

“Bodies meet first. Minds follow. In that sense, dance is often the shortest bridge between people.”

In international press, Dr Peter Lovatt is often presented as a researcher who does something unusual: he takes dance deadly seriously, while still making audiences laugh. On Thursday 22 January, he takes to the stage at the Norwegian National Dance Conference 2026.

Lovatt is the academic and researcher better known to many as “Doctor Dance”. He has written books on dance, body and mind, and in the UK he has also appeared on screen in connection with the Strictly Come Dancing universe. In short, he is one of the dance world’s most sought-after communicators.

Lovatt is a psychologist, a former professional dancer, and the founder of the Dance Psychology Lab at the University of Hertfordshire. His research is particularly associated with the idea that different forms of dance can influence problem-solving: structure can support more goal-oriented thinking, while improvisation can open up more creative, exploratory ways of finding solutions.

He has written several books on how dance affects the brain and quality of life, including *The Dance Cure*. [In a review in Publishers Weekly](#), the book is described as a blend of personal story and science communication, where Lovatt draws on his own background — from a difficult school experience to a life shaped by dance and research — to show why movement can be a powerful tool for both mastery and mental health.

At the Norwegian National Dance Conference 2026, Lovatt comes to Oslo to share experience and research, but also to do what he is known for: giving theory a body, so that the audience not only understands intellectually, but feels it in practice. In the meantime, we spoke to Lovatt about — in the spirit of the conference theme, “Dance as a bridge builder” — why and how dance can, quite literally, build bridges between people.

You have studied dance and human behaviour for more than 20 years. What was the first moment that made you realise that dance can fundamentally change how we think, feel, and relate to others?

“As a young person I knew that when I danced, I felt different. My social relationships were different, my thinking was clearer, my mood was better regulated and dancing just felt fabulous (most of the time). As a scientist I wanted to see if these changes were just subjective, or whether they were predictable outcomes. What I found was that different forms of moving and dancing, and immersion in different dance cultures, can have particular psychological consequences.”

What is the most important insight — from your research or practice — that society still underestimates about the power of dance?

“We still underestimate how fundamental movement is to being human. Dance is not an add-on to thinking or feeling, it is part of the system that creates them. When we move differently, we perceive differently, relate differently, and make different decisions. Dance is not decoration. It is infrastructure for the mind. I believe that humans are born to dance.”

You have demonstrated that dance can improve cooperation and communication within groups. What is actually happening in the brain when people move together?

“When people move together in synchrony, they report liking and trusting each other more, they feel more psychologically similar, and they are more likely to show helpful behaviour towards each other. They begin to predict each other more accurately. Timing aligns, attention synchronises, and the nervous system shifts away from threat. This reduces social anxiety and increases trust. In simple terms, moving together helps us feel that others are less unpredictable, and that is the foundation of cooperation. I believe that dance acts like a social glue, which bonds people and societies together.”

In your view, how can dance help build bridges in workplaces or communities that are polarised, stressed, or struggling with low social cohesion?

“Dance allows people to share an experience without needing agreement. You don’t have to debate, persuade, or convince, you just move. That shared physical experience creates a sense of common ground. Once people feel connected in their bodies, conversation becomes easier, kinder, and more constructive.”

You have also researched dance and health. Which psychological or emotional effects of dancing do you think are most overlooked?

“One of the most overlooked effects is emotional regulation. Dance can help people feel safe inside their own bodies again. It gives them tools to manage anxiety, low mood, and stress, not by suppressing emotion, but by moving through it. That embodied sense of safety is incredibly powerful. When I was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer, dancing helped me to regulate my emotions and connect with my wife and family when we were too afraid to speak honestly.”

The theme of this year’s conference in Oslo is “Dance as a Bridge Builder.” From a psychological perspective, how do you understand this metaphor?

“Psychologically, bridges are built when uncertainty reduces. Dance builds bridges because it creates connection before language and judgement step in. Bodies meet first. Minds follow. In that sense, dance is often the shortest bridge between people.”

In what ways can dance serve as a bridge between different generations, environments, or professional cultures?

“Movement doesn’t require shared vocabulary, status, or expertise. A child, a grandparent, a professional dancer, and a complete beginner all understand rhythm, effort, and expression. Dance creates a shared space where difference becomes interesting rather than threatening. I am currently running a project called ‘Dance with Me’, where we explore this connection through dancing and speaking.”

What does it mean for belonging and inclusion when people experience mastery through movement?

“Experiencing mastery through movement builds agency, the feeling of ‘I can’. When people feel capable in their bodies, they are more willing to participate socially, take risks, and belong. Dance offers a form of mastery that is personal, flexible, and inclusive, rather than competitive. For example, I learned to read later in life, and it was dancing which gave me the confidence to take risks, fail and not give up.

What might institutions, schools, and local communities gain if dance becomes a more integrated part of everyday life?

“The potential benefits are immense. The research evidence is clear: dancing is fantastic both as a preventative health tool and as an intervention for symptom reduction and healthier lifestyles in many categories of ill health. Dancing is fantastic for helping people to express and communicate emotion. Dancing is fantastic for helping people break away from set patterns of thinking and helps them to be more creative – whether that’s helping people find creative solutions in politics, economics, architecture or in art. Dancing is fantastic for helping people understand each other. These skills are valuable far beyond the dance studio.”

What should dance teachers, choreographers and producers know about psychology to strengthen learning, confidence, and curiosity?

“Human are born to dance. The human brain is specialised for movement. Every single human being is fundamentally rhythmic. Psychology is about how humans, think, feel, behave and interact – and so is dance. When we work with dancers, we are sometimes interacting with their core identity. Tread carefully. We are working in a very privileged place.”

You are known for getting people to laugh, learn and dance at the same time. What do you hope participants at the Norwegian National Dance Conference 2026 v will take away from your keynote?

“I hope they leave with a felt understanding that movement changes thinking. Not as a theory, but as something they have experienced themselves, and can use immediately in their own work and lives.”