



FEASIBILITY STUDY

# The Happy Antics programme: Holistic exercise for people with dementia



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## KEYWORDS

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Wellness

**Summary** *Background:* Holistic exercise for people with dementia could have psychological and physical benefits, but there is a lack of research on the experience of this type of exercise. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine the feasibility and acceptance of holistic exercise among people with dementia.

*Method:* A holistic exercise programme for people with dementia was designed and implemented. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to explore participants' experience of holistic exercise, transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

*Results:* Seven themes were generated from the data. They were enjoyment, relaxation, keeping active, social interaction, pain relief, learning something new and intention to continue, respectively.

*Conclusion:* The results of the current small-scale study provide evidence for the feasibility and acceptance of holistic exercise for people with dementia. In addition, participants appeared to benefit in terms of psychological and physical wellbeing.

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## Introduction

Regular exercise is important for older people's health and well-being, especially in maintaining and improving

physical endurance, strength, balance and flexibility (Liu and Latham, 2009; Gudlaugsson et al., 2013). Exercise has a potential role in delaying the onset of dementia and Alzheimer's disease (Larson et al., 2006; Andel et al., 2008). Published studies suggest that exercise might delay further deterioration in people who already have Alzheimer's disease or other dementias (Yu and Kolanowski, 2009; Radak et al., 2010). Significant improvements in memory recall following an exercise programme have been reported in people with late-stage Alzheimer's disease

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(Dayanim, 2009). Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that exercises that integrate functional movements with aspects of mindful body awareness can have an effect on cognitive function among people with dementia (Horowitz, 2006) as well as improvements in caregiver-burden and caregiver-distress (Castro et al., 2002).

Alternative forms of exercise such as yoga, pilates and tai chi have been found to benefit people with dementia (Wolf et al., 2003; Kaesler et al., 2007; Fan and Chen, 2011). For example, a recent study investigated the effects of yoga exercises on the physical and mental health of elderly people with dementia living in long-term care facilities in Taiwan (Fan and Chen, 2011). The study sample consisted of two groups of people with dementia. One group received yoga exercises twice weekly for 12 weeks whilst the other served as a control group, maintaining their usual activities. At the end of the study, the researchers found that yoga-trained people with dementia had better physical and mental health than those who did not participate. The benefits included lowered blood pressure, reduced respiration rate, strengthened cardio-pulmonary fitness, enhanced body flexibility, improved muscle strength and endurance, improved balance, and increased joint motion. There was also a significant reduction in depression and dementia-related behavioural problems in the yoga-trained people with dementia. A recent review reported consistent evidence from multiple studies that cognitive stimulation programmes benefit people with dementia with mild to moderate dementia over and above any medication effects (Woods et al., 2012).

Holistic exercise combines physical exercise with the wellness approach (Swarbrick, 2006) where multi-dimensional factors are taken into consideration, and which includes physical, emotional, intellectual, social, environmental and spiritual dimensions (Swarbrick, 1997, 2006; Copeland, 2002; Copeland and Mead, 2004). As an example, a wellness lifestyle can be described as balanced living, where an individual has adequate nutrition, sleep and rest, productivity, exercise, participation in meaningful activity, social interaction, and supportive relationships (Swarbrick, 1997). When the wellness approach is applied to exercise, holistic exercise strives to encourage individuals not only to take part in physical activity but also to become aware of their own physical and psychological states, and to perform exercise that is purposeful and meaningful to them. In this sense, holistic exercise is a form of exercise integrated with awareness of mind and body, in other words exercising *with* the body in addition to being mindful about what is happening during the exercise activity rather than doing exercise to the body.

Although studies have shown evidence of beneficial effects of different forms of exercise on the physical and mental health of people with dementia, there is a current lack of evidence about the potential benefits of holistic exercise in terms of the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of people with dementia, and it is still unknown whether people with dementia are receptive to holistic exercise. Research on holistic exercise is very new, with only one study published on the effects of holistic exercise on physical and cognitive function in people with dementia (Barnes et al., 2012, 2013). No additional publications were found in relation to holistic exercise and

people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease from searching six online databases (AMED, Science Direct, CINAHL, Medline, SPORTDiscus, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection). To our knowledge, investigations on the experience of holistic exercise among people with dementia have not yet been conducted. Therefore, the objective of this pilot study was to determine the feasibility and acceptance of holistic exercise among people with dementia.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 15 people including 8 people with early to middle stage dementia, 5 care-givers and 2 volunteers attended the programme in the presence of Alzheimer's Society staff. Six people (four female) consented to be interviewed for the preliminary study. They comprised 3 people with dementia, 2 care-givers and 1 volunteer. The age range was 52–86 years. Ethical conduct was guided by the Alzheimer's Society (UK) principles in respect to consent, privacy, confidentiality and withdrawal from participation. All collected data was kept and stored in accordance to the UK Data Protection Office (ICO, 1998).

### The Happy Antics programme

The name "Happy Antics" came about when participants were asked how they would describe themselves. This question was posed to them at the first holistic exercise session. One of them said they were all antiques – this sentiment was shared by everyone who participated in the programme.

The Happy Antics programme began on 8th August 2013 at the society premises in Workington. Holistic exercise sessions were held once a week for 45 min for six weeks. Happy Antics was designed to integrate conventional physical exercise with principles from tai chi, yoga, meditation, qigong, dance movements and mindfulness. The exercises adopted a holistic approach where people with dementia were encouraged to make physical movements that involved stretching and bending, to the best of their individual ability. They were also encouraged to recognise body awareness whilst performing the exercises and taught easy breathing exercises. Exercise routines and movements were choreographed and set to music. Physical movements were non-strenuous and involved exercising specific muscle groups. All of the exercises were chair-based with the exception of a 2-min exercise routine for the knees.

### Programme sessions

Sessions comprised light-intensity physical exercise routines that incorporated aspects of yoga, tai chi, qigong, dance movements and meditation (for details of the programme sessions see [online Appendix A](#)). A simple cognitive exercise was also included in the sessions. Each session started with a cognitive exercise followed by warm-up

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