

Dance for Veterans

SUMMARY REPORT

PREPARED BY DR LT CL RICK MAHER WITH ASSISTANCE FROM VAN NORTON LI COMMUNITY HEALTH INSTITUTE DIRECTOR ZARA GOMES. THE 2023 RESEARCH PROJECT WAS CARRIED OUT BY DR LT CL RICK MAHER WITH SUPERVISION BY QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PROFESSORS GENE MOYLE AND ROBERT SCHWEITZER, AND WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT AND COLLABORATION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE AND QUEENSLAND BALLET.



The Dance for Veterans program aims to enhance quality of life for veterans experiencing PTSD or other trauma-related psychological injury.

Supported by RSL Queensland, it is the first collaboration of its kind between a world class ballet company and a national ex-service person's organisation. The program is delivered across eight weeks at the Queensland Ballet studios, and facilitated by qualified dance Teaching Artists. Through the combination of progressive instruction through dance manoeuvres, together with facilitated social connection, participants are supported to improve their psychological, physical, social and environmental health. The instruction program references historical connections between military movement and dance, facilitating personal expression and confidence-building.

Levels of psychological distress amongst transitioned veterans are significantly higher than that of the wider Australian community, with almost three times more veterans reporting high to very high psychological distress (33.1%) compared with the Australian community (12.8%), and significantly higher suicide rates amongst Veterans compared with the general Australian population, with suicide rates on average 27% higher for ex-serving males, and 107% higher for ex-serving females.

In 2023, Dr Rick Maher conducted his PhD research project with Queensland University of Technology (QUT) at Queensland Ballet, to ascertain the effect that dance would have upon the quality of life of veterans who have experienced a trauma based psychological injury. The research sought to measure the participants' perceptions of their physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and how they understood the stability of their environment. Program participants reported results that trended in a positive direction as to how they perceived their Quality of Life across all four of these domains.

In relation to perceptions of physical health, participants reported a positive effect on activities such as daily living, dependence on medical substances and medical aids, energy and fatigue, mobility, pain and discomfort, sleep and rest, and work capacity. The findings in relation to the psychological health domain exceeded expectations and indicate that the dance intervention program contributes to veterans' psychological well-being by facilitating active engagement with dance and rhythm and enhances their socio-emotional abilities as a result of class participation. These findings are consistent with the World Health Organisation's acknowledgement that arts-based mental health programs contribute to mental health recovery and well-being of people with mental health injuries.

The veterans also reported improvements in their social relationships whilst participating in the program, and noted that physical environmental factors such as the dance studio and the Queensland Ballet site served to motivate and provide a sense of community belonging. Additionally, the participants reported that the program enhanced their capacity to interact in public spaces outside that of the home environment.

Qualitative lines of inquiry also allowed for the veterans to expand upon their physical health, their emotional wellbeing, their feelings about being in a veteran group setting, the program delivery, and the program facilitators. The findings reflected that the veterans' capacity to explore the depth and richness of inner experience, facilitate personal growth, and clinical interactions and interventions were enhanced through dance.

Photography by Jakob Perrett

