle)
consisting of thirty-nine mainly closed questions. These were about our characteristics and also questions rating opinions about what makes dance sessions accessible to women.

- Peer pair interviews in which participants interviewed each other and which consisted of us asking six qualitative questions about women's experience of dancing and what they liked and disliked.

- Three separate focus groups in order to gain yet more in-depth information about the experience of dancing and the effects 5 Rhythms dance has on emotional wellbeing and emotional health.

- Group discussion of the draft report plus written feedback from the participants.

**Ethics**

Right from the start we made it clear to the participants that we would treat the information they gave us as confidential. We told them that whilst we were compiling the research the only people who would have access to their words were us the researchers, our supervisors in the Mental Health Foundation and a secretary who transcribed our peer pair interviews and focus group tapes. The participants all signed forms giving informed consent to the research. Each participant decided whether they wished their words to be reported anonymously, using a code name, or they wanted their own name to be used.

We had to consider ethical issues when setting up the dance workshops that were inviting members of the public who had not done this type of dance before. We wanted to make it safe and accessible for people who may be vulnerable, but also make it clear that it was not suitable for people who could not at this time take responsibility for their wellbeing. The need to take responsibility for yourself and be responsive to your own needs was stated in the workshop flyer.

We spent a large proportion of the grant from the Mental Health Foundation on contracting a fully qualified teacher of 5 Rhythms dance who was very experienced

**Chaos**

*I found chaos fun* (Snowdrop)

*Chaos helps me to integrate physical and emotional things that came up in 2 earlier rhythms and its fun* (Christine)

*Rarely finds chaos and stillness* difficult, *happen by themselves almost* (Ella)

*Hard work, but I want to be in there*” (Flora)

*Chaos difficult* (Isolbelle)

*Scared of chaos at first* (Mary)

*I find it difficult to let go – physically – I don't like chaos in my life - but when I have been able to let go and get into chaos its been exhilarating* (Jay)
in leading groups. As we had other expenses to cover, such as room hire and office costs we decided to ask the dancers to pay for the dance workshops on a sliding scale. The first introductory workshop was free, and the following three workshops were free to those on welfare benefits.

One of the things that we felt proud of in our research project was the extra support that we planned to provide, namely that of a counsellor for anyone who felt the dance research had triggered a crisis for them and wanted professional support in deciding how to manage it. Not all members of the public were necessarily in touch with formal health or social services. We were concerned that we weren’t just asking our participants to come and have a good time dancing, but were asking them to share with us their feelings and thoughts and asking them questions about their mental health, which could bring up issues for them to confront. As public sector counsellors have waiting lists, we put aside money in our budget to pay for private counsellors. We produced a list of counsellors from two sources, First Step Trust Sheffield and Mind in Sheffield and informed the participants at the start, about what we had made available. In the event no one used this extra support but it was important as a safeguard not only for us but also for the participants themselves.

**Data analysis**

We analysed the answers on the questionnaires by adding up the number of the same answers, for example how many yes’s or no’s; or the answers in multiple-choice boxes that had been selected. Once we had done that we then turned the answers into percentages.

The analysis of the taped focus groups and the written notes from the peer pair interviews was more complicated because we had asked open questions and people could explain their thoughts and go more in-depth in their replies. We did the qualitative analysis of the typed transcripts using a systematic series of steps, looking for common and varying themes and ideas: These were the steps that we followed:

1. **Start with the research questions**: Go back to the beginning of the

**Lyrical**

*What a relief - nurturing* (Flora)

*Felt very in touch with my body* (Liz)

*Haunting, put a lump in my throat* (Snowdrop)

*Grief* (Mary)

*Sometimes it’s wonderful, but sometimes I can’t keep up with what I want to do – I love group Lyrical, it feels fun, friendly and positive* (Jay)

*Lyrical - helps me to integrate things, get through to the lighter side (its OK to have fun)* (Christine)

*Find lyrical difficult sometimes - its so easy to go into parody as a form of defence* (Joy)
research and its purpose.

2. **Label each statement**: Check every piece of data is labelled with its source (who said it and when). Divide the data into small sections, one for each statement of meaning.

3. **Listen, read and Interpret**: Listen to the tapes, read all the transcripts, highlight important words and phrases. Note your interpretation or summary by the side of each statement. Notice and challenge your own bias.

4. **Develop categories and topics**: Next to each statement, write what it is about - look for similarities and differences as you analyse each statement. Note what the emerging main topics are. Work backwards and forwards from the raw data to your analysis, changing interpretation, categories and topics as your understanding and analysis develops. Look for data that challenges your analysis or for gaps - what has not been said, or what is being implied underneath what is being said.

5. **Sort into the main topics**: Label each statement with a main topic code. Organise all the statements into bunches under each main topic code. This can be done using the 'sort' tool in 'tables' in 'Microsoft Word' on the computer.

6. **Develop a pattern linking the main topics**: Draw diagrams or mind maps to organise how the main topics and their categories relate to each other. Turn the diagram into a sequence of main topics which will be the sections in the report and list the categories under each main topic.

7. **Choose quotes**: to illustrate each point in the sequence. Always note the speaker and the transcript number with the quotation.

8. **Write**: an account of each main topic and link them, dealing with each idea in sequence. Put it aside. Come back to it in a few days and edit it. Work back and forth from the original data to the writing, re-shaping it until you feel the meaning of the data is captured. Check each point is backed up by evidence from the data.

The data taken from the diaries provided additional information such as what words people associated with each rhythm. Poems and pictures from the diaries were used to illustrate the findings.

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**Stillness**

*Always moving and beautiful*  
(Joy)

*Relaxing*  
(Snowdrop)

*Just bliss - being*  
(Flora)

*Worth exploring. Spiritual level and peace* (Christine)

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*Stillness*

*Always moving and beautiful* (Joy)

*Relaxing* (Snowdrop)

*Just bliss - being* (Flora)

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*Stillness*

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*Worth exploring. Spiritual level and peace* (Christine)
The participants

Numbers who took part in each part of the research

- Introductory workshop: 21
- Decided to participate in the research: 19
- Completed the questionnaire: 19
- Completed the 3 dance research workshops and research: 18
- Peer Pair interviews: 16
- Dairies and pictures: 18
- Focus group: 17 + the dance teacher

After the introductory workshop, two women decided not to continue, one of whom said she preferred dancing that had more structure and steps to be learnt. One participant dancer completed the questionnaire but later withdrew because of a serious relapse of her mental health problems. This left 18 participants including the researchers who completed the workshops and research. Only one or two participants were not able to come to all the workshops and group interviews. Each focus group had a mixture of new dancers who had just done the four research workshops and experienced dancers who commented on several years of doing 5 rhythms dance. A researcher, together with a dancer helping, led each group. Some of the data was lost from one tape due to a technical problem, and it was not clear who said a few of the quotes.

Two women (a researcher and the teacher) did not take part in the peer pair interviews because they were busy organizing the event. All the participants were happy to let their diaries and pictures be used for the research, occasionally removing some very personal pages.

Age/Occupation

- 68.4% (13) of the women were in the 35-49 years age range.
- 21.1% (4) were in a higher age range and
- 10.5% (2) were younger than 35 years.

When asked to describe in their own words what they did with their time the answers we got covered a broad range from student to volunteer researcher, mother, community development worker, physiotherapist, art therapist, staff nurse, to full time carer. Such a range of women with different occupations was perhaps partly down to the fact that we offered a sliding scale way of paying with the less well off paying nothing at all. Our opinion is that our dance project was very much enriched by such a variety of talented women.

Income

- On the subject of money, 42.1% (8) women were claiming benefits. As might be expected all of the women claiming benefits thought they were on a low income but also two women who were waged said they were on a low income.

Caring

- 63.2% (12) of the women had no dependents and of the 36.8% (7) who did, most were children, with only one woman having an adult dependent. We paid for childcare when needed, so that women could come to dance despite having home responsibilities for children.

Ethnic background

- In regards to ethnicity 31.6% (6) described themselves as White British. Others were more specific with one woman describing herself as English ‘pinky grey’ and another woman was even more specific in regards to region. She said she was White Yorkshire with a little bit of Irish. Unfortunately we failed to engage with people of an Asian or Black ethnic background. This suggests that future research for volunteers on this subject
should find ways of inviting Asian and Black people in a more targeted way.

Physical Health

63.2% (12) came along to the dancing with no physical health problems. 36.8% (7) did have problems and they ranged from Asthma, back problems to M.E. Almost all of the women, 94.7% (18) had good mobility. On the issue of pain, 68.4% (13) said they did experience some sort of pain. However, most women said the form of pain they experienced was mild discomfort.

Mental Health

Although we had not specifically invited service users, 73.7% (14) said they were currently experiencing some form of mental health problem, however most said it was only occasionally. The other 26.3% (5) women said they didn't suffer from mental health problems currently. When asked the question as to whether or not our dancers had suffered from mental health problems in the past the figure was slightly higher at 89.5% (17), though for most it was only occasionally. Only two women said they did not experience mental health problems. Regarding the use of mental health services, 89.5% (17) of the women had made use of some sort of help. This ranged from being an inpatient in a psychiatric hospital at one end of the spectrum, to having cognitive behavioural therapy, to having undergone some form of counselling or psychotherapy (private or NHS), at the other end of the spectrum. This may have been perceived as for personal development, not necessarily for a mental health problem.

As for the question of coping emotionally and mentally the vast majority, 84.2% (16) told us they were coping, 10.5% (2) of the women said they were barely coping and unfortunately one woman said she was not coping and thought of herself as unwell.

Alternative Therapies

Interestingly every single one of the women said they used alternative therapies with 68.4% (13) using them regularly. One of those women said that she regarded 5 Rhythms dancing as an alternative therapy. The most popular therapies used were ‘Massage’ with 36.8% (7) women using it; ‘Aromatherapy’ was used by 31.6% (6) women, as was ‘Homeopathy’. 26.3% (5) of women answering this questionnaire regularly use four or more alternative therapies.

Previous Dance Experience

73.7% (14) of the women had previous experience of dancing 5 Rhythms and most of them had danced it more than a couple of times. 63.2% (12) said that they rarely danced socially, including one woman who didn't dance at all. More than half of the women said they did attend other workshops/classes to do other types of dancing, though for most it was a rare occurrence.

Additional data from the 16 participants who took part in the pair peer interviews showed that of these, 4 dancers had not done it before at all, 8 dancers were experienced, having danced 5 Rhythms for between two and ten years; 4 dancers saw themselves as new dancers but with a little experience having come across it between one and four times before. For instance one dancer remembered:

A fabulous memory, six or seven years ago staying in a tiny cottage in the Mull of Galloway. . dancing with her sister in the cottage gardens, her sister had just been introduced to 5 Rhythms, magical moments” (Fran).

Rose
Our experience of dancing 5 Rhythms

The dancers expressed some very similar ideas, often using the same words even though they were talking in different groups or different pairs and writing their diaries by themselves. Not all the women agreed with everything and these contradictions and variations are important to illustrate the breadth of experiences of dancing 5 Rhythms. Linked to this were comments on how the women changed their perceptions about dancing over time.

The overall impression that emerged from the dancers was that they found 5 Rhythms dancing to be a tremendously powerful, enjoyable and a deeply moving experience. Added to this was that sometimes it was uncomfortable, but this was not necessarily a problem. These feelings of difficulty or dislike could be expressed in the dance and transform into positive new experiences.

What's special about 5 Rhythms dancing

The participants identified that what was special about this type of dancing was: a safe place, freedom of expression, the power of the music and group connections

A safe space:

The dancers strongly expressed their appreciation for the creation and holding of a safe space in their lives in which they were accepted, however they moved or whatever emotions they expressed.

"the physical space gives internal space" (Joy); "accepting is such a release and relief" (Rose)

"I know on the dance floor that all of me is welcome: I can stamp and rage, skip for joy, slump, crawl, walk tall, cower, cry, laugh. And I begin to welcome myself back" (Georgia)

They were not being judged:

"you can dance your feelings, and no ones judging you, so different from normal day life" (Isolbelle); "nobody makes fun of you" (Eileen); "no one is looking at you" (Rose)

It was important that there were no set steps to learn and no pressure to produce an end result. As a new dancer to 5 Rhythms said:

"it's a long time since I was a little girl that I've been able to do something creative .. enjoy the process rather than the end product .. not having to perform well, and that's what's really nice for a change (Isolbelle).

The dancers were also not expected to dance in a stereotypical or feminine way:

"if I want to dance monster I can, which I do, and there's no sort of the voices saying you know that women are suppose to dance in a certain way" (Stella).

The women found they could just immerse themselves in enjoyment of dancing. A couple of the dancers also appreciated the absence of the drinking and smoking, usually found in discos.

Freedom of expression:

This safety and permission together with the stimulus of music and songs enabled the dancers to be in touch with themselves and their feelings, to enjoy movement that was sensual, to be assertive or scared, direct, spontaneous, zany and extrovert or shy; to have the full scope to express themselves freely; to have a laugh, have fun and to celebrate. For some it was like coming home, or coming alive

"it was like coming home, a
celebration .. back in my childhood .. a party .. I loved it” (Eileen);

The freedom could be challenging:

“I think I’m so used to doing what other people want, and not showing my true feelings, so I found it very difficult” (Isolbelle).

Several women spoke of the struggle to overcome inhibitions, embarrassment and self-consciousness that restricted them from freely moving. Most women found they had become less inhibited over time.

“I was absolutely terrified the first time and I was stunned because the teacher was so uninhibited .. me and me friend .. we were shitting ourselves .. we just wanted to really run but we supported each other and we went back .. that’s over 10 years ago .. that’s what 5 rhythms has done for me, its healed a lot of my inhibitions about my body” (Fiona)

“The first half hour of the introduction I was thinking how am I going to get through, I felt so self conscious but you know within 45 minutes I was loving it … (with) every session feeling self conscious is decreasing” (Isolbelle)

However, it could still be a struggle to overcome inhibitions. One experienced dancer spoke of it becoming harder now to be seen dancing by the group because

“I'm probably getting more real in myself” (Eileen).

Some women stressed that they could feel over exposed and vulnerable having expressed themselves and alien when going out into the streets afterwards. In contrast, one woman with a wide experience of dancing in general, pointed out that she routinely danced at home and did not need the experience of 5 Rhythms to give herself permission to dance and show her emotions.

**Structure of the rhythms**

For some dancers the set sequence in the wave of rhythms was very important:

“they can be wonderful as far as relating to particular emotions and ways of being … there is a sense of completion at the end of the wave” (Jay)

but there was also a sense of ambivalence. Women sometimes wanted the rhythms to be in a different order to suit how that person is feeling at that moment; or to reflect how life doesn't flow in an ordered rhythm. For instance one woman wanted to start the dancing with staccato (rather than flowing) because that helps her get out of feeling stuck. One new dancer found that a fixed structure made it difficult because of worrying about getting it right.

Some women really liked the way music was sectioned into different qualities and they were directed by the teacher to dance in response to each rhythm. This brought out different aspects of themselves, as well as reflecting what was happening in their lives, as they responded to each music track:

"Using rhythms to dance what the internal landscape is feeling and recognise how it changes the energy” (Fran); Rhythms can reflect where I am in the world, e.g. if feeling grief then I love flowing, if angry staccato” (Georga).

The wave structure was seen as a way of working through different emotions and to go

"right down" (Mary)

deeply into feelings without getting stuck in a particular feeling. It also offered important contrasts such as between

"an angry or powerful section and this section which is a gentle and rhythmic one” (Liz)

A new dancer reflected in her diary that learning the difference may not be obvious at first, but also rewarding.

"The only way I can distinguish is by the loudness of the music, so if it's loud I think it's staccato or chaos"

but later she wrote:

"my experience of dancing the different rhythms is that I'm finding something new out all the time” (Karen).
All of the rhythms were loved and enjoyed by some women at some time, but their favourite could change from day to day. Women commented that dancing could be difficult when they were not in the mood for a particular rhythm. This variety of responses is reflected in the comments the women made about each rhythm (pages 4-8).

**The power of the music**

Dancers reported that the music had powerful effects on them:

"a whoosh or surge from the music inside you, and that is just amazing, its touched something inside you" (Flora): "The music can lift me out of one feeling into a feeling of joy" (Fiona).

The dancers also appreciated the music that is played to dance 5 Rhythms because it encouraged them to be physical, sensual, energised, and emotionally charged. One dancer spoke of the joy of not having to keep still when hearing music.

Another important point was that in responding to the music they were able to shift their attention from thinking about day to day problems to focus on the dance and the present.

It helped to:

"Get into my body and away from my head" (Jay): "I learn to inhabit my body, listen to my body, follow my body. Feelings flow through me. I am here, alive, awake and present" (Georgia).

For some the power of dancing in response to the music and the songs loosened their emotions, without the need to intellectualise things:

"it really brings out very strong feelings, it’s a way of being more alive to the music, and the words, the song" (Kit)

"I find it really helpful to put these feelings into something physical and just see what happens and its taking them out of the realm of my head and into my body" (Ella).

One dancer stressed she liked to focus on enjoying the physicality of movement and not use it to explore emotions. It was also commented that energy surged and dropped during the dancing, depending on how easy or difficult a dancer found particular rhythms.

**Group Connections:**

Dancing in an accepting and sharing group was described as a particular way of getting to know people. Woman enjoyed the closeness, interactions, sense of connection and energy and the beauty of dancing together:

"I’m feeling connected with other human beings .. really earth grounding" (Eileen)

"The sunshine, feeling happy, warm, loving towards myself and the others dancing - beautiful" (Rose).

The possibility of togetherness and separateness was also appreciated

"Making and breaking contact - being a group member and an individual is good" (Joy).

For one woman, revealing her self to others in the group was hard but rewarding. Another said it was difficult being close to people when you were not used to it, especially making eye contact. One woman found

"being watched by a group, going across the room, very scary and challenging but its easier now and she feels that’s a really good thing" (May).

There was discussion about when teachers suggested members of a group dance in pairs for a while. It could feel wonderful or sometimes It could feel difficult: choosing partners; or being chosen; or feeling you don’t connect with someone. One woman explained in her first experience of 5 Rhythms dance

"she found the paired work a bit too much, under pressure to perform" (Fran).
Transformation through dance

When asked about effects on their mental health and emotional wellbeing, the dancers explained how they had felt positively transformed through 5 Rhythms dancing. This involved moving from being stuck, releasing powerful feelings and integrating parts of ourselves.

Moving from being stuck

Many of the dancers described 5 rhythms dancing as a transforming experience that enabled them, through flowing movement, to move from a position they called ‘stuck’ through a wide range of feelings and beyond:

"the more I dance what I feel, I change from being stuck to start with (not identified)

"feeling energy flow - flowing through, and transforming (Flora)

"the whole spectrum from complete despair to complete bliss and … everything between .. and even if its very very powerful grief or rage its there with a sense that its moving and through" (Kit)

"Powerful to achieve a turnaround .. comes in stroppy and reluctant, then leaves frolicsome" (Joy)

"I generally feel joy or sadness, or rage, and it flows, that’s the good thing about it, it doesn’t stay … moving in and out of feeling calm and move beyond feelings - I am just the dance (Christine);

In contrast, one dancer stressed that for her she usually did not have transforming experiences; another, who was a trained dancer said it was mostly no different to other forms of expressive dance; and another said she had similar wonderful moments dancing in a night club. Others explained that they experienced more change as they did more of this 5 rhythms type of dancing.

Releasing powerful feelings

Dancers reported the experience involved a sense of "bursting" (Stella) of liberation, release of built up feelings and of relief. For one woman, a dance workshop had been at a very emotional time for her and she had felt safe and cared for:

"Really good to discharge and have a space to do it.. getting rid of the emotional overload from like all the bits of my life .. leave some of that here and go out with less" (Mary)

Some of the dancers spoke of moving into ecstasy through the dance:

"I feel totally ecstatic, totally blissed out … peak experiences … I’m going wheeeeee! off me rocker" (Ella) "those moments where its just a fullness" (Liz)

The way that powerful feelings such as rage or sadness could come to the surface through the dancing was challenging for some women, especially facing up to feelings they had blocked for a long while:

"What’s this dancing going to do to me. I’m going to freak out. I’ve spoilt it because of fear….the same thing I’ve had to face up to.. I feel like crying.. It does you good." (Snowdrop)

Another woman spoke of being careful not to

"open up more than I can deal with and just leave it behind as I leave the room" (Christine).
Integrating parts of ourselves

Transforming experiences enabled dancers to integrate parts of themselves such as their self-awareness, their creativity and their spirituality. One woman explained that:

“through movement and contact [she comes back into] all the parts of herself and feels whole and settled and calm – accepting her totality” (Ella).

Other women said:

“really losing myself in the physical movement, it clears my mind so that I can really know what I feel about something” (Kit)

“5 Rhythms dancing has been a real grounding in raising my own special awareness and at homeness with my body - it has integrated me in a way that has made me feel much more whole and complete” (Flora);

For many of the dancers, moving to the music loosened and integrated their creativity. This was in the dance itself and by stimulating words, colours, or images in their minds. In some taught classes dancers were encouraged to capture this creativity by stopping dancing for a while and drawing, painting or writing poetry. For different people different avenues of creativity would open, or as one dancer commented may close - as when she danced she had no words in her head, but:

"I have films in my head sometimes - these amazing creative productions" (Stella).

Some dancers found drawing and writing very useful and liked being encouraged to express their creativity in more than one way. Sometimes dancers did not like to stop dancing and write or draw as they found it an extremely frustrating interruption. A suggestion was to have it "as an option if you feel like you'd like to go and write or draw" (Eileen), and also come back to the dancing when you are ready, not at a fixed point.

For some dancing had triggered new found creativity, such as starting to do creative writing. One woman spoke of how she used to come to 5 rhythms sessions with a back injury and do art work instead of dancing, which made her feel very inspired and part of the group.

For some women the dance connected with their spirituality, sometimes together with creativity:

"for me its all spiritual really, as soon as I start dancing I feel my spirits moving through me … a sense of body and spirit is really pretty much the essence of what the dance is (Kit)

"spirituality is that feeling of ecstasy, and that feeling of transcending who you are, and where you are, …just melting into everything, everything in the universe .. total surrender and total connection .. it’s a scary place to be, but yes for me its been momentous" (Flora)

One woman commented that she did not have experiences that she would call spiritual and

"maybe I am missing out" (Stella).

Another woman told how she looked for feelings on a spiritual level in the dance, but was hindered by old rules about religion from her childhood.
Effects on day to day living

The longer term effects for dancers were that of: dance becoming part of their life, physical wellbeing, gaining a strategy for emotional wellbeing and a new appreciation of music.

Part of life now

Several of the experienced dancers told of how 5 rhythms had become, over time, an essential part of their lives, of their being:

“It has become part of her life. Doesn’t feel right if she doesn’t do it. Hectic life, job and kids and stress - uses it as a space to process and sort all that .. leaving it .. till that point of the week [the dance session]” (May).

Some go to dance sessions very regularly and some even put music on at home and dance the rhythms by themselves. One woman explained:

“I have been able to take it into my life … so it has transformed me” (Fiona).

Another women told of how she uses it:

“in outside situations such as when dancing with her child” (Fran).

It was commented that the dancing had effected their day to day living in that it had enhanced their self development and they had become more expressive, spontaneous, powerful or assertive and direct with people.

Physical wellbeing

Many of the dancers expressed how much they enjoyed the physical exercise of dancing and felt that this energised them and benefited their physical health:

“a feeling of unstoppable energy and enthusiasm for the day” (May).

For some the exercise improved or maintained their mental as well as physical health:

“It gets me out of mental tight corners - the simple physiological thing - it gives me a buzz” (Joy).

Some women spoke of how 5 rhythms dancing had taught them to look after their bodies better and deal with things within their limits and to pace themselves, but it had been very frustrating at times to be faced with physical limitations or disabilities:

“It really frustrates me because it makes me aware of the physical limitations, like getting tired, getting asthma, and a bad shoulder or whatever” (Jay)

“Phew! Hard to get going … I felt so tired, then it seemed the more I danced, the more my energy grew.. its fantastic to have learnt to pace myself. Its one of life’s big lessons” (Joy)

“After I listened to my body and moved the way it wanted to move, I felt so much better. My body sorted itself out and I was pain free” (Mary).

For one new dancer, doing the first workshop brought on a brief relapse of her M.E

“it makes me feel impotent.. I just thought I am going through this, and if it makes me ill it makes me bloody ill, and it did” (Liz)

but later she recovered and did find a way of dancing within her limits.

Dancing as a strategy for emotional wellbeing

There was discussion about how 5 rhythms dancing was not a therapy yet it could be used therapeutically, and how different women used the dance in different ways at different times. Some of the women definitely used it as a tool or resource to look after themselves and their emotional wellbeing, even a form of healing: The transforming nature of the dance was central to the process:

“5 Rhythms has been a major healing force in my life” (Georgia); “so healing, such a wonderful tool - the difference to how I usually feel is stunning - and this despite the hardships” (Christine)
Women used the dance to find out what feelings were causing them discomfort, hidden underneath or had been bottling up. As described earlier, they used dance to release and face up to feelings, deal with specific emotions, work through dilemmas and deal with feeling depressed, which was seen as stuck energy, or with locked feelings. This was described in one of the pair interviews:

“Keeps her … emotionally - doesn't get rid of feelings (e.g. sadness) but is a time to .. know and understand them. One time she couldn't move - body rigid - so much going on in her life - learnt that she ‘grid locks’ when things are bad - did another [dance] session next day and managed to unlock (May).”

Dance used this way could be in a group, or done at home, choosing music that will help to get unstuck, express feelings and move through them. Some women who danced every week used it as a regular time to sort out their emotional issues. It was commented that the healing process could involve using dance and creativity to work symbolically on an issue rather than intellectually.

An example given was a woman in the middle of a divorce who, remembering how in the dance the group wove in and out between each other without touching and hurting each other, used this to cope with someone who was being very difficult in her life. One woman told of how she felt it helped her succeed in getting a new job because prior to the interview:

"she'd just done a wave [5 Rhythms], being in touch with what was going in her, where the tension is, emotional and physical“ (May).

Another woman explained how she called up memories of feeling powerful when dancing to help her feel more confident in every day situations. Dance had helped her overcome being paralysed by fear:

"I quiver, but I am not panicked, I move, I dance, I go on“ (Flora).

This process helped them find balance in their lives and to use dance for their wellbeing. It was also effectively used by some as a preventative tool in a crisis.

"I've been dancing when my state of mind has been quite challenged, and I do know what madness is like, I have been locked up…. It's [dance is] natural healing .. in a crisis“ (Stella).

One of the dancers took the trouble to write about her experience, when she was commenting on the first draft of the report: She felt it was important to explain that 5 Rhythms dance had helped her with a specific mental health problem: Obsessional Compulsive Disorder (OCD):

"OCD makes everything very tight and rigid and heady. Dancing has helped soften the edges and loosen me up. Also OCD is rooted in fear and dancing has helped me find a way of being with the fear and moving through it. Also OCD is a system for repressing emotion and 5 Rhythms has helped me access and release them. Initially by seeing other dancers I learnt emotions were safe and acceptable. 5 Rhythms is the antithesis of OCD“ (Georgia).

One woman contrasted this process with other types of help such as medication which offered a quick fix. There was also a
discussion about whether 5 rhythms dancing could be offered in psychiatric hospitals. It was agreed that for people who had already had an introduction to it and trusted it, the dance could be very useful to deal with overwhelming feelings, but that being in the middle of feeling very distressed probably was not the right time to start learning to use the dance this way.

Appreciating music
One of the women commented that 5 Rhythms dancing had helped her

“appreciate music more, hearing it in a different way to just sitting passively”
(Eileen).

Similarly one of the dancers told how it had:

"helped me rediscover my love of music, expanded my appreciation and helped me discover different sorts of music, and I like choosing music for 5 rhythms" (Fiona).

Another found she was now using the five rhythms to describe music

"I was describing R&B (Rhythm and Blues) as: it has got this real kind of like tight staccato onto it, and its got a really flowing over the top" (Mary).

What helps people to take part -

In the questionnaire we asked the women dancers a series of questions where they were to rate the importance of various factors that could make 5 Rhythms Dancing more accessible to women. The questions asked them to rate the importance for themselves and also other women. The women were given the choice of selecting one of three possible answers. These were: not important; somewhat important; or very important.

The resulting answers of all the nineteen women who took part in our questionnaire are presented in a table form opposite.

The qualitative data provided some additional comments on making the dancing more accessible with three women having strong opinions about the need for better access: One woman said

she “wants to change the fact that some people find it inaccessible. Some people also struggle with lack of structure” (Ella).

Another woman said she thought that 5 Rhythms dancing was;

"accessible for certain people - white middle class, money, prohibitive teachers reflect that - [I've] learned to accept [but I] don't agree with that - but getting enough - take what I'm getting but not accepting all - I'd like it to be different. (Rose).

Another woman stressed the importance of welcoming new dancers:

"I wouldn't like it if insufficient explanation for new people. It feels that as a group we need to think about how to respond to and to welcome new dancers (Flora).

A new dancer commented how the beginners sessions were important as

"we've gone through the ground rules and it felt safe" (Mary).
An experienced dancer warned that not all groups were welcoming, remembering a very large group in which "they all seemed to know each other and I felt like I was the outsider" (Ella).

There was brief discussion about membership of groups. Comments were made about mixed groups. Some women said they were apprehensive at first but felt alright over time. One woman said she has had her prejudices about men challenged by dancing with them.

Another discussion was about the lack of Black people doing 5 Rhythms dancing and how without a more diverse range of people there was something missing in the dancing. One person suggested that some cultures were maybe not as physically inhibited as white people, so maybe didn't need this type of dancing to free them up.

Table showing how the participants rated the importance of features for access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features for Access</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building with no stairs</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue near a bus route</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time fits in with other commitments</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free – No Cost</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheap – Low Cost</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare paid</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassured you don’t have to be very fit</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You don’t have to be an experienced dancer</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Only</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No spectators watching</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet Nearby</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly and Welcoming</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can go on your own/don’t need a partner</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to express self in own way</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t need special equipment. e.g. shoes</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing what your in for/clear info at start</td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Principle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal accounts

Karen Ledger: Analysing my own data

This was written by one of the researcher participants as a case study. She analysed all her own data, pulling out her contributions from her questionnaire, focus group, peer pair interviews and diary.

I am a thirty six year old woman who has a diagnosis of clinical depression for which I am now on medication. I came with a lot of apprehension as to what 5 Rhythms was going to do for me. Added to that was the fact that I was a totally inexperienced dancer so I thought that it was going to prove something of a challenge.

In the research data, I described my first attempt at 5 Rhythms dancing:

"I had a slow introduction to 5 Rhythms at first, just moving from foot to foot but then finding myself loosening up. Listening and moving to Staccato was particularly uplifting as I wanted to dance around the room swinging my arms and making sharp movements" (Karen).

The four dance classes were taught by an experienced teacher of 5 Rhythms Dancing. I expressed concern when the style of teaching in these particular classes encouraged dancers to explore their inner feelings, which in this case, included dancers with mental health problems. I worried that this might have triggered anxiety or memories in a situation that was not therapy. However, I did go on to describe a good experience with the teacher:

"when we were told to concentrate on our body parts step by step such as rolling our shoulders and kicking out our feet - a great distraction from thinking of what's going on in our minds" (Karen).

As for outcomes I said that although I didn't notice any specific improvements in my mental health, I did say that during each session I did notice that I was able to focus on the dancing and the enjoyment of that rather than thinking of my problems.

When asked if I would carry on dancing 5 Rhythms, I said I would but only under certain circumstances. Any future class would for me, at this time in my life, have to be for women only, even though I realise that in most social circumstances I would come across a mixed sex environment. I felt that in order to build my confidence level I would only feel comfortable dancing with, or in front of other women. The mental health aspect which was a focus for these particular classes was the main reason that I took part as I said I:

"felt more at ease with people who were thinking about the mental health side of things" (Karen).

Consequently I didn't think I would be able to go to a 5 Rhythms class that didn't focus on mental health in some way.

Exercise was for me

"an enjoyable way to get fit" (Karen)
and a real bonus. The usual way for me to get exercise was to go to keep fit classes and although I said they were enjoyable as well, there's always that pressure of being able to keep up with everyone else and do the right steps.

I felt many positive things had happened during the four dance workshops, not least the comradeship that women now had with each other and I also felt that there was a "nurturing atmosphere" (Karen) present which I felt was comforting not only to myself but to other women as well.

Nadine Scott: My experience of doing research and 5 Rhythms Dance.

Before I became involved in this research project I felt jumbled up and like I was failing. But now I feel more in the present and sharpened up in my brain. I wasn't paid money to take part, but I feel I was paid in an emotional and spiritual way.

I thought I'd be useless, but I put in different input and the other researchers thought they were good ideas. In the research things didn't always happen the way you'd expect, which is a bit like life really! Sometimes even when things go wrong, you can get something out of it. I've also become a bit less chaotic.

From being involved I've got less reclusive and have mixed with people more. I've still been able to do things even when not quite well. I've enjoyed being part of a co-operative team and working with others and learning about give and take.

It's enabled me to want more positive environments and I'm more aware of what's positive. It's helped me to realise to go towards things that suit me, like finding out things but not necessarily in a conventional way. I think it's helped me grow as a person.

In doing the dancing, I didn't know what I was letting myself in for; it seemed way out and a bit freaky, not in the mainstream. But this also made it exciting. However I had also read an article about 5 Rhythms dance saying it was important to have a good teacher and it needed to be done carefully as it could have a powerful effect. I was scared that the rhythm lyrical might send me into a trance. I had mixed feelings about it, which were based on my own fears of 'what if'.

But I got a lot out of it. It made me want to do a lot of singing and dancing and other creative things. At first I wanted to hide at the back, but gradually I felt more at ease. It was lots of fun too, sometimes dancing to silly music and being silly together. It wasn't 'dog eat dog', but a shared and un-competitive environment.

The 5 Rhythms Dance tries to help you feel whole and to air everything inside you. It helped me not to avoid things.

I love dancing and music and movement, but dancing in a disco can make me feel really self-conscious, but here I felt uplifted and was having a good time, feeling happiness. The teacher is important, to give guidance to the music.

It also helped me physically with some whiplash that I had. Since doing the dancing I've started guessing rhythms in songs I hear. I want to do my own light hearted version at home.\(^1\)

\(^1\) However it is important to note that this was a personal experience. Advice regarding any physical health conditions should be taken from a GP or Dance instructor before embarking on 5 Rhythms dance.
Discussion

This section will look at the findings that have come out of our own research and mention some results that have been found in similar research that has been published.

We think this is groundbreaking research because there has been little prior investigation of 5 Rhythms dance and because of the way we encouraged participation with our research methods. This research also adds to the growing number of studies led by people who have been using mental health services. See the Methods section for our comments on how the research methods worked in practice.

According to The Mental Health Foundation, (Bird 1999) 1-in-4 people will experience mental health problems at some time during their lives and no one treatment or activity is going to suit everybody. It is therefore important that research (such as this project) is used to investigate a variety of different strategies that people can use to alleviate mental and emotional distress. Through focussing on one activity, our research found that 5 Rhythms Dancing can be an activity that some people find useful.

The findings

For people with mental health problems to get an element of pleasure out of at least some of the things that they do is very important. (Faulkner & Layzell, 2000.). There are many positives highlighted in our report such as the fact that many women said their experience of 5 Rhythms was enjoyable, energising and enlightening.

An important part of our analysis concentrated on whether 5 Rhythms Dancing could help people release their emotions, in a safe and supportive environment, through dance. Faulkner & Layzell (2000) found service users and survivors saying it was important to express emotions freely and an integral part of 5 Rhythms is the opportunity to express feelings through the dance. The evidence in our report showed that 5 Rhythms did enable people to let go of feelings and in turn feel liberated. It’s a usual feeling at think that where you are emotionally at one particular moment in time is where you will always be. A common occurrence with our dancers was the feeling of being ‘stuck’ but many of them felt that dancing 5 Rhythms helped them move through that feeling. This is similar to the explanations by the founder of 5 Rhythms who has written about dancing being a way out of inertia (Roth 1998) Due to the powerful nature of this type of dance it was felt by our participants that a qualified teacher may be needed in order to give guidance and support when dancers bring out strong emotions.

5 Rhythms Dancing is however, not a talking therapy though obviously if you take part in a taught class you will have some form of verbal input from the teacher. 5 Rhythms is also not Dance Therapy, which does exist as a therapy in itself and is practised by qualified dance therapists. Dance therapy sessions may be one to one, not just in a group session as is 5 Rhythms Dance when it is taught: The amount of talking done in Dance Therapy depends on a variety of circumstances too numerous to detail in this report. Anyone interested in the possibilities of Dance Therapy can look on the internet. To find out more look at the site of the Association for Dance Movement Therapy in the UK, www.admt.org.uk.

The following was found on: www.wholehealthmd.com/refshelf/substances_view/1,525,687,00.html

"Dance therapy is based on the premise that the body and mind are interrelated. Dance Therapists believe that mental and emotional problems are often held in the body in the form of muscle tension and constrained movement patterns. Conversely, they believe that the state of the body can affect attitude and feelings, both positively and negatively".

One of the most important things for our participants was the need to make sure that everyone taking part felt safe and secure while doing the dancing. This was something that came up repeatedly in our qualitative data. The participants said what they liked was the way the dance sessions
created a safe space, acceptance, no-one judging them and permission to freely express themselves. In answering the questionnaire, 79% indicated that it was important for themselves that the dance sessions were closed to spectators and 84% indicated that it was important that the group was friendly and welcoming. A 'safe space' was also a common theme for interviewees in The National Strategies For Living research (Faulkner, & Layzell 2000) when they were talking about what they needed from therapy.

**Improving access**

In this study we are not looking at 5 Rhythms Dancing as being a therapy to cure all ills but rather as an activity that a person may use in a therapeutic or healing way to help with general mental and emotional well being. It also has the added bonus of being an excellent form of physical exercise as well as being extremely fun. After all, why shouldn't people who happen to have a mental health problem be able to take part in a variety of activities that are fun but also have a secondary consequence of being beneficial to your body and spirit.

In answering the questions we asked about what would make 5 Rhythms Dancing more accessible to other people the women rated the needs of others more highly than themselves. For example; when we asked whether we would need a building with no stairs 19 women said it was not important for themselves but they all thought it was for other people. This showed that the participants cared about whether other people could take part or not. They did not want sessions to exclude other people.

The research highlights the importance of offering creative and recreational activities to people at affordable prices. When answering the questionnaire, 95% of the participants thought that it was important that sessions should be available at no cost as well as low cost to people. The cost of staging the 5 Rhythms workshops for this research would have proved prohibitively expensive if we had not received a grant towards the workshops. Part of the reason that the sessions can be costly is that 5 Rhythms dance teachers are paying for their continuing training which is very expensive. They also have large overheads for sound equipment, music, transport, insurance etc. For people on welfare benefits and low incomes, 5 Rhythms classes and longer workshops may be too expensive unless they are subsidised through outside funding. However, in the city where this research took place, once people have had an introduction to 5 Rhythms dancing by a qualified teacher, they are welcome to join one of the local peer groups which can cost as little as £2 or £3 per session.

Our conclusion is that in order for 5 Rhythms Dancing to be made more accessible to the widest possible audience a variety of ways of funding classes and longer workshops is needed. For instance they could be offered as part of adult or community education programmes or part of health promotion or creative arts schemes. Funding to subsidise them could also be requested from charitable organisations. Further research is needed on whether subsidising 5 Rhythms dancing:

a) Succeeds in attracting wider participation;

b) Improves people's health with the consequence of reducing National Health Service direct costs.

The qualitative data revealed that it was important to the dancers that they were not pressured into performing in a set way or competing and that they could find ways of pacing themselves to cope with disabilities, low stamina or pain. This was echoed in the questionnaire results which showed that 79% rated it as important for themselves (and 100% for other people) that you are reassured you don't have to be very fit to do 5 Rhythms dance. Physical health can offer a boost to your own mental feel-good factor but this does not need to be in the form of a competitive sport, as it is easy to imagine that the person who lets the goal in the net feels differently to the person who scores it. No-one loses with 5 Rhythms Dancing as it is an activity where you can take part and put as much mental and physical effort in to it that you want.
without anyone saying that you have not tried enough or you have lost us the match!

Other studies

It has been a long held belief (by the medical profession) that mental distress is an illness and mainly requires treatment with drugs. Other opinions are that this is not necessarily the case. Dobson (2000) challenged the normal procedure of treating people with mental health problems exclusively with drugs:

“Patients were expected to sit back and allow medicine to make them better”.

An alternative view is described using the example of the Mind Art Project Stockport (MAPS). This project promotes the idea that the use of creative arts as a means of therapy can prove to be beneficial to people. There is now more evidence to suggest that the arts can be beneficial. The comparison scores of 33 people completing a general health questionnaire for the now defunct Health Education Authorities Community Action for Mental Health booklet showed a reduction in significant mental health problems among people attending an arts scheme. They also reported a higher self concept and, crucially, increased social activity, rather than reliance on other health services. Using the arts as a means of being therapeutic to people with mental health problems does not necessarily diminish the role of medication or talking therapies, but can enhance them. Every human being with mental health problems is unique and the greater the variety of possible therapies the more chance the person has of finding the right combination that suits them.

There have been other environments where dance has been used. One of these is Holloway Prison (Goodison & Schafer 1999). It was reported that Holloway’s Drug Unit was using dance therapy with women who have had addiction problems, as an experiment to see if it can help lift self esteem. It seems to have produced positive results. The classes they put on started with a gentle warm up followed by a contemporary/jazz routine which was then followed by relaxation exercises and brought to an end by a rousing karaoke session. The staff looking after the women reported that sometimes “we hear women singing some of the songs in repartee from cell to cell”. Unlike the Holloway’s experiment with creative art, 5 Rhythms’ dance classes don’t advertise karaoke as being a part of their structure but, because expression is welcomed, dancers can sing along as they dance in whatever way they like!

Limitations of the research

It is important to stress that the findings from this research can not be generalised to other places or applied to other people. A different piece of research or the same research using different methods, may have found out very different results. The limitations come from this being a very small piece of research, only reporting a few people’s experiences and opinions at one point in time. It is only about one aspect of one type of dance. We only skimmed the surface of our small group’s lived experience as we did not have the resources to keep going back to the participants asking more and deeper questions. Another limitation is that the analysis is bound to be coloured by what may be called the ‘fore-understandings’ of the three researchers. We started with enthusiasm and curiosity about the dance but we did not have any expert knowledge about the philosophy and teachings developed by the creator of 5 Rhythms Dancing. This report is therefore just a fragment in the wider landscape of knowledge about dance and wellbeing.

As this report is about people’s personal viewpoints and experiences it should not be taken as a true description of 5 Rhythms dance. Please see the bibliography for such publications.

The participants

A limitation of the research was that it came to light that the group of women who volunteered to take part had some similarities that may have predisposed them to find the dance beneficial and
enjoyable. Every one of our participants had at some point in their lives received counselling or psychotherapy of one description or another. Maybe the women who volunteered to participate did so because they were already comfortable about expressing feelings and exploring different ways of doing this. As Faulkner & Layzell (2000) found in their report;

"Physical ways of exploring and expressing feelings can sometimes be complementary to talking about them".

We also planned that half the participants were already experienced with this type of dance. This was so that they could help welcome new dancers and demonstrate the dancing. We were also interested in finding out what their experience of dancing was over a long period of time. We found that over half the dancers had done it before, a few of the 'new' dancers had done it once or twice before. Many of the dancers were therefore already open to exploring unusual creative activities. The third similarity was that all the women had used at least one alternative therapy before, such as homeopathy or massage, so again they were open to trying alternative and unconventional therapeutic avenues. It would be very interesting to see what would happen if this research was carried out with people who had not had these experiences. On the other hand, it would not be ethical to try and attract people who did not want to try out what can be an unusual and personally challenging creative activity. 5 Rhythms dance is never going to be satisfying to everyone as shown by the dancer who withdrew at the start because she preferred dances with set steps. A further limitation that was noticeable was the lack of ethnic diversity in the group as everyone taking part classed themselves as White British.

**Further research needed**

We would like to see more research done about 5 Rhythms Dancing and its therapeutic or healing effects as it is an under researched area. Further research projects could investigate the experience of a wider range of people (such as men and people from diverse ethnic communities); compare 5 Rhythms dance with other therapeutic activities; and evaluate the teaching of 5 Rhythms. It was never the aim of our research project to see if our participants could reduce or come off medication, because we were not in a position to ask questions about medication. Added to that we only put on 4 one day workshops so we were not looking for dramatic results. Hopefully our research can spark off some more in-depth and targeted research about more long term effects of dance on wellbeing and on the use of medication.

Another possibility would be to offer a longer series of classes to ex-patients of psychiatric units who felt able to explore their emotions in this way. The appropriate service providers could see if this type of dancing helped to reduce further re-admission over a period of time. The experience and skills of the teacher in responding to issues around mental health would obviously be crucial to the outcome. The people taking part would also need to have worked out how to manage safely any risks to their safety that may be precipitated by a new and challenging activity. For instance some people may be aware that they are prone to periods of feeling suicidal or manic episodes. Interestingly Gabrielle Roth has told how one of the key experiences she had that contributed to her development of this form of dancing, was her sessions with people in a psychiatric hospital who had been labelled as schizophrenic (Roth 1989).

**5 Rhythms gaining popularity**

5 Rhythms Dancing is gaining in popularity in this country but it – has to be said – it has a long way to go before it reaches popular audiences. There are now several people in Great Britain, Europe and America who are teaching 5 Rhythms, following in the footsteps of Gabriel Roth, its pioneer. Teachers may also be encouraging more diverse groups of dancers to participate. One teacher is Peter Brown who has been reported (Warner,2003) as receiving a £4,500 award from a scheme called 'Real Lives Real People' (RLRP) in order to go to America to study with Gabriel Roth. Peter now
teaches classes that welcome people with mental health problems. Hopefully with money being made available, there will be many more to follow.

Before taking part in this research two of the researchers had never heard of 5 Rhythms but now these two devotees are aware that there is even a web site on the subject so to finish of the discussion here's the address and a little taster of what you will find on there:

www.5Rhythms.uk.com

“an exhilarating and liberating approach to the exploration for improvised movement and dance that is authentic, inspired and catalytic. The 5 Rhythms …. Point you in a direction and then each individual finds their own dance through deep concentration, focus and the willingness to follow energy into the magical landscapes of improvised movement.”

References and information


Information about 5 Rhythms dancing

Gabrielle Roth has created many fantastic albums of dance music. For details and all aspects of the work see: www.ravenrecording.com.

There is a British website listing teachers, courses etc, based at the Moving Centre UK: www.mcauk.com

See also the 5 rhythms site: www.5Rhythms.uk.com

Books, videos and music can be ordered from Second Wave Productions, PO Box 93. Totnes, Devon TQ9 6ZD, UK. E-Mail: productions@5rhythmsUK.com

Acknowledgements

Thanks to:
All the participants who danced with us and shared their enthusiasm, doubts, creativity, feelings and thoughts with us.
Cora Greenhill who taught 5 Rhythms and participated in the research, for her willingness to try new ventures and dance on the edge of the unknown.
The Strategies for Living team at the Mental Health Foundation, especially Sarah Wright, the Research, Support and Training Worker for the projects in England, who unfailingly encouraged us and repeatedly came up with creative ways to deal with the inevitable hiccups.
First Step Trust for helping us get started. The UK Advocacy Network for generously providing office space, a computer, stationary and from Liz Skelton, much appreciated support and work on the graphics and layout of the report.
Always wanted to dance? Come and join us!
You are invited to a course of free, expressive dancework for women, supported by the research project: Strategies for Living (funded by the Mental Health Foundation)

This will take the form of 4 day workshops and some sessions for sharing your experience. This will form the basis of the research into the part that dance can play in supporting women’s healthy living. There will be an introductory day. Those who would like to continue will then be invited to take part in 3 further sessions as participants in the research. The dance is explained overpage.

Dates:
Free Introductory day: Saturday March 16th, 11.00am - 5.00pm at Endcliffe Methodist Church Hall
This will be followed by a course of three dance workshops on Saturdays:
April 20th, 11.00am - 5.00pm at Endcliffe Methodist Church Hall
May 4th and June 1st (Venue to be decided),

All places on the three dance workshops are free for women who are unwaged.
For women who are waged the charge will be on a sliding scale of between £10 and £40 for all three workshops. This will help supplement the research project's funding.

We want the dance to be as accessible as possible, so if you have any requirements such as child care, please contact us.

Booking: There are only 20 places on this course so book early
Please contact Sarah Cook, Telephone: xxxxxxx evenings (or leave a message on the answer-phone).

If the places are reserved for new dancers, but experienced dancers are welcome too. We would appreciate a firm commitment to coming as we will not be able to offer places to everyone who wants one because of the limited places. Booking is on a first come basis. Priority will be given to women who live in or near Sheffield. If you are a new dancer you can book just for the introductory day to start with, and then if you want to do more, and take part in the research, book the other 3 days.

The dance research group, Sheffield, Jan 2002

As well as taking part in the Dancing for Living course, you may also choose to take part in other dance sessions to widen your experience of 5 Rhythms. Information about these will be given on the course.
Appendix 2. Teaching 5 Rhythms

I have been invited to write a short piece about my role as a teacher of the 5Rhythms™ 'wave dancing' to append to this report. At the outset, I need to say I am writing as myself, one teacher. As the dance encourages everyone to dance their own dance, so teacher training emphasises being truly oneself in the teaching role. We come from different backgrounds: the arts, performance dance, healing, therapies, drugs and rock n roll, accountancy: you name it! Inevitably, then, all teachers will bring their differences, and the 5Rhythms is a young tradition where we are all exploring and growing ourselves through the work. (There are still only about 150 teachers world-wide, of which Britain has many more that its fair share - so there's probably one near you!)

Having said that, because the basic teachings are the rhythms themselves, anyone familiar with the practice will enter the room and recognise what is happening and be able to 'fall into the wave' whoever is teaching, or indeed if no one is teaching but experienced dancers are practising on their own.

What teachers have in common is having experienced long-term passionate immersion in the dance through working extensively with Gabrielle Roth herself and her most experienced teachers (in Britain, Susannah and Ya'Acov Darling Khan). There is an extensive and clearly defined body of work, or set of 'maps' to study, of which the practise of dancing the 5Rhythms is the core. The maps of the emotions, the life cycle, sexuality, and the ego characters that conflict with our soul life, all offer their challenges which we dance through again and again before doing the actual teacher training. No one is permitted to teach the work who has not been accredited by Gabrielle herself in this way. To learn more about the work, details of Gabrielle's books, music and websites are listed separately. They are inspirational and strongly recommended to everyone!

The research report shows, I think, how the dance can be experienced on many different levels, and as a teacher it is one of my tasks to support these different levels. I bring to the teaching my understanding that while the essence of the practise is incredibly simple and natural, the roots of the work are entwined with the roots of shamanism, Taoism, and traditions that transcend western dualistic thinking that splits body, mind and spirit. We may be working in a gym or a school hall, but I will always have some altarpiece with a candle, because for me the dance space, like the body, is sacred.

This work has come into the world through the body and mind of an extraordinary woman living in New York today, but, like such practises as yoga or the martial arts, it has ancient roots, and, like them, it brings benefits on the purely physical level as well as the emotional, creative and spiritual levels. It is a holistic practise in every sense, and for me wholeness means health.

For me personally, the dance has always connected with my sense of Goddess, a way of life humans may once have known in whole communities, where spirit or divinity is known directly as the energy that moves through the body, opening us ecstatically to the creative life force that connects us to each other and the whole of nature. Because a 5Rhythm 'wave' always starts with the body in the flowing rhythm, I experience the whole practice as coming from the feminine. I feel this contains deep learning essential in our world.

I bring to my teaching a professional background in school and adult teaching, creative writing, humanitarian psychotherapy and bodywork. I also try to bring a beginner's mind, a complete openness to following the process, a commitment to freedom, playing with passionate persistence with the tension between resistance and release.

The dance is catalysing, i.e. emotions are not simply released but may be effortlessly transformed, simply through being danced. 'How do we know the dancer from the dance?' (Yeats) When the dance is truly one's own, it allows life, art and healing to happen simultaneously. Revelation is a regular occurrence!

I have to cross my own edges all the time if I want the group to be risk being real. The work is about finding freedom, but contains the paradox that we need discipline to be free. I encourage the energies and emotions in the room to be expressed in dance, and sometimes in ritual and ritual theatre. I am a director, but the direction comes ideally from following intuitively what is happening and wanting to happen, not a plan. I follow with music more than words. I'm a DJ. Teachers are multi-taskers. Risk takers mistake makers and high stakers. It's an exciting job…

But all this requires responsibility.

Classes and courses in 5Rhythms™ are usually advertised as open to everyone, with no requirements about levels of physical fitness etc. But I do expect participants to be able to take personal responsibility for themselves and look after their own needs, as my primary responsibility while teaching is to work with the group, rather than individuals. I remind everyone that my suggestions are only suggestions, that they choose how far to stretch themselves, and constantly follow their own energy and pay attention to their own bodies. I also ask that no one comes to dance under the influence of alcohol or other psycho-active drugs. And very importantly, people must have chosen to come themselves: I don't believe this work should ever be prescribed, and people should not be pressurised to come, or to stay. Those who have any concerns about their welfare should talk to the teacher about them before enrolling on a course, and if they are in therapy or on medication it is advisable to consult their therapist or doctor.

This Project was Supported and Funded by:

[Logos of Mental Health Foundation, Strategies for Living, and Community Fund]