

## Just dance!

If the sound of music makes you want to jump up and dance, but the effects of MS make that impossible, wheelchair dancing may be the answer.

My husband and I have always loved to dance. For the first 18 years of our marriage we did everything—jitterbug, disco, the two-step. MS changed all that. Several severe exacerbations left me with impaired mobility.

But our desire to dance was still there, not only for the physical closeness it brings, but also to end the social isolation I felt sitting in a wheelchair.

Until a few years ago, I had never heard of wheelchair dancing. Depending on my physical condition, my husband either held me in a bear hug and supported me while we swayed to the music or I used a wheeled walker and sat on the seat or stood using one hand to support myself.

Then, while we were on a cruise, a staff member told us that one of the waiters had performed a dance routine with his partner in a wheelchair at the crew's talent show. We sought him out right away. After a dance lesson with him, we learned that you don't have to be able to walk to enjoy dancing. How

exciting it was to be twirled and feel that I was almost flying!

Since then we have tried to develop our own style. We have also taken dance lessons from a local dance instructor who had no previous experience with adaptive dance.

### It's a worldwide movement

Wheelchair dancing has become very popular throughout the world. There are dance clubs, dance sport competitions, and artistic dance companies with disabled performers. It turns out that quadriplegics in electric wheelchairs dance, using the sip/puff controls to move to the music.

The term "wheelchair dancing" encompasses several ways:

- Couples doing what works for them—no matter which partner uses the wheelchair. Often when the wheeler is a man, his partner sits on his lap and they both dance while seated.
- Group line dancing—the dancers get in line and do pre-planned moves.
- Ballroom dancing—waltz, foxtrot, and rumba—each can be adapted.
- International competitive sport dancing—the International Paralympic

Wheelchair Dance Sport Committee cites participants from 19 countries.

- Tap dancing—Yes, tap! If you are able to move your feet, get tap shoes. If you don't have a hard surface, tap mats are available. If your feet won't cooperate, just clapping your hands wearing gloves with taps attached is the start of a good time.

### How to get started

- Call your National MS Society chapter for information. Call area dance schools to see if they have classes or are willing to organize one.

- If you wish to purchase manuals and/or tapes, visit [www.adaptive-dancing.com/AD\\_Manuals.html](http://www.adaptive-dancing.com/AD_Manuals.html).

- Use a wheelchair with anti-tip wheels and removable arms.

- Wear comfortable clothes that allow movement—especially your arms and shoulders.

- Find a clear area in which to practice at home.

### Wheelchair dance etiquette

- Plan your moves ahead of time with your partner.

- When dancing on a crowded dance floor, stay to the edge of it.



Joyce and her husband, Shelly

- Give the couples dancing nearby a friendly warning.

- Keep your feet tucked in as much as possible.

- Remove loose items from your chair so that they won't fall out and be a hazard to other dancers.

- Have your partner stay on one side of the wheelchair. It makes twirling easier.

- Hold your partner's hand gently.

What a lift dancing gives: new friendships, exercise, improved upper body strength and posture,

and most of all, it's a way to unite disabled and able-bodied people. The late Martha Graham, modern dancer and choreographer, once said, "Dance is a song of the body. Either of joy or pain." We're positive the more times you give yourself over to wheelchair dancing, the more joyful songs your body will sing. ■

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Joyce Render Cohen and her sister Gayle Render Dinerstein frequently collaborate.

### Wheelchair dance resources

[www.atdf.org](http://www.atdf.org)

[www.dancematdirect.com](http://www.dancematdirect.com)

[www.dancewear.com/dancewear](http://www.dancewear.com/dancewear)

[www.tapdance.org/tap/supplies.htm](http://www.tapdance.org/tap/supplies.htm)

[www.discountdance.com](http://www.discountdance.com)