

## From moving to feeling: dance for mental health

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Growing up in Ahmedabad, one of the most enjoyable weeks was that of Navratri. There used to be a small puja around 7 pm or so in my neighborhoods, and in neighborhoods across the city. We'd then go home, eat dinner, and start getting ready to dance the entire night. There was so much to do – outfits and jewelry were coordinated, the dance steps were planned and practiced, and we'd finally end up at the grounds for hours of dancing. Usually, we'd start off with garba ("garbha" being the Sanskrit word for "womb", in celebration of the feminine energy), a dance done in a huge circle where the dancers move and clap to the rhythm of the music. The number of claps would vary with the music, as would the tempo of the song and the steps we'd perform. After several hours of dancing, there would be a bigger puja followed by raas dandiya (a form of Gujarati folk dance where dancers have sticks in their hands and dance with partners while moving in a circle) and hinch (another folk dance with elaborate bends of the body). We'd walk back home around 2 am exhausted, yet eager to repeat this the remaining nights of the festival. As I grew older and started progressing in my Bharatanatyam pedagogy, I would dance at various venues in the city performing classical and Indian folk dances. My colleagues and I performed the "Mariamman dance" at the Tamil temple with neem leaves in one hand and a pot with burning coal in another; I still remember we would dance to a frenzy trying to evoke Mariamman – the goddess of rain and medicine. I felt that the line between classical (or happens to be called "classical") and folk dances is an artificial one; the most commonly accepted difference is that classical dances require years of intense practice and represent a stylized view of the culture, whereas folk dances reflect a more-accurate peek into a culture, the way it moved, and the sounds that evoke the movement.

After my training as a neuroscientist, I was fortunate to take up dancing again, and have started thinking about the value of folk dances and their impact on physical and mental health. Looking back, I can think of the following ways that folk dance affected me:

- Providing social and cultural rootedness and cohesion: As a casual way for me to interact with friends and neighbors after a day of school or work, folk dances were an extraordinary setting come together and engage in a fun, lighthearted activity. By definition, folk dances are based in the culture of a community. While the barrier to learning and performing a classical dance form may be substantial, folk dances provide a low-barrier avenue for people to come together and dance in a non-judgmental setting.
- Providing a deeper look into the history and tradition: Details such as the type of food eaten during each of the days of Navratri, to the exact incarnation of the goddess celebrated on each day are in my memory and subconscious brain to this day. Though I may not know the rationale for each of the customs, it is an incredible feeling to be part of a continuing tradition. Folk dances are also a great way to understand a culture's history and the priorities and lifestyles of their ancestors. For example, folk dances from communities comprising of warrior swordsmen use swords, whereas in a Gujarati folk dance called "tippani", women use tall sticks to recreate the work of pounding grains in huge mortars. Props play a critical role in folk dances worldwide – from Chinese folk dances comprising of umbrellas and long satin ribbons, to dances from the Philippines with elaborate arrangements of pots on the dancers' heads. Folk dances provide a look into how our ancestors celebrated, grieved, and lived.
- Restorative effects of music on mental health: To this day, the sound of garba music makes me want to get up and dance. From the childhood memories of the dance, to the rhythmic power of music, folk dances (and dance in general) is a great way for the body and mind to interact with music. While the specific details on how music provides the effects it does are not fully known, there is no denying that music has a powerful, tangible role to play in our lives. Music can be calming, restorative, and has shown to help [people process grief and trauma](#).
- Effects of movement on the body and mind: Just the act of moving has positive impacts on the mind and body due to the release of hormones and neurotrophic factors that regulate mood and emotion. [Dance and movement therapy](#) is a proven way to integrate the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of

one's life. Folk dances typically do not require extensive training, meaning that people can participate to the extent that they wish, and in ways that feel most authentic to them. The power of dance is evident when we see programs for using [dance in people with Parkinson's Disease, dementia and depression](#).

- Meditative and repetitive nature of movements in folk dances: Since the steps in folk dances are performed over and over again, I remember going to a mental place of meditation and introspection through movement and music. It is no surprise that [dance meditation](#) has been shown to help the dancer center themselves, focus attention to the present, and prevent rumination.

In ending, although I did not see it at the time, the role of folk dances in my life now is evident. I am fortunate to experience the positive mental health effects of dance in general, and folk dances in particular, as a culturally-sensitive way of building and interacting with community.