



CLOWNING, CONNECTION, AND CONFIDENCE AT 55+



Social Circus as a Tool to Support Healthy Ageing
A Qualitative Study

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FOREWORD / ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At In Your Space Circus, we have long believed in the power of circus and street theatre to bring people together, spark joy, and transform lives. Every day, through our classes, performances, and community projects, we see the difference that creative participation can make to people's confidence, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. Yet too often, the impact of participatory circus, or social circus, is not recognised or celebrated as widely as it deserves to be.

Silver Circus was developed from the idea that older adults should have the opportunity to experience the same playfulness, creativity, challenge, and connection that circus can offer people of any age. What began as an invitation to try something new quickly revealed itself to be something much deeper and more important. Participants were not only enjoying the sessions; they were building friendships, rediscovering their confidence, moving their bodies in new ways, and finding moments of joy and laughter that carried far beyond the sessions.

As an organisation, we felt strongly that these experiences should not remain anecdotal. Circus has enormous potential as a tool for social connection, creativity, and wellbeing, yet the sector does not always have the platform it needs to demonstrate and celebrate its impact. Commissioning this research was therefore an important and intentional step for us. We wanted to listen closely to participants' experiences, to capture the changes they described, and to contribute to a stronger evidence base for the value of social circus in later life.



The findings presented in this report affirm what we have long sensed: that social circus is far more than an enjoyable activity. Participants describe benefits across emotional, social, physical, and cognitive aspects of their lives, and they highlight the importance of the supportive, playful environments created by our trainers. What emerged is a powerful idea of circus as a holistic wellbeing practice that encourages people to stay curious, active, connected, joyful and confident as they age.

For the circus sector, this research also carries a wider message. We need to continue building the evidence, sharing the stories, and championing the role that circus can play in strengthening individuals and communities. We should be shouting from the rooftops about the positive change that creative, arts-led work like this can instigate.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the research team for their care, rigour, and commitment in carrying out this work, and for ensuring that the voices and experiences of participants remain central to the findings. I am also deeply grateful to the participants who shared their stories so openly, to the trainers and care staff who support this work, and to the partners and funders who made both the programme and this research possible.

It is our hope that the insights contained in this report will support the continued development of Silver Circus and help bring greater visibility to the role that circus can play in supporting healthy, connected, and creative communities.

Cath McBride
Company Director

What emerged is a powerful idea of circus as a holistic wellbeing practice that encourages people to stay curious, active, connected, joyful and confident as they age.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from a qualitative research study examining the perceived health and wellbeing benefits of the Silver Circus project, a social circus programme delivered by In Your Space Circus (IYSC) to adults aged 55+ across community and residential settings in the North-West of Northern Ireland. Funded by The Ideas Fund, the study aimed to explore how older adults themselves experience and describe the emotional, social, physical, and cognitive impacts of participating in social circus.

Using focus groups and semi-structured interviews with participants, care staff, and trainers, the research prioritised older adults' voices and subjective experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis identified two overarching themes: (1) the self-reported health benefits of social circus participation, and (2) the central role of the teaching approach in shaping those benefits.

Participants consistently described Silver Circus as a positive and valued experience, highlighting emotional benefits such as joy, laughter, improved mood, emotional regulation, and confidence-building. Social benefits included reduced isolation, strengthened relationships, and opportunities for playful, non-judgemental connection. Physical benefits ranged from increased activity and improved functional movement to pain self-management and continued independence.

Cognitive engagement was also reported, with participants and care staff noting increased focus, alertness, memory, and mental stimulation embedded within enjoyable activities.

A key finding was the importance of the trainers' relational and adaptive pedagogy. Trainers' emphasis on rapport, humour, inclusivity, and responsiveness created safe and motivating environments that encouraged participation across diverse abilities. The intentional integration of play, explanation, and adaptability distinguished social circus from traditional exercise or therapeutic interventions, making health-promoting activities both accessible and enjoyable.

Overall, the study concludes that Silver Circus is experienced as a holistic, person-centred wellbeing practice rather than a single-purpose intervention. By combining movement, creativity, social connection, and cognitive challenge within a playful and respectful framework, social circus offers a valuable model for supporting healthy ageing. The findings contribute to the growing evidence base for participatory arts in later life and support the continued development and scaling of social circus initiatives for older adults.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of the Silver Circus research project, which investigated the potential of social circus to support the emotional, social, physical, and cognitive health and wellbeing of older adults. Commissioned by In Your Space Circus (IYSC), and funded by The Ideas Fund, the research aims to enhance understanding of the role of participatory arts, particularly social circus, in promoting healthy ageing across four domains: social, emotional, physical and cognitive health.

The report begins by introducing IYSC and the Silver Circus project, then reviews existing literature on participatory arts and health in older adults, with a focus on social circus. It then details the research methodology and presents an analysis of findings, highlighting the positive impact of circus engagement on participants' lives.

The report concludes with a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future work in this area.

IN YOUR SPACE CIRCUS

In Your Space Circus is an innovative and dynamic arts organisation and circus school based in Derry and the North-West of Ireland. Their mission is to unleash the power of circus and street theatre, igniting the imagination and transforming lives and communities. They utilise circus and street theatre as vehicles for personal, social and community development, delivering projects and productions which incorporate circus skills, street theatre, visual arts, music, costume-making, and theatre. They create street theatre work for events and festivals, and offer circus classes and workshops for people from the age of 1.5 years, both in-house and via outreach, including the Silver Circus project.

SILVER CIRCUS

The Silver Circus project, designed and delivered by IYSC, aims to provide a creative outlet for older adults (age 55+), promoting social engagement and mental well-being (In Your Space Circus, 2024). The project has been funded over the past five years by Derry City & Strabane District Council, Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Ideas Fund, which is delivered by the British Science Association and funded by Wellcome.



BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Funded by The Ideas Fund in 2023, Dr Nick McCaffery was engaged to examine whether Silver Circus participants experienced health and wellbeing benefits from learning circus skills, and to evaluate the suitability of the social circus model as an intervention for older people in Northern Ireland. The first phase of the project culminated in a one-day event that brought together participants from all groups to engage in circus skills activities, and to create a film showcasing the project's positive impacts.

In 2024, IYSC was awarded a second round of funding to expand on this previous work and research the subjective health and wellbeing experiences of the project participants, and to produce a robust evidence base for the model's efficacy. Using qualitative methodologies, this study asks the question "How do adults aged 55+ perceive and describe the health benefits they associate with attending circus classes?"

HEALTHY AGEING

The global population is ageing. By 2030, one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or over (World Health Organisation, 2025), and already in Northern Ireland, over one in six people are aged 65 and above (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2025). In response to this demographic shift, the United Nations launched the Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) to reduce health inequities and improve older people's lives by, among other priorities, addressing ageism, fostering age-friendly communities, delivering person-centred care, and ensuring access to quality long-term care (Gianfredi et al., 2025).

"Humans now live longer than at any time in history. Global life expectancy has doubled since 1900 and continues to rise... But adding more years to life can be a mixed blessing if it is not accompanied by adding more life to years."

*Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, World Health Organisation Director-General.
(Ghebreyesus, 2020)*

Although influential in shaping international policy, dominant models of “healthy ageing” often privilege biomedical, productivity-focused, and deficit-based perspectives (Rudnicka et al., 2020). By prioritising measurable function and independence, these models can marginalise older adults’ subjective experiences of ageing well. Research also shows that ageism, a pervasive public health issue and major barrier to active ageing, undermines older adults’ confidence and self-esteem (Marques et al., 2020).

Accordingly, there is growing recognition that promoting wellbeing in older adulthood requires attention not only to physical health outcomes but also to how older adults themselves perceive, narrate, and make sense of activities that support their wellbeing. This shift foregrounds the importance of qualitative research methodologies that prioritise older adults’ voices, challenge ageist assumptions, and explore wellbeing as an embodied, relational, and meaning-making process.

ARTS AND HEALTH

The role of the arts in health promotion is well documented, with increasing policy attention on its value as a form of early intervention (Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2021). Fancourt and Finn’s (2019, p. ix.) scoping review identified a “major role for the arts” across prevention, promotion, and treatment of ill health, a finding reinforced by subsequent large-scale evidence syntheses (Fancourt, Warran, & Aughterson, 2020).

Their review also demonstrates that arts participation supports adult wellbeing, with benefits for pleasure, psychological flourishing, and overall quality of life. In older populations specifically, arts engagement is associated with cognitive benefits, such as improvements in memory and executive functioning, as well as physical benefits, including enhanced gait, strength, and balance.

However, much of this literature is underpinned by quantitative and epidemiological approaches that seek to establish causal or associative relationships between arts engagement and health outcomes. While such approaches are valuable for policy advocacy, critics argue that they risk reducing complex experiences to instrumental outcomes such as reduced loneliness scores or improved cognitive measures (Braun & Clarke, 2023), and that arts engagement is better understood as a space where older adults can resist ageist narratives, and experience joy, play, and belonging (Lynch, 2024). Qualitative research offers an important counterbalance, enabling deeper exploration of participants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2023).

ARTS AND HEALTHY AGEING

Evidence increasingly links arts engagement with reduced social isolation and enhanced wellbeing in later life. Cohen's Creativity and Aging study (2005, cited in Lynch, 2024) was instrumental in challenging assumptions about cognitive decline, demonstrating the continued plasticity of the ageing brain. Subsequent studies have reinforced associations between creative engagement and cognitive reserve, pain management, social connection, and emotional wellbeing (Fancourt et al., 2023). Participatory art forms in particular, offer multi-dimensional experiences that extend beyond health metrics to combine creativity, cognition, movement, social interaction and self-confidence in ways that are difficult to disentangle quantitatively, reinforcing the need for qualitative inquiry.

PARTICIPATORY ARTS AND HEALTHY AGEING

Tymoszuk et al. (2020) underscore that participatory arts, such as social circus, in which people actively create art, are distinct from receptive arts such as cinemagoing or gallery visits. Participatory arts are often associated with social practice, and the nature of engagement can further consolidate social bonds.

For example, research by Kurtz and Algoe (2015; 2017) indicates that shared laughter fosters social bonds by signalling mutual understanding and increasing connection within groups. Studies of choir singing (Johnson et al., 2018), theatre participation (Noice & Noice, 2011), and other creative practices also report improvements across cognitive, emotional, and social domains (Noice & Noice, 2014).

While these studies provide important evidence, Noice and Noice (2014) themselves acknowledge methodological challenges, including small sample sizes, short intervention periods, and limited exploration of participants' subjective experiences. Qualitative studies, such as Groot et al. (2021), begin to address this gap by foregrounding older adults' accounts of mood, personal development, and social connection, highlighting arts participation as a relational and meaning-making practice rather than a standalone intervention.

These findings suggest that understanding participatory arts in later life requires moving beyond outcome-based evaluation towards interpretive approaches that explore how older adults describe change, value participation, and integrate creative practices into their sense of self and wellbeing.

SOCIAL CIRCUS FOR HEALTHY AGEING

Social circus is a participatory art form that utilises play and circus skills to foster personal development, social connection, and wellbeing, and is characterised by accessibility and inclusivity (Social Circus International, n.d.). Drawing on Maglio's (2013) framework, social circus can be conceptualised as having impact across four interrelated domains: physical, cognitive, emotional, and social wellbeing. These categories broadly align with existing research on the wellbeing benefits of participatory arts, reviewed herein, and have been applied elsewhere as a framework for assessing the wellbeing potential of social circus (McCaffery, 2023; 2024).

However, existing research on social circus has largely focused on children, young people, and marginalised populations (Bessone, 2017; Lavers et al., 2025), often framed through developmental or social inclusion lenses, and emphasising the importance of trust and relationship building in facilitating effective circus participation (Bolton, 2004; Cadwell, 2023). Research involving older adults remains limited, fragmented, and frequently embedded in grey literature or project evaluations rather than peer-reviewed qualitative studies.

However, research does exist which demonstrates the wellbeing benefits of play across the lifespan, a central tenet of social circus. For example, playful older adults tend to have a more positive outlook, feeling happier, more hopeful, and relaxed (Yarnal & Qian, 2011), and it has been argued that play can help combat loneliness in ageing by strengthening relationships (Dodge et al., 2025).

Where older adults do appear in the social circus literature, the focus tends to be on observable outcomes (e.g., balance, attention, mood), as in Riegle van West et al.'s (n.d.) comparison of Poi (a Māori performing art involving swinging tethered weights) and Tai Chi. While such findings are promising, they offer limited insight into how participants themselves experience circus practices, negotiate risk and play, or interpret changes in their bodies, confidence, and social relationships.

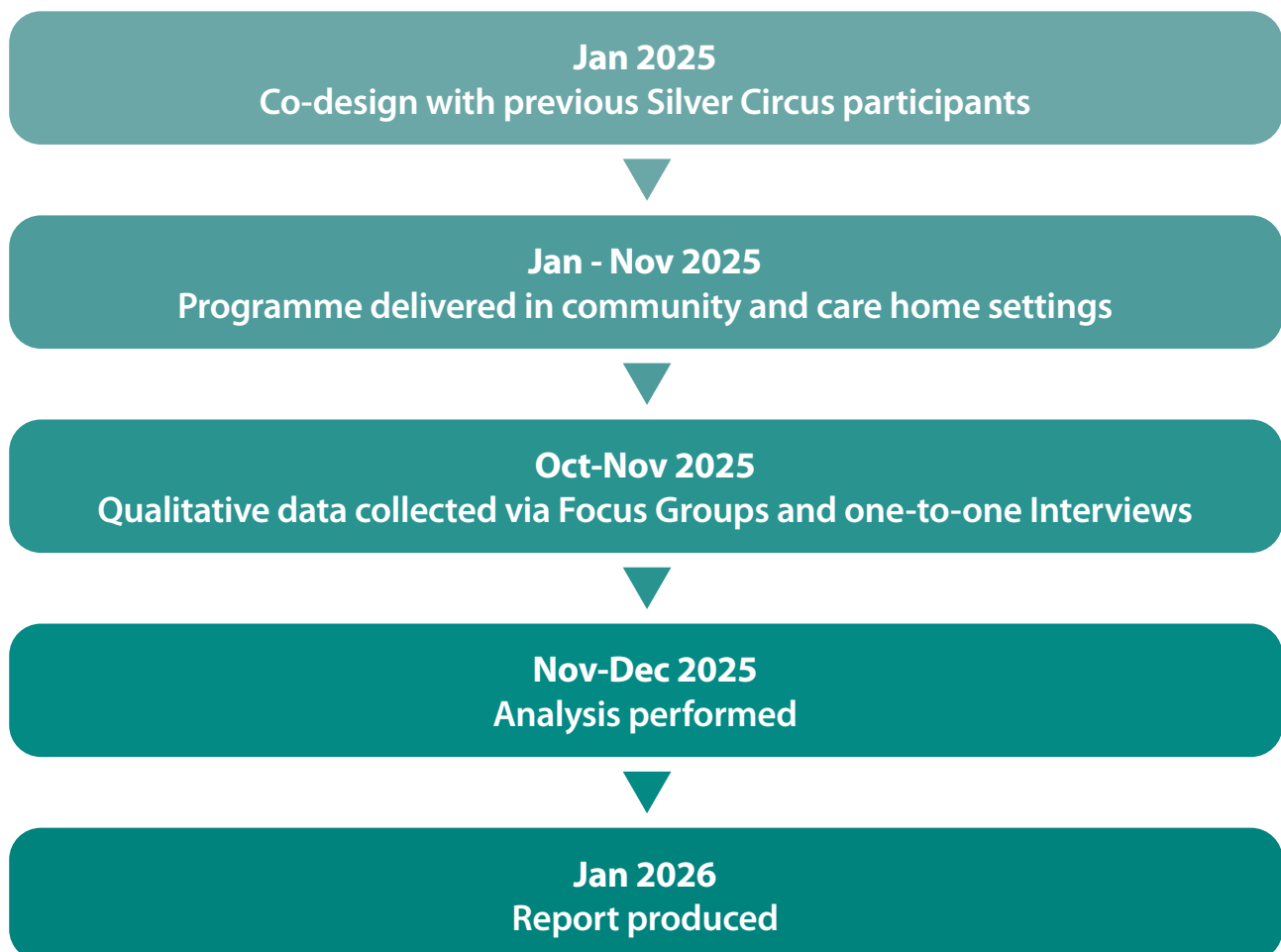
Small-scale reports (Kekäläinen, 2014) and practitioner reflections (Baumgold, 2017) suggest that social circus may offer beneficial effects for older adults, including opportunities for playfulness, embodied learning, and non-competitive physical activity. Yet these accounts remain under-theorised and under-researched, particularly from the perspectives of participants themselves.

AIMS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Despite growing recognition of participatory arts as a contributor to healthy ageing, qualitative research that foregrounds older adults' own perspectives remains limited, particularly in relation to social circus. Existing literature tends to focus on the outcomes of arts participation for older adults, rather than how participants themselves experience, describe, and make meaning of that participation. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative research design exploring the question:

How do adults aged 55 and over perceive and describe the health benefits they associate with attending circus classes? By prioritising participants' own accounts, the study seeks to develop a richer understanding of how social circus is experienced as a health-promoting activity in later life, and to inform future policy and practice in community arts and healthy ageing.

To achieve these aims, the steps and timeframes in Figure 1 were undertaken:



METHODOLOGY

Participants

Thirty-eight participants from the North-West of Northern Ireland took part in the study through either focus groups or one-to-one interviews conducted between September and November 2025. Criteria included current or former participants in the Silver Circus community programme (n = 30); Staff members from residential settings where the Silver Circus programme was being delivered or had previously taken place (n = 4); Core members of the Silver Circus training team (n = 4).

No demographic data were collected as part of this research. All participants received a Participant Information Sheet and provided written informed consent prior to participation.

Procedure

In January 2025, three initial co-design meetings were held with two community groups (Culmore Hub and Eglinton) and one residential care setting (Owen Mor), all of whom had previously engaged with the Silver Circus project. These meetings provided an opportunity to discuss the purpose of the research and to collaboratively shape the research approach.

As a result of these discussions and following consultation with care home personnel and In Your Space Circus, a dual approach to data collection was agreed. In community settings, participants were invited to take part in focus groups, while in residential care settings, interviews were conducted with staff rather than residents. Although some residents may have been willing and able to participate, the presence of adults at risk and uncertainty regarding capacity to provide informed consent necessitated a precautionary and ethically informed approach.

Data were collected via focus group discussions with four community groups (Eglinton, Donemana, Claudy, and Plumbridge), one-to-one interviews with four staff members from residential settings (Longfield Care Home, Culmore Manor, House on the Wells, and Cornfield Care Centre), and two focus groups with the four core members of the Silver Circus training team. All focus groups and interviews were semi-structured and guided by Maglio's framework, to explore perceived physical, social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of participation in social circus activities.

Sessions were audio-recorded and auto-transcribed, with transcripts subsequently reviewed and edited manually to ensure accuracy and clarity. All participants were pseudonymised, trainers were identified numerically, and data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

We identified two overarching themes and corresponding sub-themes that illustrate how participation in Silver Circus is perceived and described as supporting the health and

wellbeing of adults aged 55+ in the Northwest of Ireland. The table below gives an overview of all themes:

Overarching Theme 1: “It’s good for ye!” The self-reported health benefits of social circus participation. This theme reflects all the health benefits participants reported.

Master Themes	Sub-Themes
1.1. Emotional Benefits	1.1.1. The value of pleasant surprises 1.1.2. Joy, fun and laughter 1.1.3. Emotional regulation 1.1.4. Confidence-building
1.2. Social Benefits	1.2.1. Reducing isolation / peer support 1.2.2. Enhanced relationship wellbeing
1.3. Physical Benefits	1.3.1. Active ageing 1.3.2. Improved functional health 1.3.3. Pain self-management
1.4. Cognitive Benefits	

Overarching Theme 2: “It’s a pedagogical instinct.” Teaching approach as central to the social circus experience. This theme captures the pedagogy of silver circus, both in the methods and practices described by Trainers and the experiences shared by participants.

Master Theme	Sub-Theme
2.1. A relational approach	2.1.1. Rapport building 2.1.2. A cup of tea and a chat
2.2. A spoonful of sugar	
2.3. Adaptive and dynamic programming	
2.4. Knowledge is empowering	
2.5. Jugglers-cum-gerontologists	

OVERARCHING THEME 1:

“It’s good for ye!” The self-reported health benefits of social circus participation.

“What do I get out of doing circus? A lot. A really good lot. I found my husband was only dead and I kept going, and the emotional support and the health benefits you know, I was able to keep going, deal with things that come my way and not only that then also was able to keep fit. A lot of good support, you know, from all the girls and from everybody.”

(Jennifer)

Feedback on the Silver Circus project was decidedly positive, and Overarching Theme 1 details the ways participants felt it was beneficial, or “good for ye,” as Trainer 1 regularly asserted. This theme is presented under four Master Themes, reflecting the emotional, social, physical, and cognitive health benefits participants identified, and some sub-themes that help order the data. However, the authors acknowledge that all benefits are interrelated.

1.1. EMOTIONAL HEALTH BENEFITS

Across the dataset, the most striking benefits participants identified related to their emotional health, discussed here under four sub-themes. The first reflects how participants’ expectations led to pleasant surprises, before turning to the most prominent thread in the theme: abundant joy, laughter and fun. Analysis then reviews the ways Silver Circus supports emotional regulation and can contribute to confidence building.

1.1.1. THE VALUE OF PLEASANT SURPRISES

Consistently, participants were unclear what to expect from participation in circus classes but found themselves pleasantly surprised by the experience. Phyllis describes this with enthusiasm:

[Phyllis]: We didn’t know we were getting clowns! We knew it was a fitness activity. We weren’t sure what to expect... I’ll call it a nice surprise!

Trainer 1 acknowledges that participants are “taking a big chance by engaging with something that they most of the time have no understanding of what we’re going to do with them.” Activities Coordinator, Evelyn, elaborates:

[Evelyn]: **when I first said about the circus coming in, they were going, ‘are you off your head?’ But from the first session they really got it you know... It’s one of the best projects that we’ve had coming in and people are fantastic... whatever it is about the silver circus they have just hit it on the head.**

Most people did not consider circus workshops when planning their programme of activity for older people, unless they had been approached by IYSC directly and offered a Taster session, had a connection to someone in the organisation or, as Jane describes,

[Jane]: **I’d done circus that many times for young people and stuff like that over the years, that I was really enthusiastic. I kept going, ‘Go on, come to it. You’ll enjoy it.’ Because everybody when they started was like, ‘what’s this going to be like?’**

The authors met with some participants prior to commencement of workshops to discuss baseline expectations where circus was typically associated with high octane spectacle. When asked what circus means to them, participant responses included “swing boats,” “tight ropes,” “cartwheels,” and “clowns.”¹ Given this preconception, several participants initially communicated a mix of curiosity and reservation; therefore, finding the classes enjoyable was a pleasant surprise.

These accounts suggest that surprise functioned not merely as novelty, but as a reframing of what physical and creative activity could look like in later life.

1.1.2. JOY, FUN AND LAUGHTER

“You just know that when the boys come in, the fun is going to start.”

(Evelyn)

Overwhelmingly, participants reflected on the joy, laughter and fun underpinning workshops, consistently expressing how much they looked forward to each session. For example, when asked what health benefits she could identify, Veronica responded:

[Veronica]: **Probably our mental health. We look forward to it because it’s enjoyable. And doing it in a group, you’re more inclined to try it out than do it at home on your own... Probably because we’re laughing at what we’re doing, but nobody’s ever, well I don’t be watching anybody else because I’m so intent on what I’m doing myself...**

That the sessions are so enjoyable is a major motivation for continued engagement, and consequently ‘looking forward to the sessions’ was a common thread, as Sarah affirms, “I really enjoyed it. Look forward to it. It’s all very fun.” Benjamin’s residents “were buzzing, they were laughing, you know, they were getting engaged,” and Evelyn, asserts that, “if you want laughter, and want fun and inclusion, they’re the boys to do it!”

Benjamin expands on the idea that fun and laughter serve purpose beyond mere entertainment, suggesting they also provide relief from emotional distress. He notes the challenges in engaging his residents in activities, citing the significant effects of living with alcoholism, which can limit opportunities for fun. Nonetheless, when questioned about the significance of fun to the residents, he underscores its importance.

[Benjamin]: **It is for the men, it is very important because like they're all heavy, heavy drinkers like they are chronic alcoholics... they have had a lot of trauma in their lives and you know like that hour of fun just, they take them away from whatever is going on with them, you know, it's priceless for them**

In this context, fun and laughter take on particular significance, offering momentary relief within lives shaped by trauma and addiction.

1.1.3. EMOTIONAL REGULATION

"It just lifts the mood"

(Evelyn)

Across the testimonies, there are repeated references to the role of circus classes in supporting emotional regulation through mindfulness and improved mood. Jennifer and Jane discuss how circus classes helped them to cope with grief by providing a welcome distraction:

[Jennifer]: **It actually takes you out of your head.**

[Jane]: **Yeah. That's what it does.**

[Jennifer]: **Makes you concentrate.**

[Jane]: **Makes you focus and concentrate and laugh and enjoy it.**

[Jennifer]: **Yes. Yeah. That's what I don't, because [my husband] was only dead a wee number of weeks and it made all the difference.**

[Jane]: **The hour just flies. And it made all the difference.**

Participants' references to concentration, grounding, and being "taken out of your head" point to an emergent form of mindfulness embedded within circus practice. According to Trainer 2, circus exercises demand that participants are "fully present in the class," as learning new skills requires concentration and focus.

Furthermore, as Trainer 1 explains, Silver Circus classes are tailored to include breathing and grounding exercises with the explicit intention that participants learn,

[Trainer 1]: **to centre themselves, and to get themselves to calm. To ground themselves... they should be going out there with a hell of a lot less stress than they come in with because they shouldn't have been thinking about their own lives while they were in there.**

Some participants reflected how practicing these grounding techniques at home also served to improve sleep, by reducing anxiety and overthinking at night:

[Karen]: **My problem is sleeping... On the nights I just lay, I couldn't sleep at all but, I do waken, but I do the exercises and then the next thing: it's morning!**

[Jacqui]: **I found it made me sleep better. You know and you don't think about things.**

Circus classes also improved participants' moods, as Care home staff noted:

[Evelyn]: **it just lifts the mood, it makes them happy**

[James]: **It's good for the residents, I think it's good for their moods and stuff as well too. It brings them up. They enjoy it. They really do enjoy it. I enjoy it!**

Significantly, Benjamin notes the enduring impact of the sessions on his clients:

[Benjamin]: **You can see it having a lasting effect. You can see it throughout the day, after it, they've been involved in something, and they've gained a bit of confidence from it. And it's really, it has improved their state of mind. It's improved their well-being. It definitely has. You can see it. They are very happy when they've... come out of sessions and... they're more talkative.**

1.1.4. CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

"The challenge was there and we rose to it"

(Lucy)

Community members, care home staff, and trainers all noted that circus activities pose novel challenges and offer a sense of achievement when mastered. Lucy reflected that silver circus brought out a willingness to try new things and boosted confidence:

[Lucy]: **people found surprising skills, things they could do that they didn't think they were able to do.**

She elaborates in conversation with Jennifer:

[Lucy]: **we were challenged to do things that we would never have tried. Like the time they brought the thing, Jennifer, do you remember? We were upside down?**

[Jennifer]: **The silk.**

[Lucy]: **We all were able to do it!**

[Jennifer]: **We all did it and enjoyed and smiled and through it, you know. And then they brought a very low-level rope or tightrope thing... They never brought anything that we were reluctant to, to try, you know, it brought that out of us.**

Trainer 3 clarified that this approach is deliberate:

[Trainer 3]: **We don't need more three-ball jugglers in the world. What we're looking for is wins, confidence building, enjoyment, sparks of life, especially when you get that accomplishment.**

He illustrated with a story of a participant aged in her nineties in a residential setting, who had been reluctant to engage in plate spinning for a fear of failure, but through support from the Trainers successfully got the plate spinning,

[Trainer 3]: **And her whole face lit up, you know, like a real spark of youth, you know what I mean? It was a real youthful moment and a real spring of excitement. So, for me, it's all about that, connections, getting that like wins, basically, you know, and accomplishments, even if it's very, very, small and tailored.**

While Trainer 3 describes this moment as a "spark of youth," analytically it reflects confidence, agency, and embodied capability in later life, rather than a return to youth per se.

1.2. SOCIAL HEALTH BENEFITS

Participants highlighted social health benefits in terms of feeling less isolated due to peer support and relationship building, reported here as 'strengthening social bonds,' and the opportunities for playful connection that circus workshops provide.

1.2.1. STRENGTHENING SOCIAL BONDS

Grainne represents a benefit frequently expressed across the dataset, when she states, "I just like the fellowship and the craic," although notably, throughout the data this sense of fellowship was generally credited to the pre-established social bonds within the groups, rather than specifically to the circus workshops themselves. Alison details the value of the community group in her life:

[Alison]: **Well, all the exercises that I do here, this is my life. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for this here, having been here this last 25 years.**

Silver Circus sessions are highly interactive, increasing opportunities for communication that foster relationship building and outlast the sessions. Joseph, a care home Activities Coordinator, explains that after the sessions finish, residents "tend to chat more to each other." He explains how the Trainers' efforts to establish meaningful connections contributes to this effect:

[Joseph]: **I think the banter was the golden value of it... they tend to bring up, well Trainer 1 especially tends to bring up, old things. He goes, 'do you remember this?' Y'know, and it sparks conversations.**

Evelyn, too, describes how the Trainers facilitate the sessions as peers, avoiding any condescending power dynamics:

[Evelyn]: **I think what it is as well is the inclusion and that they feel part of it as opposed to being talked to like as if they were in a classroom...**

Rather than creating new relationships, circus sessions often appeared to deepen and activate existing social ties through shared activity and interaction.

1.2.2. CHILDLIKE CONNECTIONS / CIRCUS AS PLAY

Building on the fun aspects of circus referenced under emotional benefits, participants alluded to a childlike playfulness underpinning the circus sessions,

[Peggy]: **You go back to your childhood. You go back to when you were younger.**

While Peggy references childhood explicitly when discussing the joys of throwing hats around the room in her eighties, Lucy discusses the sense of safety provided by the classes, safety to explore, play and connect without judgement:

[Lucy]: **social isolation is such a big issue and we knew that when we came to circus skills we were coming to a safe space and... you could make an idiot of yourself, if you couldn't do something it didn't matter.**

Importantly, participants described this playfulness as affirming rather than infantilising, grounded in mutual respect and

emotional safety. That circus provides a playful space is no accident. Trainers emphasises the intentionality behind the approach:

[Trainer 1]: **one of the great assets that circus has is play.... it reinforces community... when you're playing in a group and you're passing things around and you're taking part; you become part of that play. You're connecting. Everybody's connecting in that room... I think that's what's really special about circus, or about that play... there is something unique about it that we did as children.**

1.3. PHYSICAL HEALTH BENEFITS

Participants in both community and care home settings perceived a range of physical health benefits from taking part in circus workshops. These included general opportunities to stay active, as well as improved functional health and increased capacity for pain self-management.

1.3.1. ACTIVE AGEING

In residential settings, interviewees reflected that circus classes offered much-needed opportunities for physical activity. Joseph described the circus classes as "the only exercise they're getting," and Benjamin detailed:

[Benjamin]: **because of the bad mobility, it's hard to get them to do anything [but] during that session, Trainer 1 did the thing with the balloons and the rackets and**

stuff, and it was you know, it was great to get them moving. Some of them that can't really, can't walk a distance, they were able to do that while sitting on their chairs.

Benjamin references a popular activity among the participants, a slow-motion version of tennis with light rackets and balloons instead of balls, which allows for a range of movement, gently stretching and strengthening the upper body, without any pressure on joints or need for quick reactions that could lead to pulled muscles.

As activity coordinator, Evelyn focuses on ensuring residents engage in regular physical activity, helping them preserve their strength and mobility. She explains its importance:

[Evelyn]: Well, it keeps them very independent, as they can be, and again the social end of it if they can walk up here it's an achievement for them it's great.

These accounts highlight how circus activities support functional ability by enabling movement that is adaptable, achievable, and meaningful.

1.3.2. IMPROVED FUNCTIONAL HEALTH

Accounts of functional health benefits emerged across the dataset, particularly around building strength in the arms and hands, and improving grip.

Reflecting on the scarf juggling, Jacqui felt it was "good for the arms and shoulders," and that building this strength enabled her to continue knitting.

One of the Trainers explains how juggling weightless props works muscles:

[Trainer 3] some of them were getting really fatigued with scarf juggling and they were like, 'my shoulder is sore,' but it's – they're not only lifting a scarf they're lifting their whole arm and the scarf so... they are working hard.

Jane discusses the importance of maintaining good grip as a key feature as she actively ages:

[Jane]: Because I'm cycling every day and it's really important that I keep my grip on my hands. So those exercises help to strengthen the knuckles in your fingers, make them more mobile and stuff like that.

The skills learned in the circus workshops support a healthy, active lifestyle for Jane outside of the sessions.

1.3.3. PAIN SELF-MANAGEMENT

Other community-based participants reported that they routinely perform some circus exercises at home to address specific symptoms. For example, Stephanie shared how the classes have supported her recovery post-surgery, highlighting the interrelatedness of physical and emotional health outcomes:

[Stephanie]: **I found it was very beneficial to me mentally and physically, because I had a knee and hip replacement. Because I found when I was getting the exercises, even upper body and legs and that, it uh helped me and of course I had good fun doing it. I enjoyed it every week.**

Alison describes how regular home practice has become an important part of her pain management routine:

[Alison]: **Well, I had to do my exercises every day when I got home. I had arthritis down my side here and it's still affecting my shoulder badly lately, but I haven't had no pain lately... before I couldn't, I had to lift my arm up like this... And then Trainer 1 told me, 'Put your hand there, move your shoulder, not your arm.' That was the weirdest thing ever I've done... I never went to no doctor, no nothing.**

While trainers were clear that circus does not replace medical care, participants valued the sense of agency gained through self-managed movement.

1.4. COGNITIVE HEALTH BENEFITS

"You get your brain going."

(Grainne)

While most participants did not explicitly reference "cognition," these accounts reflect perceived cognitive engagement rather than assessed cognitive change, aligning with the study's focus on subjective experience.

[Lucy]: **...you're using both sides of your brain rather than just the one side... You know, so our memories hopefully will stay. And concentration. We'll be more focussed.**

In care home settings, staff noticed improved alertness, attention and engagement,

[Joseph]: **Well, they become more alert and stimulated and more chatty, so they become more alive you could say... they turn into flowers and they start playing music and they're muttering... it brings them alive or something.**

And some effect on memory is discussed by both James and Veronica, who report that some residents with dementia find the sessions memorable, remembering Trainers' names and talking about them between sessions.

Trainers anticipate that circus exercises will contribute to cognitive function, stimulating fine motor skills, and strengthening neural pathways by learning complex patterns:

[Trainer 4]: **the theory on juggling is, it does help to open your pathways within your brain because you're learning patterns.**

OVERARCHING THEME 2:

“It’s a pedagogical instinct.” Teaching approach as central to the social circus experience.

“We’re trying to find ways of explaining that this is a valid and well thought out approach and it’s very much participant-led, that we’re taking our cues from the people in front of us all the time.”

(Trainer 1)

The teaching approach underpinning the Silver Circus project stands out as a significant theme across the dataset, evident both in the methods and practices described by Trainers and the experiences shared by participants. This master theme is supported by several sub-themes that together illuminate the unique “recipe” for the project’s success.

Firstly, the importance of building rapport between Trainers and participants is emphasised, establishing a foundation for all subsequent activities. Another sub-theme focuses on how the project delivers health benefits by incorporating them into enjoyable and playful sessions. The adaptability and dynamism of Silver Circus is also highlighted, drawing on the multidisciplinary character

of circus arts and the trainers’ experience as performers to tailor sessions to the specific needs of each group. Additionally, the practice of sharing theory with older participants is discussed, and finally, the initiative shown by the training team in independently researching and developing Silver Circus is recognised.

2.1. A RELATIONAL APPROACH

“You need a wee relationship”

(James)

2.1.1. RAPPORT BUILDING

The attitude and approach of the trainers, fostering meaningful connections that make participants feel valued, respected and included, emerges as integral to the pedagogy of Silver Circus. Under Master Theme 1 we discussed how meaningful trainer-participant rapport building supports the latter’s social health, and this section highlights the particular actions trainers take and their reasons for doing so.

Firstly, they prioritise connection. Care home staff repeatedly allude to the time and effort made by trainers to address residents by name,

to get to know them and their interests, and to show genuine interest in spending time conversing with the residents. Evelyn and James explain,

[Evelyn]: [residents] talk about the boys even through the week, and a lot of the residents that have dementia remember their names, which is absolutely amazing, but I think it's because the two boys are so interested in the residents... they remember everybody's name and I think that's a big thing as well, the social element. They feel as if they're really involved. And yes, I do, I see a big difference.

[James]: They walk around and they talk to them. They actually sort of know ones by their names and all now. They call them by their names and stuff, which is a good thing as well too... You need a wee relationship... it's a recognition of that person; do you know what I mean? It's nice.

This inclusive connection is also present in the community groups, where trainers actively engage with all participants. As Nuala puts it, "they're great craic with everybody," and Jennifer highlights the authenticity of the bonds when she states that the trainers, "all became our friends."

The training team describe this connection with participants as crucial to the project's success, using humour to create a safe, playful environment that encourages engagement:

[Trainer 1]: we have to find a connection in that initial meeting, or they'll not come back for the next one. You've got to get them to laugh. You've got to get them to see that you're there to play. You're not there to make fun of them or make them feel vulnerable. You want to make them laugh the first week and build that confidence within them that they can take risks.

2.1.2. CUP OF TEA AND A CHAT

One particularly valued practice across all settings, is the trainers socialising with participants over a cuppa. In community settings, this is usually after the workshop when, as Lucy reflects:

[Lucy]: they stay for a cup of tea and then we have a good chat as well. You know, it's a very special time.

Likewise, in residential settings the 'tea and chat' supports relationship building, sometimes at the beginning of the sessions to ease participants in, as Evelyn describes,

[Evelyn]: I always give the residents a cup of tea first so when [the trainers] come in, the residents are normally sitting at their tea. And then I'll give them a cup of tea, so they sit down and start their chat. Then the next thing you see is Trainer 1 getting up and taking the dishes and putting the dishes away.

Trainers corroborate, describing this as a valuable opportunity to informally reintroduce themselves to the group, chatting to participants while tidying away the teacups, after which participants are “ready to go then, they’re so engaged” (Trainer 2).

The effects are equally valuable at the end of the session, creating space for social bonding, as Joseph describes,

[Joseph]: **then they sit and have a cup of tea and that’s kind of a nice part of it as well... it was like a wee cup of tea conversation in a circle at the end of the activity.**

These relational practices function as central to the teaching methods, rather than supplementary social gestures.

2.2. A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR...

Participants’ reflections on the fun they have during Silver Circus classes (sub-theme 1.2.), highlight a deliberate practice of weaving health benefits into enjoyable and playful sessions. This helps the medicine go down and makes sessions more engaging, as Evelyn explains:

[Evelyn]: **to them exercise is a chore, whereas the circus workers don’t make it a chore, they make it laughter and fun...**

Trainers emphasise how foregrounding play and fun distinguishes social circus from more traditional, exercise-based interventions,

making health-promoting activities more appealing and accessible,

[Trainer 2]: **always, it’s about finding the craic. And you just sort of slip it in... ‘Oh, would you believe it? It really helps your shoulder...’ The overall approach is just fun, craic, and the benefits are there. You know, sweetening the medicine with the fun... So, if you’re a physiotherapist, you will focus on doing this exercise, move this arm, this leg, and it’s all quite, you know, dry; and, you know, we just go, ‘well, we’re going to move the body, let’s have the craic, put the music on and have fun with it.’**

This approach contrasts with deficit-oriented models of older adult exercise by foregrounding enjoyment rather than correction or compliance.

2.3. ADAPTIVE AND DYNAMIC PROGRAMMING

A key feature of Silver Circus’ pedagogy is its adaptability and dynamism. Participants in both community and residential settings appreciated trainers’ practice of continually adapting activities to ensure they remain suitable, enjoyable and inclusive. This level of responsiveness requires significant embodied expertise, improvisational skill, and professional judgement on the part of the trainers, who credit the multidisciplinary nature of circus arts, and their own experience as both performers and practitioners.

One community group were already very physically active, meeting regularly for walks and regaling the researcher with stories of “kayaking down the Foyle from Moville down to Greencastle, surfing the tide down into Greencastle Harbour” (Jane). As such, all their sessions were conducted standing in a circle, and they were able to participate in more physically demanding activities, including aerial and tightrope (Jennifer).

For others with ranging abilities, exercises were modified. James reflected that if any residents were struggling with an activity, they’d be offered an adaptation, “doing something similar but in a different way.” Similarly, Benjamin observed that limited mobility did not preclude anyone participation:

[Benjamin]: **Some of them that can’t really, can’t walk a distance, they were able to do [the activity] while sitting on their chairs.**

Evelyn concurs, noting that the sessions promote inclusivity, both in terms of the physical exercises and the sense of accomplishment:

[Evelyn]: **Now, there is a couple of people that wouldn’t have the strength, but... he makes sure that everybody gets a turn and everybody get a proper shot at it... Based on their ability... And then, if say somebody didn’t get it, he’ll make sure that he’s within reach of that person, so that person feels that they’ve done it.**

Trainers recognise this need to be adaptable and responsive for the project to be successful across the diverse settings within which they deliver:

[Trainer 2]: **there’s not just one Silver Circus project. You know, there’s not one size fits all. You’ve really got to adapt to each individual group... you really have to kind of look at their needs and adapt what you have in your toolbox to them, really.**

Trainer 3 highlights the need for Silver Circus Trainers to possess quick thinking and improvisation skills, “the ability to be able to just look at a prop and use it in a non-ordinary fashion.” He notes that both experience and instinct are crucial for developing these abilities:

[Trainer 3]: **you’re teaching 20 people, but you might have to teach this one trick 20 different ways. You need that ability to adapt there and then, on the spot... [There’s] a lot of subtle dynamics that you need to be aware of if you’re gonna be doing this work... that comes with experience. Or some people have just got it, you know what I mean? It’s a pedagogical instinct.**

Trainers consistently draw upon their experience as performers when delivering the programme. Circus is an interactive art form that demands the ability to read and respond to audiences, which trainers employed to “gauge the mood” (Evelyn), or “lighten

the situation” (Trainer 1), as required. They entertain and impress on “the unicycle and... juggling at the same time” (James), and the talent for being “a great storyteller” (Evelyn), helps to captivate and entertain participants, much as they would an audience.

Because circus arts draw from multiple disciplines, trainers have experience using a broad range of techniques, practices and resources, enhancing their flexibility and adaptability:

[Trainer 1]: **we’re bringing our warm-up practices that we would use in theatre and in circus into their space and we’re adapting them to, to deal with their stiffness and stuff... there’s a wealth of knowledge within the circus community because the circus community is very diverse in its disciplines. You know, from gymnastics to juggling, you know, to clowning and all that.**

The multidisciplinary nature of circus offers an innovative, engaging alternative when planning and implementing health programs for older adults, as noted by Trainer 2.

[Trainer 2]: **Physios would go in, would look to the world of physiotherapy to figure out what’s the key to this, and we go, oh, let’s do some acrobatics, or... here’s a warm-up that a gymnast taught me, or here’s something that an aerial artist taught me. So, you get this massive kind of real-life experience as a sort of training manual.**

I don’t think there’d be a training manual big enough to sort of describe what a circus workshop could be capable of.

2.4. KNOWLEDGE IS EMPOWERING

Trainers typically shared information and research about the value and benefits of circus exercises, and other holistic wellbeing advice, during the workshops. Some participants, like Joanna, mentioned that they “enjoy the information they give us,” and for several individuals, this knowledge motivated them to practice at home, reinforcing the value of the exercises.

[Lucy]: **Well, you see, if you think it’ll work, it does work. He also told that the calves, our calf muscles were very important pumps.**

[Jennifer]: **Yeah, it was your second heart**

[Lucy]: **And I read recently, somewhere, probably online, that if you suffered from... swollen feet, swollen legs, that if you exercise your calf muscles that they would drag the fluid like up and out.**

From the Trainers’ perspective, presenting evidence-based information during workshops can help to legitimise social circus as a wellbeing intervention:

[Trainer 1]: **in the 1990s one of the big American universities had done a study that proved that juggling built white matter in the brain and helped you ward off colds and flus and stuff like that...**

And it's something that we battered out as like a calling card: We're not just a bunch of clowns... Wee bits and pieces like that actually helps in the delivery. It's amazing. When you're talking to people in a workshop, older people, they like information.

With older adults this practice is distinct from other demographics, who are less interested in the health benefits and more focussed on the craic:

[Trainer 1]: If you tell them before you do it that this is why we're going to do this movement, 'because it will improve your balance and your eye-hand coordination,' they go... 'I'll give this a go, oh... This will help me come down the stairs, I'll be able to reach for the banister, y'know, things like that. You have to tell older people why you do things. You can't just go, 'well, we're just doing it for a bit of fun.' They want a reason for being there and for doing it, and why it's a piece of exercise.

2.5. JUGGLERS-CUM-GERONTOLOGISTS

Without any formal gerontological training to inform the Silver Circus project, IYSC practitioners conducted their own independent research to guide the project and plan sessions.

Trainer 1 shares some insights into his process:

[Trainer 1]: I had seen some stuff in the past... bits and pieces from physiotherapy practitioners. But then when I went and investigated it, there is actually a company in England that uses the Silver Circus sort of same thing... but they're all trained physios. And we bring the play with us, and that's different, so.

This autonomy provided Trainers with a welcome opportunity to apply research findings and engage in practical experimentation:

[Trainer 3]: I really enjoy the flexibility that we have, and I really enjoy, like, you can just have an idea and go, what's going to work with this group, and then immediately bring it in the next week and see if it floats or it sinks.

The project began exclusively in community settings, so expanding it to include care homes brought about new challenges, as Trainers 1 and 2 noted:

[Trainer 2]: when we went down to care homes, it was like, well, we're really going back the drawing board here. And, you know, throw everything out and start all over again... We've got beanbags, we can throw them. That's basically where it started... And, then just started adapting whatever circus equipment we had at our disposal and brought more stuff and just kept trying things out until we got stuff that worked.

[Trainer 1]: We're getting better at tuning in on what they're saying they need, and we're matching up the things that we do with the things that they need. But that really is coming with the experience of just doing this project.

This process reflects a form of practice-based evidence generation, grounded in iterative experimentation and reflective adaptation, which is supported by a collaborative approach, as Trainer 1 describes:

[Trainer 1]: the In Your Space team work together on a wide variety of projects. So... if one of us comes up with something, like the balloons and the tennis racket that I come up with, and then I'll bring it into [another] group... I was working with Trainer 3 one day, and... he just lay on the floor and stuck... his hands and feet up in the air to get them to throw the rings around... and I do it all the time now... Collaborating. Aye, we're always stealing things from each other!

However, Trainers also found value in skills sharing workshops with other circus organisations, to both generate new ideas and refresh older ones:

[Trainer 1]: the cup balance with the ball... I must have seen it years ago... then recently at skills sharing workshop (someone) put it back in my mind. And I went and looked up a few more bits and pieces of it. It's such an... old circus technique and

physiotherapists use it and all this sort of stuff... there's so many planes of movement in that one exercise that they're not doing every day. And they're even saying, 'oh, that was really good.'

Finally, all trainers welcomed additional opportunities to share best practices, noting that "skill share days are brilliant!" (Trainer 1). They also indicated a desire for greater access to evidence-based training, highlighting the value of being able to reference new research in their instruction.



DISCUSSION

This study explored how adults aged 55+ experience the Silver Circus project, focusing on the health and wellbeing benefits they perceive. The findings show that social circus is more than just a fun activity, it is a holistic, health-promoting practice that combines emotional, social, physical, and cognitive benefits in ways that participants notice and value.

1. EMOTIONAL BENEFITS: JOY, FUN, AND CONFIDENCE

Participants consistently described emotional benefits from taking part in circus sessions, including riotous laughter, playfulness, and the joy of trying something new.

Circus also supported emotional regulation and coping, which helped with grief, stress, and sleep by providing focus, distraction and a supportive environment.

Finally, participants reported confidence-building as a key benefit, feeling empowered by mastering new skills, like aerial silks or walking low tightropes. Trainers framed this as creating “wins” for participants, helping older adults discover capabilities they hadn’t thought possible, fostering a sense of achievement and agency.

2. SOCIAL BENEFITS: CONNECTION AND INCLUSION

Silver circus was also highly valued for its social benefits. Participants described how the

sessions reduced isolation and strengthened relationships, emphasising the importance of shared activity and conversation.

Playfulness was central to this social value. Circus allowed participants to connect in a childlike, fun way without feeling judged, and that the safe, non-competitive environment encouraged connection. Trainers intentionally created this environment, using humour, rapport, and informal conversation to foster meaningful interactions.

3. PHYSICAL BENEFITS: MOVEMENT AND PAIN MANAGEMENT

Participants reported a range of physical health benefits, from maintaining mobility and strength to supporting pain self-management. In residential settings, staff noted that for some participants, circus was their only opportunity. Activities were adapted to each participant’s abilities, meaning everyone could take part, whether sitting in a chair or standing in a circle.

Several participants also practiced circus exercises at home, using them to manage symptoms related to surgery or arthritis. This demonstrates that social circus encourages active, self-directed engagement with the body, giving older adults tools to support their own physical wellbeing.

4. COGNITIVE BENEFITS: ENGAGEMENT AND MENTAL STIMULATION

Participants described using both sides of their brain, concentrating, and remembering sequences during circus activities. Lucy noted that juggling and other exercises helped her stay focused and use her memory. Care home staff observed increased alertness and attention in residents during and after sessions.

Importantly, cognitive engagement was embedded within enjoyable, meaningful activity, rather than being presented as formal “brain training.” Participants associated mental stimulation with fun, movement, and social interaction, suggesting social circus may offer a natural and engaging way to support cognitive health in later life.

5. WHY TRAINERS MATTER: RELATIONAL, RESPONSIVE, AND KNOWLEDGEABLE

The trainers’ approach was critical to how participants experienced the benefits of social circus. Participants valued the relationships they built with trainers, describing them as friendly, respectful, and approachable. Trainers used humour, play, and adaptability to make sessions enjoyable while also supporting health outcomes.

The sessions were flexible and tailored, accommodating varying abilities and needs, and trainers explained the purpose behind exercises to motivate participants. Knowledge-sharing, guidance, and

encouragement helped participants practice confidently, both in sessions and at home. Trainers’ experience in circus skills, performance, and their instinctive, responsive teaching methods were central to making the sessions both safe and health-promoting.

6. WHY SOCIAL CIRCUS WORKS: UNIQUE FEATURES

Participants consistently identified features unique to social circus as the reason they experienced health and wellbeing benefits:

- **Playfulness and novelty:** Circus was enjoyable, surprising, and motivating.
- **Embodied activity:** Movement was meaningful, adaptable, and accessible.
- **Social interaction:** Fun group exercises strengthened relationships and reduced isolation.
- **Integrated cognitive challenge:** Learning new skills naturally engaged memory, focus, and coordination.
- **Pedagogical approach:** Trainers’ relationships, explanation, and responsiveness made activities inclusive, empowering, and supportive of overall wellbeing.

In short, Silver Circus was perceived as a holistic wellbeing practice, not just an activity for fun or fitness. It addresses emotional, social, physical, and cognitive domains simultaneously, in ways that participants themselves recognise and value.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social circus, as delivered through the Silver Circus project, is perceived by adults aged 55+ as a meaningful and holistic contributor to healthy ageing. Participants consistently described benefits across emotional, social, physical, and cognitive domains, emphasising joy, connection, confidence, movement, and mental engagement. Crucially, these benefits were not experienced as isolated outcomes, but as interrelated aspects of an enjoyable, playful, and socially embedded practice.

The findings highlight that the effectiveness of Silver Circus lies not only in the activities themselves, but in the teaching approach underpinning them. Trainers' relational, adaptive, and knowledge-informed methods created safe, inclusive spaces where older adults felt respected, challenged, and empowered.

By embedding health-promoting movement and cognitive challenge within play, laughter, and social connection, social circus offers an alternative to deficit-based models of healthy ageing.

Overall, Silver Circus emerges as a distinctive participatory arts model that supports healthy ageing in ways that participants themselves recognise and value. This study strengthens the qualitative evidence base for social circus with older adults and supports its continued development, evaluation, and integration within community and residential settings as a flexible, person-centred wellbeing practice.

This report makes seven recommendations for future Silver Circus programming and proposes five opportunities for expansion and development of work in this sector.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PRIORITISE JOY AND PLAY OVER EXERCISE.

Social circus sessions should be framed and marketed as fun, playful and surprising, with wellbeing benefits. Deficit-oriented language should be avoided, and a strength-based message should be employed with enjoyment positioned as the main incentive to attend and for continued engagement.

2. USE TASTERS TO OVERCOME LOW EXPECTATIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS.

Often people associate circus with spectacle and are not likely to choose it independently, it would therefore be useful to run taster sessions and focus on partner referrals as the primary recruitment route. The “pleasant surprise” moment could be positioned as an intentional design feature and a reframing of what activity in later life can be.

3. INCORPORATE TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH SOCIAL INTERACTION.

Maintain explicit practices that participants value such as building rapport, genuine conversation, and humour. Sessions should continue to include structured social time, where possible as this supports safety, belonging and engagement. This time should be scheduled and supported through adequate resourcing as a key part of the intervention.

4. MAINTAIN A FLEXIBLE APPROACH ACROSS ABILITIES AND SETTINGS.

Social circus is not a one size fits all approach. Programmes should be subject to continual review to accommodate all abilities and settings. Consideration should be given to seated/standing options, varied mobility, pain and fatigue and differing group and individual needs. A multi-disciplinary toolkit should be developed and continually refreshed which can allow trainers to be flexible in the moment, during the sessions.

5. MAKE HEALTH BENEFITS EXPLICIT AND HIGHLIGHT THE VALUE OF THIS.

Continue knowledge-sharing during sessions, particularly in relation to the health benefits of social circus, for example how this type of exercise supports balance, grip, mood, and sleep. This serves to legitimise the work as a wellbeing intervention and can also motivate home practice and self-management.

6. ENCOURAGE SAFE HOME PRACTICE AND SELF-MANAGEMENT.

Since participants report using exercises at home for pain management and recovery, provide a light-touch structure by creating simple take-home routines such as breathing, grounding and activities such as scarf juggling. It should, however, remain clear that this does not replace medical care and safety guidance. Home practice could be tracked and monitored as a meaningful pathway of impact and agency.

7. INCORPORATE AND BUILD ON TRAINING AND PEER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRACTITIONERS.

Trainers asked for more evidence-informed training and skills-share days, it would therefore be useful to formalise a practitioner development programme or pathway which provides knowledge and guidance on aspects such as adaptive facilitation in ageing contexts, trauma-aware practice, dementia-friendly delivery, and how to talk about evidence confidently.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE WORK

1. STRENGTHEN THE EVIDENCE BASE

Future research could be strengthened through a mixed-methods evaluation that retains participant voice as central, while also incorporating a small, feasible set of quantitative measures aligned with the study's key themes (e.g. loneliness, wellbeing, balance confidence, pain interference, and sleep quality).

A follow-up study conducted 3–6 months after programme completion would further strengthen the evidence base by exploring the longevity of impacts. Such work could focus on whether benefits persist over time, particularly in relation to social engagement, relationships, confidence, home practice, activity levels, and perceived health and wellbeing.

2. INCLUSION, ACCESS, AND EQUITY

Ongoing review of the demographics currently not being reached would support IYSC to assess and enhance the accessibility of Silver Circus programmes. Groups for consideration may include older men, people with higher levels of frailty, minority communities, rurally isolated populations, and people with sensory impairments.

This reflective process would allow programmes to adapt responsively to increase access and equity, while retaining the playfulness and enjoyment that underpin engagement and success.

3. DEVELOP A REPLICABLE MODEL AND IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

IYSC may wish to formalise the project's "recipe for success" into a replicable model or implementation guide, including:

- Core principles (e.g. play-first, relational safety, adaptive programming, knowledge-sharing)
- Session templates and an adaptable activity library
- Minimum trainer competencies and skills
- Safeguarding and risk approaches appropriate for older adults and care settings

Developing such a model would support wider adoption and scalability, enabling the benefits of social circus to reach a broader population while maintaining programme quality and integrity.

4. EXPLORE UNDERLYING MECHANISMS MORE DEEPLY

The findings point to several mechanisms that would benefit from more focused, in-depth research or evaluation. These include:

- Experiences of “being taken out of your head,” potentially linked to mindfulness, attention, and flow
- The role of novelty and mastery in building confidence and self-efficacy
- Shared play and laughter as contributors to social bonding and connection
- Embodied learning as a pathway to enhanced perceived functional ability and agency

Further exploration of these mechanisms would strengthen theoretical understanding of how and why social circus supports wellbeing in later life.

5. PARTNERSHIPS AND POLICY POSITIONING

Future work could be more explicitly aligned with healthy ageing priorities, including reducing ageism, supporting age-friendly communities, and promoting person-centred approaches. This framing would support the development of referral pathways and partnerships with health and care providers, while ensuring that Silver Circus remains firmly arts-led rather than medicalised.



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