

## Reflection

**The Medicine of Salsa**Marjorie Jacobs<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Training Associate at Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston, United States of America**Abstract**

Psychiatric rehabilitation aims to promote health recovery from significant losses, both physical and psychological, that have derailed the lives of adults and young adults so that they can actively participate in rebuilding and recreating themselves. This population faces premature morbidity and experiences higher than average rates of chronic and life-threatening disorders, including diabetes, obesity, metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease, depression, anxiety, autism, ADHD, trauma- and stressor related disorders, and schizophrenia. When participants join any of the BU Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation programs, they take on the role of student, increasing their knowledge, skills, and supports to further their personal goals and recovery journeys.

Several of the mind-body, rehabilitation interventions I design and teach utilize music, singing, and dance to boost mood and motivation, facilitate social connection, increase concentration, improve memory, create new positive memories, deepen respiration, promote movement, and elicit the relaxation response. In addition, I use seated and walking meditation (often combined with nature sounds, music, chanting, and/or singing) to cultivate attention, curiosity, awareness, acceptance, an expanded perspective, accurate perceptions, compassion, and optimism.

The poem *The Medicine of Salsa* was inspired primarily by my 13-week intervention entitled *Mindful Music, Dance, and Meditation*. I have been teaching and developing this intervention since 2014. The students learned to dance a variety of upbeat West Indian and Latin dances, starting with the English language lyrics of reggae, calypso, soca and advancing into the unfamiliar rhythms of cumbia, merengue, cha-cha-cha, and salsa, all sung in Spanish lyrics. My intention was to introduce new songs with wholesome and optimistic lyrics so that they would not trigger negative or distressing memories.

Each 90-minute-class was structured by (1) a check-in, (2) listening to and singing new music, (03) a review of dance steps from the previous class, (04) learning and practicing a new dance with recorded music (in the large group and then in small groups, and/or with partners), (05) a seated meditation, and (06) a short feedback session ensued. At the end of each class, students reported feeling happier, energized yet calm, present, focused, hopeful as well as more positive, confident, and connected to each other.

**Keywords:** *recovery, trauma- and stressor-related disorders, depression, anxiety, music/sound therapy*

multilingual abstract | [mmd.iammonline.com](http://mmd.iammonline.com)

**Biographical Statement**

Marjorie Jacobs (MA in Social Change with a CAGS in Integrative Holistic Health Studies) is a psychiatric rehabilitation practitioner at the Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation where she designs and teaches promising group interventions to adults and young adults diagnosed with a serious mental illness (SMI). In her work that is informed by positive psychology and neuroscience, she incorporates the expressive arts (music listening, singing, dancing, and poetry) and a mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral approach in the rehabilitation process with the goals of facilitating mental health recovery and stress resilience.

<https://cpr.bu.edu/about/directory/marjorie-jacobs>

PRODUCTION NOTES: Address correspondence to:

Marjorie Jacobs, BU Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 940 Commonwealth Ave. West, Boston, MA 02215, 617-353-3562 E-mail: [mljacobs@bu.edu](mailto:mljacobs@bu.edu) | COI statement: The author declared that no financial support was given for the writing of this article. The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

## The Medicine of Salsa

Inside the classroom, sitting  
we listen mindfully,  
lyrics in Spanish and English,  
when feet start tapping, heads nodding.  
Celia Cruz's\* full-bodied  
rhapsodic voice  
wakes us.

We rise smiling to syncopated Spanish  
her singing *Ritmo Tambo y Flores*  
*Rhythm of Drum and Flowers* lifting us  
To the mountain top  
high above verdant valleys.  
The view here is electrifying –  
clouds of depression, stress,  
anxiety dissolving  
blue sky expanding.

Under her spell  
we are singing the chorus  
in foreign tongue  
*La Vida Es Un Carnaval*  
swinging our hips  
our feet now stepping to the beat  
dancing Salsa for the first time  
in a group and with partners  
holding a hand  
her lyrics leading us ---  
*Anyone thinking there're just bad times*  
*needs to know that's not the case.*  
*Anyone thinking things'll never change*  
*needs to know that's not the case.*  
*smile to the hard times, they'll pass.*

We are turning and being turned,  
our minds opening  
*Ay, there's no need to cry.*  
*It's more beautiful to live singing.*

Everything seems pleasingly possible.

\*Note: Celia Cruz, 1925-2003, was named *Queen of Cuban Salsa*. She was a supporter of music education in the Hispanic community (*Celia Cruz Bronx High School of Music*), and her non-profit foundation provides financial assistance to underprivileged Latino students who wish to study music.