

Ecstatic dancing: Wendover Woods

As part of the Forestry Commission England and Sport England 'Active Forests' programme interviews were undertaken in July 2022 at Wendover Woods with participants involved in Ecstatic dancing. Sixteen people participated in short interviews, individually or in groups including fourteen women and two men. Their ages ranged from 20s to 50s. The session last for approximately two hours and the weather was very sunny.



Ecstatic dancing

Ecstatic dancing is a type of dance focusing on freedom and expression. The session at Wendover started with a short cacao ceremony when everyone sat in a circle to hear about the session from the organiser and they were asked what they wanted to get out of the event. Headphones were then handed out to each person and the music started slowly and built up over time to a fast beat and as it did people's movements before more vigorous. The session lasts for about 2 hours, and participants were encouraged to bring a picnic and have lunch together afterwards. 41 people signed up to the event and a small number dropped out on the day. 16 people were interviewed sometimes alone and other times in small groups of friends. Just under a third had visited Wendover Woods previously but only to attend a dance session, seven had visited the woods previously to undertake other activities, and one person had not visited before.

Motivations to participate

Motivations to take part were varied with a strong theme of mental wellbeing and a desire to get out of the busy chatter of the mind through moving the body. Some people talked about a spiritual connection motivating them to take part. A small number of people also talked about suffering trauma or loss and describing how they thought nature, music, laughter and dance were healing.

Benefits of Ecstatic dancing

Participants were very enthusiastic about the benefits of ecstatic dancing. Words used to describe the experience included: liberating, grounded, physical, spiritual, a journey, a release, embodied, energising, relaxing, and social.

Benefits of Ecstatic dancing at Wendover Woods

'When you are indoors it's just you and the group but when you are out here in the forest there is the public which is quite scary actually. It feels like a public performance or I am being judged by people looking in. But after the first and second time I feel like that doesn't matter at all. What is nice is being bare footed with the grass under you feet and the birds tweeting and the beautiful surroundings and the air' (Male 20s)

'Essentially you are free at heart but you get so caught up you forget that with the bills and boilers breaking and you just forget what really matters. You need that connection to something bigger than yourself to life, to nature and to other people' (Woman, 30s)

'I think all of us like dancing and I think none of us likes to go to clubs anymore we have children and we don't want to do that anymore so we want to do it in a bit more of a community environment' (Woman 30s)

'Yes, I spend a lot of time in urban areas, cities and there is this being so close to people but being disconnected but being in the nature is so easy to go by people and say hi and smile' (Male 20s)

A few participants talked about loving to dance but not wanting to visit nightclubs and drink, particularly those with children. Participants also felt that the approach was non-judgemental it does not matter how you move or who you are.

The forest environment

A few of the group had participated in ecstatic dancing in a community hall or round house. Being active in the woods was seen as a definite added benefit with people describing the woods as beautiful, peaceful, a spiritual space, a place with lovely views. Dancing barefoot on the earth was also enthusiastically mentioned as important, helping participants to feel grounded and connected to the earth. Quite a few of the participants were determined to come back not just to dance but to spend time in the woods.

Behaviour change

Several people talked about coming back to visit the woods even though quite a few had travelled from the London area taking between one and one and a half hours to reach the woods. A young woman brought her friend and mother to the site after taking part in one of the dances. One of the men talked about feeling comfortable discomfort when first taking part in the session and the importance of moving beyond his comfort zone. The dance sessions had increased his confidence and doing this led him to undertake another challenge which was public speaking.

The Ecstatic dance at Wendover Woods brings together key elements that participants felt were particularly important including: physical movement via dancing; connection with nature through being in the woods and being barefoot; mental wellbeing; the beauty of the woods; and the pleasure of listening to music.

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Website: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/active-forest-programme-evaluation/>