

# Tango Therapy: The Healing Embrace

The Argentina Independent

By: Anette Berve; August 2008

---

While dancing is generally a popular form of exercise, it is now medically proven that dancing, and especially the Argentine tango, has a great effect medically. People of all ages flock to the *milongas* and the sound of Gardel fills the air, might this be the fountain of youth long searched for?

'Tango therapy' is the term applied to the therapeutic purposes of the dance and is becoming a popular way of increasing the quality of life of many patients. Using dance as therapy is nothing new, as the social setting of a dance hall and the sound of music is known to ease stress and stimulate the brain positively. Through dancing, not only the body is cured, but also it also stimulates the mind and is used to help people suffering with everything from depression, and phobias to schizophrenia.

The tango therapy has recently become a new form of treatment in patients suffering from neurological diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Patients afflicted with the diseases face a future of deteriorating physical and mental state and need a constant stimulation of the mind through for example music.

Previous physical treatment in patients with Parkinson's included general exercise such as walking, but studies carried out by the Department of Physical Therapy at Washington University in Canada suggests that the coordination in tango proves more effective than any other form of exercise.

## **Finding the balance**

"We saw that the movements in tango proved helpful particularly regarding balance and walking backwards," says Dr. Gammon Earhart, assistant professor at Washington University and author of the study. She explains that the motor skills of Parkinson's

patients vanish and especially movements like walking backwards and turning are hard to carry out, making it difficult to perform everyday chores.

After reading a study by Patricia McKinley at a conference of the Society for Neuroscience, which stated that tango improved mobility in generally frail elderly patients, Earhart decided to see if the same results could be achieved in patients with Parkinson's. Together with Madeleine Hackney, a PhD student and professional ballroom dancer, they conducted a series of tests comparing tango to standard exercise regimes as well as more familiar dances for the Canadians like waltz and fox trot.

"All treatments had some result elements in common, but the treatment using the tango always proved either equal or superior to the other exercise methods," said Earhart. Improvement in balance and more fluid movements was seen after as little as two weeks of exercise.

Earhart believes that there are some benefits found in dance in general, but that the tango contains some specific manoeuvres that are especially beneficial to people with Parkinson's. The healing might lie in the fact that the patient needs to be on high alert to plan out the following steps in the complicated dance. The coordination needed to perform the dance stimulates the brain correctly for the patient to improve their balance.

### **The healing embrace**

"I believe tango is beneficial because of the closeness. Through the close embrace with their partner, the patients feel safe and dare to move around more," says Marisa Maragliano, secretary of Sentimiento Tango, who initiated the first international conference for tango therapy that took place in Rosario two weeks ago.

"The patients feel like the protagonist when they dance and this improves their self-esteem. The closeness to the partner is vital and the embrace in tango provides a physical connection," she adds. Maragliano is an active figure in the tango therapy scene and arranges several classes with patients suffering from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Treating the latter is organised through Clínica de Memoria in Rosario.

“Many Alzheimer’s patients become isolated from society and the disease dominates their life. Through attending the dance classes they take part in something social and can again enjoy physical contact and talk to other people,” Maragliano says. For Alzheimer’s patients the stimulation of the mind is vital to combat total deterioration of the memory.

For the older Argentine generations, tango triggers a lot of memories, explains Maragliano. Through the music they are brought back to their youth when they were in the *milongas*, dancing all night. “When the music is put on they instantly recognise the beat, understand which tango to dance and even remember the lyrics and sing along,” she says. “Families tell me their loved ones return from class having lots to tell, something which is unusual for Alzheimer’s patients due to isolation and lack of motivation to participate in any activities.”

At Clínica de Memoria, 30 patients are being treated for Alzheimer’s. Dr. Gerardo Tiezzi, director at the clinic explains that they help patients regain their identity through series of different exercises, now including tango dancing.

“Before we used simple and standard treatment methods like physical exercise and mental stimulation through music. But we noticed that the patients specifically remembered tango lyrics without problem and decided to try and incorporate the tango dancing as a part of the exercise.” He says the feedback has been positive and patients state the dance makes them feel happy.

### **The magical ingredient**

“Tango therapy deals with how people feel and improving their life quality,” says Earhart. “While others look at the spiritual side of it, I am interested in the medical and scientific benefits and I have to admit we did make some very interesting findings.”

The question remains, how is it that tango, with songs of tragic love stories and slow, melancholic music became therapy and not disco, with happier beats, inspiring lyrics and colourful costumes? Actually the meringue and salsa are two other dances proven to have medical effects, but Maragliano believes that the key lies in the fact that tango is one of the few dances where the partners are locked in an intimate, embracing position,

creating a stimulating physical contact with healing effects. It is the more spiritual and mental effect that makes it so effective. It definitely is proven to be the embrace that heals.