



Movement Medicine

FLEXING BODIES TO HEAL MINDS



New Zealanders are rolling out their yoga mats or taking to dance floors as therapy against the stresses of modern life. **Kerry Sunderland** explains how 'wellness' aims to prevent disease.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOMINIQUE WHITE

The 'wellness' industry of gentle exercise and alternative therapies was worth US\$3.7 trillion worldwide at last tally, according to the Global Wellness Institute. With pharmaceutical drug use at all-time highs, 'wellness' advocates spurn what they say is a chronic health crisis in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) societies.

Wellness aims to be proactive, rather than reactive, adopting attitudes and behaviours that not only prevent disease but also enhance quality of life.

The Top of the South is home to a vibrant and diverse wellness 'community', as practitioners prefer to call it.

Leading the charge are the old favourite yoga and new dance movements that aim to clear the mind through liberating the body.

Hot Yoga, a Nelson institution for several decades, may have closed its doors last year, but yoga itself shows no signs of cooling off. A new multi-focus centre called Wellness Movement opened in the city centre, joining Studio Evolve on the Maitai River waterfront, Natural Living at Founders Heritage Park and a yoga studio at Braemar Eco Village hosting Nelson Iyengar Yoga and The Therapeutic Edge.

Nelson also boasts numerous home-based and improvised studios, where offices and classrooms are converted into yoga spaces in the evenings and during weekends.

'Conscious Dance' workshops have flourished in tandem. This year, about 15 new Open Floor Movement Practice teachers will graduate in Australasia, including four based in the Top of the South. Dance and yoga practitioners also meet regularly to 'jam' at Fairfield House.

WildTomato asked a range of Nelson's yoga, movement and dance teachers whether movement can be medicinal, and if so, how.



Penny Olsen and Ange Palmer

Exercise as therapy

Penny Olsen teaches Restorative Exercise at Wellness Movement, which she co-founded with medical herbalist and yoga teacher Ange Palmer.

"We need to take a step back and look at how we've crafted our lives, often for convenience and time-saving," Penny says. "We've really separated ourselves from nature and as a result we are paying a biological tax. We move less, walk on asphalt, eat food that is far from its source and often highly processed, wear clothes that restrict our movement – and fundamentally this is where the chronic health problems are coming from. They are diseases of behaviour.

"We're trying to supplement with exercise, which is very important to do, but we also need to look at the driving factors – and a lot of it is our sedentary lifestyle."

Penny says Restorative Exercise empowers people to take charge of their own health through increasing movement in everyday life, "rather than having to find time to perform an exercise programme".

"I don't diagnose or treat individuals; it's movement education that teaches you how to move well by changing habits. We use stretching, stability and balance work based on restoring natural human movement – being able to sit on the floor, squat, carry, lift, bend and walk longer distances. It is a cultural thing that we can't do these as we age.

"It's simple stuff – back to basics, back to our roots as human beings and restoring the movements that used to be in our lives."

Penny is a former physiotherapist who has also worked in public health, outdoor education and as an organic horticulture teacher.





Dancing for wellbeing

Hester Phillips, who is due to graduate as a Conscious Dance Open Floor teacher this month, says dancing is prevalent in every culture. “It’s a universal activity that’s very efficient and effective at bringing about states of wellbeing. What makes Conscious Dance different from other dance is that we focus on the process, rather than the product or the outcome, and how the process can increase our wellbeing.

“We’re not dancing for anyone else or what it looks like or to perfect the execution of a particular move. In dropping the outcome and being very faithful to the process, it becomes what can be called a healing art.”

Hester says the goal of any Conscious Dance practice is to align mind, body, emotion and soul so that all four realms are operating congruently.

“I see dance as the bridge between opposites; between body and spirit. Yet what I love about dance is that it’s beyond dogma. Instead, it’s about giving every person the chance to embody his or her own individual experience.

“In daily life, we can get stuck in habitual ways of being, whether that’s repetitive thoughts or emotions that we’re really familiar with but don’t often serve us, or not being connected to something greater than ourselves. The dance floor is a space to express what is often familiar, but also to try out new ways of being.”

Hester holds a Master in Arts Therapy (Hons) and is a professional arts therapist, educator and facilitator of conscious dance practices.

“We’re not dancing for anyone else or what it looks like or to perfect the execution of a particular move.”

HESTER PHILLIPS

Movement healing minds

Sue Hallas has taught Iyengar Yoga in Nelson since 1998. A form of yoga that emphasises sequencing, precision and alignment in its postures (asanas), Iyengar often uses props to achieve alignment and to support people with less energy.

“We really don’t give enough credit to how much movement can heal minds,” Sue says. “Iyengar Yoga has postures and sequences used as medicine to attempt to correct all sorts of specific things, like skeletal misalignment, pancreatic problems and bowel issues, but also illnesses of spirit and mind, such as depression and anxiety, and conditions that straddle both, like asthma. The research is out there in the exercise science and physiology literature that movement is tremendously healing for the body.

“Like a lot of yoga, Iyengar helps to improve flexibility, strength and balance. It energises and restores mental health and equilibrium but with a focus on alignment and in a manner that empowers people with physical limitations of some sort. One of the hallmarks of Iyengar Yoga is that there is no set routine, therefore I can tailor it much more to the needs of the moment or the body type.”

Sue teaches at both Wellness Movement and NMIT.





“We store emotions in our body, which can get blocked, and moving allows them to shift and change.”

BEX DEVA



Bex and Chai Deva



Kelly Gill Brydon and Rose Middleton

Dance is for everyone

Mike Baker, of Contact Improvisation Dance, says the technique is for everyone ‘and not just able-bodied folk’.

“In Contact, there is a whole pedagogy of teaching and learning. There’s a whole vocabulary of movement and it’s not just about physical movement, it’s attitudinal as well – and so there’s a progression from beginner, to intermediate, to advanced.

“Contact provides you with a toolbox that means you can go anywhere in the world and dance with someone who has done Contact before and instantly develop a rapport,” Mike adds. “You connect, you communicate, you lead and follow simultaneously and together you develop a dialogue, which is very special, and then mutually you agree to end the dance.

“There are a lot of metaphorical life lessons – one of the things Contact teaches you is to take responsibility for yourself; it’s not about rescuing others. We have our hands free so that if you fall, you can save yourself.

“There’s no grabbing. It’s all about momentum, volition and balance. Contact Improv is mindfulness in movement. Safety is very important – lots of Contact dance starts on the floor.”

Mike has practised tai chi for 42 years and taught it for 32. He began teaching dance in 1999, holds a Master in Dance and Video from Auckland University of Technology and is a certified fitness trainer.

Tuning body and mind

Chaitanya Deva, who has run Studio Evolve with his wife Bex since 2014, says movement is a fundamental part of healing.

“Yoga is a really great way to change shapes and make shapes with our body that we don’t necessarily do in our day-to-day lives. Vinyasa means ‘breath synchronised movement’ and the Vinyasa Flow classes at Studio Evolve involve movement – not just stretching – designed to tone your body and improve your posture, stamina and flexibility. The postures vary from class to class but almost always include sun salutations.

“I start all of my classes by encouraging students to tune

into their minds and bodies. I ask them what sort of mental state they’re in; what sort of emotional state they’re in; whether they’re feeling energetic or lethargic. Yoga is a great way to develop awareness of your body because it’s being asked to move in ways it’s not necessarily used to doing – so the ability to wander off in the mind and disconnect and dwell on problems is greatly diminished because real life is calling for your attention.”

Chaitanya has more than 500 hours of teacher training under his belt, he has a Diploma in Therapeutic Massage and is about to lead Studio Evolve’s second 200-hour yoga immersion programme.

Nia designed to transform

Rebecca (‘Bex’) Deva went along to her first Nia class in Christchurch in 2006 and has since completed several levels of Nia teacher training.

“I definitely think any kind of movement can be transformational, but Nia is specifically designed for that purpose. It’s based on 52 moves that bring somatic balance to the body,” she says. “It also plays with different energetics from the martial arts (precision and strength), the healing arts (consciousness and alignment) and the dance arts (expression and emotion).

“We store emotions in our body, which can get blocked, and moving allows them to shift and change. Dance also fires up all neural pathways. Potentially, if you just do the same dance all the time, you’re not going to grow anything, so while free dance is really important, there are a lot of benefits, mentally, in challenging and building more pathways by learning new moves.”

Bex also teaches yoga, after completing the immersion programme last year.

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Kerry Sunderland is a freelance journalist, author and editor. She is also Nelson Arts Festival Readers and Writers programme coordinator and a part-time creative writing tutor at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology.