

Belly dancing in care homes

Where the idea came from

Being physically active is a challenge for many people as they get older. People who live in care homes face even higher risks of falls and significant health problems and even fewer connections with their communities as a result. Increasing people's physical activity is a good way to help reduce those risks, but many care homes find it hard to come up with activities that engage people and that can be achieved at the home within the resources they have.

The idea to introduce belly dancing to people living in care homes grew out of contact between Wisdom in Practice, the Make it Happen forum in Falkirk and the Forth Valley Migrant Support Network. One of the committee members for the Migrant Support Network is Diane Davis-Bailey, who teaches belly dancing in the context of people being more confident and aware of their bodies. The outcomes for people taking part include having better balance and improvements in people's safety and wellbeing, as well as feeling more confident.

Diane came to the Make it Happen Forum and delivered a few sessions to older people's groups. The outcomes from this included people enjoying it and having fun, understanding more about being safe when out, and understanding more about this culture.

That led to the idea of asking Diane to run sessions in care homes. Diane had done this on a few previous occasions, but doing it now and seeing it as a pilot for more homes doing it was still a good idea.

- We hoped it would provide an opportunity for people living in care homes to have more exercise.
- We also hoped it would challenge some assumptions about what older people with high support needs, including dementia and very limited mobility, might enjoy.

What we did

We decided to introduce belly dancing sessions at 2 care homes as a pilot. Each would have 2 sessions, to give an opportunity to learn from the first one and make changes on the second occasion. We sent round an invitation through a local network of care providers. Two homes came back very quickly and those have been the locations for the pilot, but there are another 7 who also asked to do this.

It was important that the Care Homes agreed to a minimum of two sessions. This arrangement allowed Diane to plan delivery for the benefit of these residents.

The first session at each care home was in August and the second in early September. The sessions were a great success. We learned a lot and the suggestions here will be useful to people planning other activities in care homes as well as when you introduce belly dancing to older people in your area.

We want to thank all the people who took part: people living in these homes, their relatives and friends, staff who took part, managers and other staff, and Diane for the sessions.





What we learned

People taking part

Most older people in the care homes loved it.

People knew what was happening before the sessions.

Some people came along because they were curious and then joined in.

People enjoyed meeting Diane who is full of life and easy to talk to. Diane talked throughout the session, explaining about the exercises or mentioning the music or talking about her life, and interacting with residents.

People were up and moving about even if they needed a bit of support for it.

People who could not stand could still take part sitting as many movements included exercises for arms and legs and ankles.

Residents were encouraged to only do those exercises they were comfortable with and to stop if it became painful or they were tired.

It worked better when a few care workers from the home stayed and also took part, to encourage people and get them started.

On the second occasion some relatives joined in and also enjoyed the activities and exercises.

Aspects of belly dancing

Traditional costume adds to the experience and is colourful, bright, visually attractive and opens up the conversation/discussion around where the tradition comes from, why the coins are there, discussion about materials, who wears it, how it's worn, etc.

Diane had worn ordinary clothing for the first sessions – which is what she usually wears for sessions in other settings – but we realised people were disappointed that she wasn't in traditional dress. Diane wore the belly dancer costume on the second visit and this was very well received.

Residents were interested in the costume, liked the colours and touch and feel of the coins. Diane explained the history and background of belly dancing and the residents liked to hear these stories.

At all the sessions residents liked to wear the coin "belts".

We discovered how important the choice of music is and choosing well known tunes and songs increased participation. Some of the residents who did not take part in the exercises still sang along to the songs.

Practical aspects

Knowing that there would be 2 sessions in each setting helped with planning.

We found it helped to have shorter sessions than Diane usually provides, as many people's energy is limited. 30-40 minutes was the right length. The instinct is to have the usual length of session and offer value for money. Here, the value is in shorter sessions for the usual price.

We also found it works better at times when people are not tired – so earlier in the day and not on days when people have another activity.

The second visit can be used to build anticipation in the residents and allow family members to be present.

The second visit also allowed Diane to build rapport with residents and staff members.

The staff are vital for feed back during and after sessions.

The rooms at both care homes are well proportioned, light and bright with plenty of room for residents to stand up and dance along if they wished. This is the right sort of setting for this activity.

The second session in one care home was on a warm, sunny day in early September, when people were sitting outside. The belly dancing session also moved outside, and this worked very well.

Afterwards

People were talking about it afterwards with each other, workers and relatives. We found it helps to have photographs to remind people who have significant memory problems that they took part.

People who had been involved in the earlier sessions wanted to take part again at the second sessions and were encouraging friends and visitors to get involved.

The activity also got some people talking about dancing they used to do, so there was some reminiscing going on.

Impacts for people

It is too soon to say if there are impacts for people's balance and other aspects of their wellbeing, but the feedback is that workers saw people being more active and balancing better during the sessions than they had expected.

It has helped people's social connections by sparking off conversations about getting more people to come to the home and other things people could do outside.

The idea of belly dancing for older people in care homes is challenging people's perceptions of what older people in these circumstances might want to do and be able to do.

Some feedback

“The words “Belly Dancing” make people smile – it seems to conjure up positive mental images.” (Worker at care home)

‘Meeting Diane and having something like this happening in the home is a breath of fresh air.’ (Manager at care home)

“Best laugh I’ve had in ages. I hope she comes back again.” (Resident)

“The music is very upbeat and uplifting and doing exercises together encourages laughter and plenty of smiles.” (Worker)

“That was different and made a good change. There were lots of smiles and people were joining in. Having the next session in a month’s time will give people time to look forward to it and it will be something different again”. (Manager)

“Diane used music from the 50s & 60s and this worked really well. All of the songs & tunes were well known and remembered which resulted in many of the residents singing along (including some who were very frail).” (Manager)

“I love the photograph of my mum dancing. It makes me smile every day. She has dementia and forgets about it happening but is happy when she sees the photo of her and her friends having fun and laughing.” (Relative)





Next steps

The 2 care homes that took part in the pilot and others that were interested want to continue with this. Some homes are looking at ways to cover the costs themselves and we have started discussions with the Council/NHS services for older people on ways to extend it.

There have been requests from care homes in other locations when staff heard about it from people in Falkirk through the national providers' networks.

We are now looking at ways to take this on to other places.

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Material from the project are gathered together at:

www.wisdominpractice.org.uk

