



The Parkinson's Podcast
Think Like a Dancer
with David Leventhal
Davis Phinney Foundation

Jackie Hanson (Education Program Manager, Audio and Video Producer, Davis Phinney Foundation):

Hello everyone. And welcome to The Parkinson's Podcast. This podcast is brought to you by the Davis Phinney Foundation and brings you experts from around the country, as well as additional educational and inspirational resources to help you live well today with Parkinson's. Hi everyone, wherever, or whenever this episode today finds you, I hope you are doing well. My name is Jackie Hanson and I am the education content associate here at the Foundation. And I'm so glad you're here listening with us today. If you are new to this podcast, or this is the first time you've ever heard about the Davis Phinney Foundation. Welcome. I'm so glad you found us. We love to hear from our community members old or new. So please at any time, feel free to reach out to us at blog@dpf.org, and just introduce yourself. I, or one of our other many amazing staff members will be there to say hi or answer any questions you have or provide you with any resources you may need this week.

We have a brief, but very special episode, featuring a conversation with David Leventhal. For those of you more familiar with the Parkinson's world, you may have heard David's name as he is a very well-known and influential contributor to the Parkinson's community. David is a founding teacher for dance for PD and a program director. He leads dance classes for people with Parkinson's around the world and trains other teachers in the dance for PD approach. He is the recipient of the World Parkinson's Congress award for distinguished contribution to the Parkinson's community and was a co-recipient of the Alan Bonander Humanitarian award. Speaking from my own personal experience, David is a wonderful teacher with a kind and genuine presence and in the following conversation, he speaks to the important elements of dance and how they transfer to living well with Parkinson's. This talk is an excerpt from a full live presentation David gave at a past Victory Summit event. So be sure and check out the full recording via the link in this episode's show notes. With that, here is Melani Dizon who will introduce this discussion.

Melani Dizon (Director of Education, Davis Phinney Foundation):
Thank you for being here, David. We're super excited to have you.

David Leventhal (Program Director and Founding Teacher, Dance for PD):
I'm thrilled to be with all of you and I appreciate the invitation and just for full disclosure. I am also an enthusiastic three-year, four-year board member of the Davis Phinney Foundation. So, I'm thrilled to be able to contribute in this way. What I'm gonna talk about today is really what

you're going to be thinking about the rest of the time, not just when you're in class, but when you're at home, because as Davis and Connie will tell you being an athlete or being a performing artist entails a certain mindset that you carry with you 24 hours a day, it affects how you think about what you eat. It affects how you think about processing the world. It affects how you think about your body. It kind of percolates through every aspect of your existence.

And that's a good thing because for people living with Parkinson's to think with a mind of a dancer or an athlete can yield a number of benefits. I'm going to point to four of those benefits today. And these are things that you can take with you as you go into your lives and really use as tools in your daily life. The question I get most often is what is dance and how is it different from all of the exercise programs that are recommended to me by my neurologist? And so, I'm gonna start out by unpacking a little bit of what happens in a dance experience and what makes it a little bit different. I should say that it's not different from exercise. It builds on to exercise. It is exercise plus, and what's really interesting is it incorporates many of the elements that Drs. Tarolli and Pontone talked about earlier today in terms of cognitive stimulation, cognitive challenge, mood awareness, and mood change. So, a lot of what we do in dance is building onto the purely motor elements with these added elements. Now, the first element I wanna introduce is imagery. So instead of just thinking about moving your wrists, I actually want you to think of dipping your hands into a beautiful pool of water. What does that pool of water feel like? What's the texture of that water? What's the temperature of that water? So, there's now a quality of movement that's informed by the imagery we're using, right? And then instead of just rotating your hands, what if I thought about presenting a gift to somebody, or if you are feeling like you deserve the gift, maybe it's coming to you. How would you rotate your hands if you were receiving a gift or giving a gift, right?

So, it's a different idea. So, let's start to put some of that together, right? So, we have a dip into the water, a dip into the water, open your hands to receive the gift and bring that gift into your heart. What I'm starting to do now is to think about choreography and choreography is really, it's like writing is to words, choreography is to movement. So, choreography is this idea of putting disparate movements together into a sentence, right, into one phrase. What does that sentence start to look like? And how do I think about that sentence as one cohesive chain of movement, instead of different parts that don't relate, how can I make all of this movement relate to itself? And now we're just missing one element, which is music. So, music is the thing that blends all of this together into a delicious package. When you're thinking about dance, it's almost like you know, you have these elements of exercise and stretching like the carrots and the potatoes and the tomatoes and the onions, and you could eat those raw and separate, right? These building blocks, but dance creates this wonderful stew that you want to keep eating. It's so delicious. And that's, so all the elements are in there, but it creates something that you, that you want to come back to.

Here. David takes a brief moment to lead the live audience through a dance exercise, putting together all of the aforementioned elements into one experience. You can find a link to this

video in the show notes of today's episode. He then continues the conversation discussing the music that was played during the exercise.

David Leventhal:

So, what we're doing here is actually a piece of repertory from the choreographer, Mark Morris. This is a piece that he did called Falling Down Stairs, which is really a project commissioned by the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma. And the reason I bring this in is that it, for me represents that lift off from those ingredients of exercise and stretching into the world of dance. And the way that we do that is really thinking about these four elements, right? Leveraging imagery and your imagination in the service of movement, right? So not thinking about movement mechanically, but really understanding it as the physical expression of what's in your mind of what's in your imagination and letting that fly. Number two, choreographing, choreographing is just a fancy term for again, creating movement sentences, movement phrases. And this is actually a really valuable skill for people living with Parkinson's because when you're dealing with challenges of executive function, to create a plan for yourself, to create a roadmap of movement is incredibly valuable.

And that's essentially what choreographers do. They're creating roadmaps of movement to help dancers understand what to do next. You can do that for yourself. You can do that at home, around a tricky corner. You can do that at the grocery store, getting to the checkout aisle. So, thinking about movement, not as a challenge or a limit, but as a path, as a plan, as a sequence. Number three, there's been quite a lot of research at this point on the power of music and music's effect on the brain, use music as a tool, right? So let it be your guide. I gave you movements. We talked about the phrasing, but when Yo-Yo Ma came in and started playing, whoa, that changed everything. It gave us as one of our participants in Brooklyn said a red carpet. Music is like a red carpet that rolls out in front of you and tells you not just what to do and when, but how to do it.

So, there's an emotional connection. Music is also an incredible mood enhancer, right? We listen to music, it changes the way we're feeling. It's also incredibly stimulating. So, whether it's music, we're familiar with that triggers memory or music that is new to us, that forces us to listen differently. It's a wonderful way of challenging our brain to think differently. And the fourth one which is something that I feel very, very deeply about coming from life as a performer, which is that every movement counts, every victory counts, every movement counts. And what performing artists do is make every movement count for their audience. So, there's nothing that gets mumbled. There's nothing that gets hidden. Everything needs to be clear and projected to the very, very top of that balcony, right? If you're hiding your movements, if you're not being clear with your movements, they can't see it.

And yeah, they've paid a little less than the people in the orchestra, but they still deserve to see your movement. So, when I think about movement, particularly for people in our dance for PD classes, I'm really getting them to think like a performer, right. To project their movement,

project their story out. So, I wanted to give you and kind of do a deep dive into a couple other of these elements. Okay. So, we're gonna do short dance experiences that really allow you to embody these four elements, imagery, choreography, and sequencing, music, and this idea of projecting like a performer. And you might say, well, this is great if I'm in a dance class, but what about the rest of my life? No, these are things that you can do every day at home by yourself or with a partner out on the street, wherever you are.

So, I'm gonna start with this idea of imagery. The idea here is that you have a canvas all around you. Okay. So, imagine wherever you are in your room a blank canvas. And I want you to start by doing a little bit of tracing with your hands. Okay. So, you can start, I'm gonna start very simply with one brush, one paint brush, but I want you to think again, not just frontally, not just the screen, but to start to think about all of that space around you. I want you to think about coloring that space, really be specific, what is the color of that brush? What is the thickness of that brush? What is the texture of that brush? And I'm gonna talk you through this activity, which is really all in your head, but starts to use those ideas and those images in your head to initiate movement through your body. Just starting with that brush and allowing yourself to be free with this, don't try to prescribe something or to make it feel anything other than a doodle. I'll turn the music down a little bit, so you can hear me. And now transferring that brush to the other hand.

And now taking up a second brush and painting all around you. As big and expansive as you're comfortable being, but also remembering the details, the finer brush strokes. So big and right in front of you now thinking about little dots of color, so little specs like George Serra, the great French pointillist. So, continuing, we were doing our dogs, right. Now, I want you to think about actually smearing that paint. So, we're using again, just our imagination, but we're using that sense of texture of that paint, feeling the oil paint, kind of pressing through our fingers, it's a very different quality than we had with our dots. And that quality change in our imagination is actually affecting our movement. Right? We're moving very differently. This is one of the things that we really like to focus. One of the things we really like to focus on in dance is not just the what, but the how. So, let's go back to that image of Jackson Pollock. And let's really now think about laddering that paint out as much as we can. So, throw it out of your fingers. Let that energy is kind of curl off your hands. You can also splatter your own body. You can splatter your own clothes with the paint.

You can splatter your knee, you can splatter the room around you, just throwing that paint out as far as you can. Beautiful, good. And now gathering all of that paint, like scraping it off the walls, all those dots, all those lines, all those colors, scraping 'em off, getting that paint under your fingernails, bringing it right into your heart and just opening out into a burst of color and release down.

All right, good. Now, one of the things that I wanted to one of the things that I wanted to talk about was this idea of kind of improvised movement versus structured movement. So, what we

just did was really using your imagination to create your own movement. Some of you were following me more or less, some of you were probably in your own world with that. And just letting the music and some of the cues that I was giving, be your guide. And that's something that we focus on as well, because often when you're living with Parkinson's, you're improvising your movements. You're improvising your way through the day. We don't always have set choreography. However, structure is also very helpful. So, when we think about, when we think about phrases of movement, we think about those sentences. We can start to create a roadmap for ourselves, and this can be incredibly valuable for people navigating their worlds, right?

If there's something that is challenging in your daily life, whether it's getting to a place in your house, turning a corner, if you start to experience freezing of gait, it's often helpful to think about the movement as a dance, as a choreographed expression, rather than an improvisation where you're having to make it up. So, thinking about, all right, I'm gonna take eight steps on this beat, or I'm gonna take four steps in this direction or four steps in direction. If you can create a plan for yourself, if you can choreograph for yourself it's, it can be so much easier. So, I wanted to I wanted to wrap up with, here are the four things, and what I've done here is taken these four ideas. And I've given you some just everyday activities, right? Leveraging imagery to help you get out of bed in the morning.

So, if you're having trouble getting out of bed, what images could you use to help yourself out of bed? Number two, choreographing your way to the checkout counter. I actually say this, because I, somebody told me a story. He started dance for PD classes and a couple months later he felt that he was, he would get stuck in the grocery store. And so, he started thinking about the way forward as choreography, rather than just steps. So, creating a sequence for himself, letting music be the guide, right? So, whether you're walking around with music, whether you have music on in the home, find music that inspires you, it could be red carpet music like we listened to for our Oscar award. It could be west side story. It could be jazz. It could be rock music, whatever you like, that's going to inspire you, find that rhythm, find that pulse, but also find the emotional tone of that music to help support you.

And number four, thinking about projecting your gestures when you're having a conversation, right? Imagine that that person is 15 feet away. So how would you project your movement so that that person could actually have a sense of what you're trying to say. So, these are really important concepts that I want you to carry into your daily life. So that you're thinking as a dancer, you're carrying those things in much in the way that Cindy, who I'm going to finish with here does in her life. Cindy, for me represents the exemplification of thinking like a dancer. She is living her life as a dancer with Parkinson's and this is an excerpt from a film by Dave Iverson, who I know a lot of you know, as well. The film is called *Capturing Grace*.

(Cindy from the film *Capturing Grace*):

I've learned to value myself more, which is quite a gift. When I'm schlumping, I say to myself, I'm a dancer. I have to sit up straight. I'm a dancer and it gives me motivation to take better care of myself. When the medicine is working, I can almost do everything. It's just that the amount of time gets shorter and shorter when it functions. Parkinson's forces you to reveal your vulnerabilities. You know, otherwise people mostly try to put on their best face, their best appearance. You know, I'm going out in public, I have to put on this and that. And I have to put on my overcoat, button it uptight. Well, you can't, if you're going with Parkinson's and you can't button it, you're revealed, you know, there's no way about it. What happens to me when my feet feel like glue and they're stuck on the floor, I sometimes cannot walk, but I can dance. The music leads. In other words, it's not my brain telling me to take a step or to do this or do that. The music is leading me. So, I'm like following this wonderful leader, who's so mysterious and has such a lovely sound. And it's gonna take me to some other place.

(Speaker #2 from *Capturing Grace*):
What is that other place?

(Cindy from the film *Capturing Grace*):

Well, excuse me, it's the place where you're weightless, you know, you just, your body is just, it just flies. It doesn't tug at you, tug you and pull you and push you and you know, have your, in these knots where you can't move and you can't think, and you're struggling and fighting. It just, you know, you go above that.

David Leventhal:

I'm gonna finish there. Thank you, Cindy for that incredible message of really thinking like a dancer and the power and the benefits of doing that, not just in our classes but really thinking like a dancer in every aspect of your life.

Jackie Hanson:

Thank you so much for listening to today's episode, how dance can help you live well with Parkinson's. If you enjoyed today's episode, please consider subscribing, leaving a review, and giving us four stars. Your reviews and ratings allow us to grow and reach more people with Parkinson's to help them live well today. A big thank you to David Leventhal for taking time to have this conversation with us. If you're interested in learning more from David, check out the show notes for today's episode, which will link you to many other presentations from David, as well as other dance experiences. As always reach out to us at any time with your questions, comments, or simply to say hello to blog@dpf.org. Again, that's blog@dpf.org. Finally, don't forget that this podcast is just one of many resources we offer the community including but not limited to live webinars, a course for the newly diagnosed and our Every Victory Counts manual, which is a comprehensive resource and guide to being knowledgeable about Parkinson's and living well with it. You can find all of these resources at dpf.org. Again, that's dpf.org. Thanks everyone so much for being here and we will see you next week.



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