

HAVE A FLING!

Happiness is...

# ...a kilt and a pirouette

*Want the surest route to contentment and health? You'll need a sporran, dancing pumps, no pants...*



**We're not kidding. According to recent research, all that Scottish reeling and jigging is the best tonic there is for our physical and mental health. Over the last ten years the aptly monikered Professor Michael Argyle, a psychologist at Oxford Brookes University, has been investigating the causes of happiness and wellbeing.**

**"Our research shows that group Scottish dancing is the hobby which gives the most pleasure," concludes Argyle.**

**It's an opinion confirmed in a BBC documentary experiment that found Highland flinging was the best way of achieving happiness from a broad range of activities. So what is the unique combination offered by all this Caledonian jiggy-pokery? And can you do it in Essex?**

## DRESSING UP

"The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung had a theory that humans need a 'shadow' – a kind of psychic alter ego," says social psychologist Victoria Saunderson, who has studied the psychological benefits of costume. "It holds that we feel trapped in the confines of a single persona, and this is particularly true of people in stressful jobs who are expected to be constantly responsible.

"There's a longing to 'throw off the pinstripes' and do something outrageous, so you get high-profile lawyers turning tricks with £10 prostitutes. But if these people had an outlet – a time and place to be someone else – they wouldn't overturn the appercart of their lives in quite such catastrophic fashion.

"Donning a costume makes Scottish Dancing one very good way of being someone else. You could also get the same benefits if you joined a drama group," Saunderson adds.

## EXERCISE

"It's been established that an hour of vigorous dancing is equivalent to an hour in the gym," says GP, health author and keen dancer Dr Vincent Forte. "It works all the major muscle groups, but because of the variety of movements, none to excess. Which makes dancing a safe way of toning muscles without the risks of repetitive strain and pulls common with more intensive exercise."

Research from The Mayo Clinic in the US confirms that dancing can burn as many calories as walking, swimming or cycling, which are alternatives if you're not for grooving. Attaching pedometers to square dancers, their study found participants covered nearly five miles in a single evening – but they estimate that the greater demands of the Celtic version would almost double that.

Plus they found other physiological benefits, with the side-to-side moves strengthening weight-bearing bones (tibia, fibula and femur), helping to prevent loss of bone mass. They concluded that dancing is a positive alternative to aerobics or jogging. ▶

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## MENTAL AND OVERALL HEALTH

"For starters, research has shown leisure activities boost our immune systems," says Professor Argyle. One American study found 50-year-old men without socialised leisure activities had a mortality rate three times that of peers with them. "And leisure activities involving exercise – like dancing – have a particularly good knock-on effect on mental health," says Argyle.

"Dancing is one of the best ways to release endorphins – naturally occurring body chemicals which create a sense of euphoria and wellbeing," says Dr Forte. "You get a pleasant high which often lasts a day or two. Although there's sometimes a 'downer' when the effect wears off, it just takes a repeat 'dose' to restore the feeling. So be warned: this makes dancing quite addictive."

More mental benefits come from the new brain structures dancing creates, adds Doctor Forte. "Rehearsing and learning the profile of movements builds new pathways in the brain – vitally important when you remember that after the age of 18 we lose 100,000 brain cells every day."

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## COMMUNALITY

Researchers at Illinois University recently published their findings on the holistic – physical, mental and social – benefits of social exercise such as dance. Sedentary but otherwise healthy volunteers met for 40-minute exercise classes three times a week. After six months, those who had maintained the programmes showed improvements in happiness and life satisfaction, and a decrease in loneliness. For those who gave up, on the other hand, happiness levels dropped to below their pre-exercise starting point.

The researchers' conclusions? "Social exercises such as dancing, group cycling, aerobics lessons or team sports, are very good at engendering wellbeing. However, it's important not to stop the exercise once you've begun. Put it another way: you may start to miss your dancing partners."



## SEXUAL INTERACTION

Good news if you're looking for love: the experts also reckon the social network of a dance class makes it easier to meet members of the opposite sex. People can dance with different partners in an exciting way, without feeling threatened or breaching the boundaries of good taste and intimacy, as may happen at a disco or party. "Pastimes are good for the socio-sexual fabric, and dance classes don't have the hostility to individual outsiders which other social groupings tend to produce," says Professor Argyle. "Strangers are made welcome, and studies at Sydney University proved social and gender-based divisions are much less important than elsewhere in society." □

If you fancy giving Scottish Dancing a whirl contact the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (Pat The Queen...), at 12 Coa Crescent, Edinburgh EH3 Tel: 0131 225 3854 for details of your nearest class.