Even If Sitting in a Wheelchair, Dancing Makes a Difference for Those Plagued by Dementia. It’s Transformational!

*Dance Movement Therapy Works Minds and Bodies, Improves Mood, Eases Agitation, and Enables Communication*

Dance and Movement Therapies are the Latest Additions to the Robust Creative Arts Therapy Program at United Hebrew

(New Rochelle, NY...) Seniors in Senta Perez-Gardner’s movement therapy group at United Hebrew of New Rochelle arrive in wheelchairs and walkers, some with low energy and long faces. But by the end of their hour-long session, which may include stretching, dancing, and floating a parachute into the air, there’s a tangible shift in the group’s mood.

“It’s transformational!” says Perez-Gardner, a certified recreation and movement therapist at United Hebrew about those plagued by dementia and Alzheimer’s Disease. “Someone who was hunched over may now be swaying to a beat. A resident who was lethargic is now tapping her toes. Suddenly, they’re fully engaged, expressing themselves emotionally through movement.”

Dance and movement therapy are the most recent additions to the robust creative arts therapy program across United Hebrew’s campus. The purpose of the program is to help improve seniors’ overall well-being and quality of life by keeping mind and body active, says Mila Levine, director of recreation and volunteers at United Hebrew’s skilled nursing facility.

“Dance movement therapy was a natural addition for us because it gives our residents a chance to express themselves in new ways,” says Levine. “For our residents with dementia, dance and movement gives them a way to connect to each other, their families, and the world around them.”

Research has shown dancing can lower the risk of dementia because it involves not only physical, but also intellectual and social interactions. Both intellectual and social stimulation have been shown to reduce the risk of developing dementia. Dance movement therapy also allows those with Alzheimer’s disease and dementia to move as a means to communicate, which helps develop a “physical vocabulary,” according to
the American Dance Therapy Association, which includes a membership of 1,800 dance movement therapists worldwide.

**The power of movement**

Perez-Gardner, who has a background in classical ballet and holds a master’s of science in dance, movement psychotherapy, and counseling from Sarah Lawrence College, joined United Hebrew in January. Her technique is to use dance therapy to help regulate mood, to loosen people up physically, and to stimulate the senses.

At the beginning of each session, she assesses a resident’s movement patterns and behaviors as a clue to the way they are thinking and feeling. Sessions typically include a warm up, moving the arms and legs, and looking and reaching up to elongate the body. She uses props such as scarves and balloons and spiky balls to elicit movement. She says she often sees residents express their emotions through movement.

“Someone who is agitated and anxious, which is common among this population, may move fast and strong to the music, which eases their frustration,” says Perez-Gardner. “Others may be reminiscing. One resident recently mentioned she used to dance with her husband to a particular song, and it sparked a conversation with fellow residents about their lives and their families. They’re expressing feelings in a way that may not be communicated to a family member or a nurse or an aide. In that way, the therapy is contributing to their care.”

These expressive therapies are particularly effective for those affected by Alzheimer’s disease and dementia, says her colleague Kelsey Gangnath, also hired in January. Gangnath is a certified dance movement therapist who holds a master’s of science in dance movement therapy from Sarah Lawrence College.

“If you’re having trouble recalling the past, dance can help trigger memories because it creates a social interaction that is familiar,” says Gangnath. “It keeps people engaged, even when they are not speaking. When they don’t have the pressure of speaking words they can’t remember, they can relax. It eases the agitation that is common with dementia.”

She also has used props during her sessions. “Props like parachutes enable push and pull. Foam noodles, another prop, offer ways to connect with other people, especially those with limited mobility. Gangnath says that whenever she can, she ties in holidays and dances that may have cultural meaning for some residents.

“We give residents a dialogue with which to express themselves, and it works!” says Gangnath. “You see their eyes light up. A resident who may have arrived at the session in a wheelchair may get up to dance. Suddenly, someone who hasn’t been very responsive is throwing a balloon back to me. It’s contagious.”
Professional arts therapists work with seniors in an array of supportive care settings across United Hebrew’s campus of comprehensive care. In addition to the program at the nursing facility, creative arts therapies are also offered at United Hebrew’s Willow Towers Assisted Living and Willow Gardens Memory Care facilities. The therapies are part of United Hebrew’s approach to memory care, which includes stimulating activities and incomparable care in a secure environment, where adults with memory impairment continue to lead meaningful lives. Over 100 hours of therapeutic programs are offered to hundreds of residents each week in specialties including music, art, recreation, and now, dance and movement, according to Rita Mabli, United Hebrew’s president and CEO.

“We view these therapies as critical because they not only help our residents with Alzheimer’s and dementia, they also offer a healthy way for all of our seniors to enjoy daily life. Whether it is creating a beautiful work of art, performing rhythmic movement, or engaging with your friends in song, creative therapies promote healthy aging,” says Mabli. “What’s more, visiting friends and family can take part, too. They give everyone a chance to feel the joy together.”

*Kelsey Gangnath, dance movement therapist, United Hebrew of New Rochelle*