

Strictly: It takes you

Lucy Maddox on psychologists' involvement in the reality dance show

These are dark days, and I am not commenting on the shabby politics of the coalition. Many of us are getting up and coming home in the gloom: a bleak existence with the consequences of winter blues for many. Clues for improving our mood might lie in some recent psychology media involvement.

Pamela Stephenson, actress-turned-psychologist and recent star of *Strictly Come Dancing*, stated the case for the mood benefits of dancing, in *The Guardian* on 21 December: '...it's healthy to get fit, to laugh, to do something you enjoy, to dance... Dancing is the physical expression of our emotional selves, and personally I have found it to be a life-affirming path to a new-found style of happiness.'

Stephenson was candid about the enjoyment she got from dancing with her professional dance partner: 'Early on, my husband did delicately inquire if the dance moves engendered physical arousal... I admitted they did.' She also spoke of the 'fun, laughter and physical challenges' that the intensive dancing regime gave her.

Most poignant, I thought, were her reflections on the contrast between her career and the life she briefly led whilst in training for the show. 'Over the years, the job I do has taken its toll on me... Mental health professionals are on the frontline of the war against human anguish, angst and antisocial behaviour. However well-trained and capable we are, it is impossible to be a receptacle for the shadow side of humanity with absolute impunity.'

Another psychologist who retrained from a theatrical background is ex-professional dancer and Reader in Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire, Peter Lovatt, aka Dr Dance, who appeared on *Strictly Come Dancing: It Takes Two*. Lovatt founded the Dance

Psychology Laboratory at the university (see www.dancedrdance.com), where he says 'we're trying to understand dance and dancers using psychological methods'.

Lovatt agrees with Stephenson that dancing can make us happy, but only in certain conditions. 'Studies have shown that mood changes after recreational dance... but not all people and not all types of dance... We need three conditions for mood and health benefits to occur: the dance needs to involve simple and repetitive movements, the dancer's heart rate needs to be slightly above resting and the dance needs to be non-competitive.'

Strictly is highly competitive. Lovatt thinks the reason most celebrities enjoy it so much is because often their day job and personal identity is not related to dancing. 'For most contestants it's a diversion away from their real lives.' Lovatt contrasted this to the elevated levels of stress hormone found in competitive ballroom dancers: 'Rohleder in 2007 found competitions raised cortisol because they posed a threat to social identity. Competitive dancers define themselves as a great dancer... Pamela Stephenson went in with an amazing frame of mind of getting a break from her work.'

Lovatt also warns that how happy a dance can make us depends on the style: '...more freestyle dances where you can't get it wrong make people happy. Classical ballet doesn't necessarily make people feel great...it involves trying for a practically unachievable ideal.' More

people report improved mood after 'relaxed styles of dancing with a social element, like swing dancing or ceilidh'.

Lovatt thinks people like *Strictly* because 'it makes dance incredibly accessible. It shows something we could all do and of course there's fantasy and romance.' Lovatt works extensively with the media for a similar motivation of increasing accessibility: 'communicating psychology to the broadest possible audience'. His experience of being an expert commentator on *Strictly: It Takes Two* was 'very interesting...they are very prescriptive in style...we were only allowed to say positive things about the celebrities'. Nonetheless Lovatt found it enjoyable, 'I loved the experience... I was surprised how slammed up everybody was... it was fun.'

Lovatt's advice about working with the media is that 'it's useful...but it depends on what your aims are...you can't compromise your message for entertainment and it's a fine line... As a psychologist you've got to be true to your self and your profession but deliver the message quickly.' Ultimately Lovatt likes 'having to present information and change your message according to the complexity of the audience. And before I was a psychologist I was a professional dancer, so I love being in the make-up room and getting in front of the lights for five minutes.'

Media psychologist Brian Young of the University of Exeter commented in *The Observer* on an additional role of reality shows such as *Strictly* in creating social bonds. Young's research categorises people into different social identities based on their viewing, including the 'TVangelists' most likely to watch reality shows like *Strictly*, and tweet or text their views. 'The categories I am identifying are...like social identities', said Young. 'It is a little like deciding what you wear.' In this era of Facebook and Twitter, sharing our television habits has become another way of describing who we are to people around us and recognising similarities.

Stephenson described having only one regret from *Strictly*: 'I never got to dance my Argentine tango... But...it's good to have one dream left unrealised; it keeps hope alive.' Perhaps we can take this as further advice on getting through the last days of winter. Ditch your new year resolutions and get your dancing shoes.



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