

With a new year upon us, let's renew our desire to be better dancers and to encourage our non-dancing friends to join in the fun. Why? Dancing makes you smarter. You may have heard about the New England Journal of Medicine report on the effects of recreational activities on mental acuity in aging. Here it is in a nutshell. The 21-year study of senior citizens, 75 and older, was led by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City, funded by the National Institute on Aging, and published in the New England Journal of Medicine. Their method for objectively measuring mental acuity in aging was to monitor rates of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. They studied cognitive activities such as reading books, writing for pleasure, doing crossword puzzles, playing cards and playing musical instruments. They also studied physical activities like playing tennis, golf, swimming, bicycling, dancing, walking for exercise and doing housework. One of the surprises of the study was that almost none of the physical activities appeared to offer any protection against dementia. There can be cardiovascular benefits, of course, but the focus of this study was the mind. There was one important exception: the ONLY physical activity to offer protection against dementia was FREQUENT DANCING.

Reading - 35% reduced risk of dementia

Bicycling and swimming - 0% reduced risk of dementia

Crossword puzzles at least four days a week - 47% reduced risk of dementia

Playing golf - 0% reduced risk of dementia

Dancing frequently - 76% reduced risk of dementia

That was the greatest risk reduction of any activity studied, cognitive or physical. Why dancing? The essence of intelligence is making decisions. And the concluding advice, when it comes to improving your mental acuity, is to involve yourself in activities which require split-second rapid-fire decision making, as opposed to rote memory. One way to do that is to learn something new, such as dancing, that integrates several brain functions at once, increasing your connectivity. Dancing simultaneously involves kinesthetic, rational, musical and emotional processes. It requires a lot of split-second decision-making, in both the lead and follow roles. In social dancing, the follow role automatically gains a benefit, by making hundreds of split-second decisions as to what to do next. Women interpret the signals their partners are giving them, and this requires intelligence and decision-making, which is active, not passive. This benefit is greatly enhanced by dancing with different partners, not always with the same leader. With different dance partners, you have to adjust much more and be aware of more variables. This is great for staying smarter longer.

But men can also match the follower's degree of decision-making if they choose to do so. Really notice your partner and what works best for her. Notice what is comfortable for her, which moves are successful with her and constantly adapt your dancing to these observations. That's rapid-fire split-second decision-making. When possible, don't lead the same patterns the same way, or in the same order, each time. Challenge yourself to learn and try new steps. Make more decisions more often. Finally, remember that this study made another suggestion: do it often! If you can't take dance classes or go out dancing four times a week or more, then dance as often as you can. More is better. And do it now! The sooner the better! Don't wait! Start now!