Study examines tango as treatment option

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COLUMBUS, OH – An expanded clinical research study among breast cancer survivors experiencing nerve damage from chemotherapy shows that healing doesn't have to be an overwhelming grind.

It can be a dance.

For the past three years, an Ohio State researcher, Lise Worthen-Chaudhari, has been leading a clinical study to explore how adapted Argentine tango dance therapy is helping breast cancer survivors heal from nerve damage or dysfunction called neuropathy, a common side effect of chemotherapy treatment.

A clinical study explores how dancing and music help the body overcome nerve damage when compared to exercise alone. GETTY IMAGES

Facing symptoms like numbness, tingling, pain or weakness throughout the body, movement is the best medicine, Worthen-Chaudhari said.

"Exercise, activity, turns out to be the best thing, and it's hours and hours of activity that's required," she said. "I just asked the question: Could that be any easier?"

A dancer herself, Worthen-Chaudhari said the clinical study explores how dancing and music help the body overcome nerve damage when compared to exercise alone.

Thus far, the study has yielded promising results, suggesting a 20-minute tango session is just as effective, if not more effective, than a much longer exertion in the gym.

Worthen-Chaudhari said larger studies will be needed to claim this definitively, but with the clinical study's extension, the team is on its way.

Clarifying that she isn't anti-gym, Worthen-Chaudhari said the goal of the research, beyond the obvious life-saving nature of cancer research, is to also improve the participants' quality of life – so they are able to enjoy movement and moments with loved ones, especially if they don't have the time in their schedules for extensive workouts.

"We're just trying to say, 'How can we improve that so it's more automatic, it's easier, it's more efficient for people to multitask?' It turns out that the dance that we're doing improves that multitasking as much as exercise," she said.

Earlier this year, the clinical study began its next phase – a five-year expansion that expects to recruit 140 breast cancer survivors.

Aimee Kain said she participated in Worthen-Chaudhari's research to be able to hopefully improve the neuropathy treatment of future patients.

The Nashport, Ohio, mom beat Hodgkin's lymphoma as a teen, and, years later, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2020.

"When I found out that I was chosen for the tango group vs. the control group, I was super pumped," Kain said.

After making the hourlong drive to Columbus every week to participate in the study, Kain said she has seen improvement in her neuropathy symptoms and now only experiences them with temperature changes.

"There are things that I did throughout my cancer treatment that somebody else tested, and they worked very well for me," she said.

"To know that I could be part of that for somebody else is great."

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