

Future London | The Skills Project

IN ASSOCIATION WITH **Google** Digital Garage

OVER the past six months, Jenny Stallard has learnt how to make podcasts, and launched her own. Working on her podcast *Freelance Feels* has not only helped her employability, explains the north London-based journalist, but it has also improved her mental health.

"Podcasting is a digital skill many employers look for, plus it shows I'm keeping up with industry trends," she says. "Building my skillset and getting insight from my guests has given me confidence."

Stallard's positive experience is a prime example of how lifelong learning, whether acquiring a skill or taking up an activity or pastime, can be fun and help to improve mental wellbeing.

Analysis by London Economics for the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills suggests that 80 per cent of learners had improved self-confidence or self-esteem as a result of their learning.

Almost half were more likely to undertake voluntary work and community engagement activities; three-quarters said that they were better able to manage their time or keep active; and three in five women said that their learning had helped them to support their children with homework.

Psychologist Natasha Tiwari believes that deciding to master a new skill is all about taking back control. "That boost in self-esteem and creativity is a wonderful reminder that one is able to trust in their ability to bring about change in their lives – it's hugely empowering."

Tiwari describes the "flow state" we're in when focused, engaged and enjoying ourselves doing something we love with



There is an intrinsic joy in creating and being playful – and we can often lose that as adults

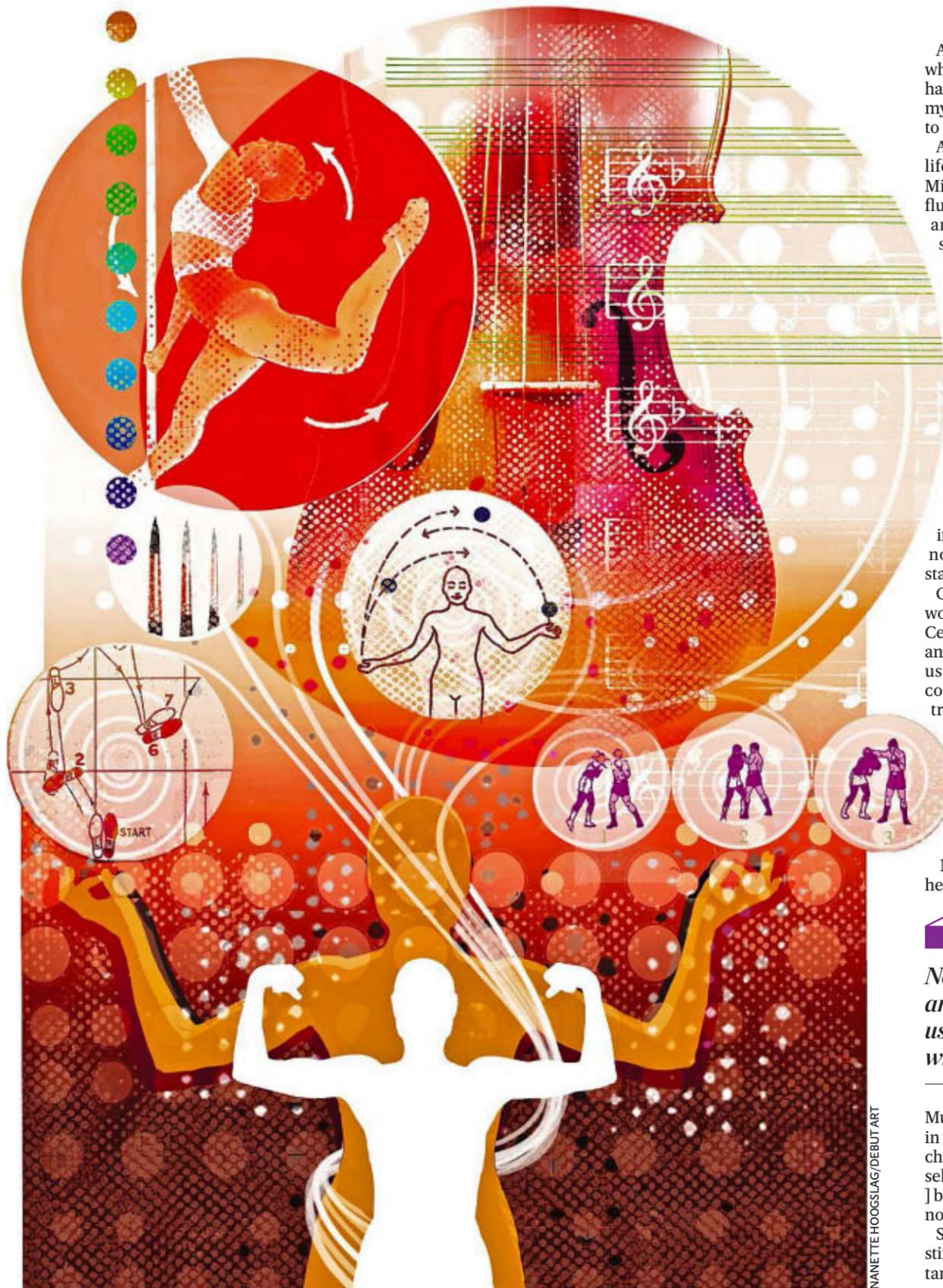
no sense of time. "This flow state activates the release of the 'feel-good' chemical dopamine in the brain and gives you a better ability to cope with everyday stress, anxiety and worries, while boosting your energy levels and the immune system," she says.

For Marilyn Devonish, 51, conquering her fear of public speaking improved her employability as well as her own wellbeing. "Growing up, I was very shy and had low self-esteem, and my crushing fear of public speaking curtailed not just my employability, it also impacted my social life and made me feel like an outsider," she says.

The Watford-based coach and management consultant has since addressed audiences at live events, on television and radio. "Public speaking opened up a whole new doorway, avenue, and life," she says.

Attaining new qualifications and training, or taking up a hobby or pastime, can have economic and social benefits beyond boosting salary and employability, according to education economist Dr Gavan Conlon, partner at London Economics.

As he explains, the benefits of mastering a new skill or taking up a new hobby can sometimes seem difficult to quantify. "From an economic perspective, because the reason for mastering a skill is often unrelated to a job, the only way to understand its economic 'value' is by understanding how much was given up by the individual



NANETTE HOOGSLAG/DEBUT ART

From podcasting to Zumba, learning new skills can lift your mood and boost your career

Taking up a fresh activity may be daunting but psychologists say it can improve your health – and it's fun. **Anna Turns** reports

in terms of the time devoted to mastering the skill."

But that doesn't mean new skills don't have value. A recent study of 50,000 people commissioned by BBC Arts shows that spending time on a creative pastime acts as a coping mechanism in three ways: as a distraction tool from

stressful emotions, as a contemplation tool that allows headspace to reassess problems, and as a means of self-development to face challenges by building up self-esteem and confidence.

Olivia James, a confidence coach based on Harley Street, says that trying something new is a daunting prospect

for many, but that recognising effort rather than results can help an individual to become much more resilient and override that fear of failure. "A well-adjusted human being likes to explore and there's an intrinsic joy in creating and being playful – we often lose that as adults," she says.

Author Jini Reddy discovered this when she took up Zumba last year: "It has reinvigorated my love of dance and my playful, silly side. Zumba allows me to switch off in a different way."

And learning French has improved life for Marie Farmer, 30, founder of *Mini Mealtimes*: "Although I'm not yet fluent, I'm already feeling more alert and motivated, my confidence has shot right up even when talking to French speakers," she notes. "It's even helping me at work, people are impressed I'm learning [a new language] and have given me lots of support and encouragement."

When Lauren Halliday left her marketing job 18 months ago to go freelance, she spent three months intensively learning social media advertising. "Knowledge combined with action is a powerful fuel for confidence. My new skill gave me the confidence to approach brands and ultimately turn this skill into my livelihood," says Halliday, who now runs a social media agency for start-ups called *Social Sequence*.

Clinical psychologist Dr Marc Tibber works with under-25s at The Brandon Centre in Kentish Town, where he runs an eight-week wellbeing programme using photography as a way to build confidence, social connections and transferable skills. "Photography is a way of opening up discussions in a safe, non-confrontational way," he says. And by improving their ability to work in a group and independently, reflect and work creatively, each participant improves their employability too.

Marianne Rizkallah works as the head music therapist at North London



New tasks or activities that are not routine can help us to adapt and extend what we know and can do

Music Therapy. Music making, whether in music therapy or with others, as in a choir or band, can provide a space for self-expression, she says. "[People can] be heard in a way that is personal but not too directly intrusive," she says.

She explains that playing instruments stimulates brain activity through simultaneously using sight, hearing, touch and spatial awareness.

Learning new skills can help protect the brain, notes Dr Marinella Cappelletti, senior lecturer in psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London. "Learning in later life is seen by some researchers as a way to protect the brain against ageing because it promotes 'neuroplasticity' [the brain's ability to develop new neural pathways or connections]."

Keeping learning throughout our lives brings real benefits, says cultural psychologist Professor Stephen Billett. "Our contemporary lives change constantly, so engaging in new tasks or activities that are not routine for us helps us to adapt and extend what we know, can do and value," says Prof Billett, an honorary research fellow at the Department of Education at the University of Oxford.

He explains: "Employability includes not just getting a job, but sustaining employment across working life and seeking advancement which contributes to our sense of self. Remaining employable requires ongoing learning and honing of skills."