

CASE STUDY

How an Irish Set Dancing Teacher Used BlueJeans to Transform the Lives of People with Parkinson's

For about 35 people living with Parkinson's disease in Ireland, going to Patrick O'Dea's set dancing classes meant more than just improving their balance and building strength. It was an opportunity to socialize and, for some, the high point of their week. So, when COVID-19 struck and O'Dea had to cancel his classes, many felt anxious.

"They were scared for themselves, as well as of the fact that the fantastic time they were having, coming to meet other people, would end," says O'Dea. "One thing about Parkinson's is you're alone in that world. So, the pandemic is quite scary because you're vulnerable in yourself and in your way of thinking. You're not sure how your life is going to continue."

O'Dea has been teaching Irish set dancing to people with Parkinson's disease in Dublin and Limerick for 10 years. He trained in the techniques developed by Dr. Daniele Volpe, a neurologist who found that set dancing, together with Irish music, could improve the balance and mobility of individuals with Parkinson's.

Knowing how important his classes were to participants, O'Dea looked for ways to continue his lessons. "There were two guys in our class, Joe Condon and Gary Boyle, and they said to me, 'Will you try and get us online?'"



Industry: Non-profit

Challenge: Patrick O'Dea needed to find a way to continue his Irish set dancing lessons for people with Parkinson's disease after COVID-19 forced him to cancel in-person classes.

Solution: He decided to run virtual classes via BlueJeans Meetings, liking the simplicity of the platform's interface and its ease of use.

Results: O'Dea has been able to continue his classes, helping people with Parkinson's anywhere in the world remain active during COVID-19.

Participants in his online classes have greatly improved their well-being by staying connected and engaged.

They have learned to embrace technology and use it to enhance their quality of life.

“Word spread and suddenly, people were contacting us saying they wanted to get online. So, BlueJeans has been a household name in the Parkinson’s world in Ireland for the last 15 months.”

– PATRICK O’DEA, IRISH SET DANCING TEACHER

And that launched O’Dea’s search for an online meeting platform. Together with Condon and Boyle, he identified key requirements for a video conferencing system and tried out a few options. One of the main issues they ran into was the delay between the music and video when O’Dea was doing online classes using his laptop. “This was where BlueJeans excelled,” he says. “We were able to upload the recorded classes to BlueJeans, and the music and video synced.”

Since most of those attending his classes had little experience with computers and video conferencing, O’Dea wanted the system to be simple and easy to use. “If I sent them a link through their WhatsApp group, I wanted them to be able to just press that link and join the session straight away,” he says.

Choosing BlueJeans Meetings

O’Dea eventually chose BlueJeans Meetings for the simplicity of navigating its interface. “The decision to go for BlueJeans was quite quick because I liked the platform,” he says. “The icons on the side were nice and big. You knew exactly what they were.”

The ability to easily record exercises, upload videos, and access them during classes was another deciding factor for O’Dea. “I was able to work with all the tools I needed.”

Then came the hard part: getting everyone to log in to a computer and follow a few steps to join their first online class on BlueJeans. With many of the participants unfamiliar with connecting to the internet, O’Dea had to get their family members and some sports clubs in Dublin and Limerick to help.

“Once they got through that first difficult phase of getting connected and saw that they could do it again, they had no problem joining whatsoever,” says O’Dea. “Word spread and suddenly, people were contacting us saying they wanted to get online. So, BlueJeans has been a household name in the Parkinson’s world in Ireland for the last 15 months.”

Attracting Participants from Around the World

In just two weeks, about 100 people with Parkinson’s had signed up for online lessons, which were offered by Dublin non-profit Move4Parkinson’s and the Parkinson’s Association of Ireland Midwest.

“A lot of people have to travel for a few hours from the south of Ireland to Dublin just to see a doctor or another practitioner. Now, they realize how easy they can get into BlueJeans and have a consultation with their doctor online.”

– PATRICK O’DEA, IRISH SET DANCING TEACHER

The popularity of the online classes quickly caught the attention of an Irish television station, which then featured O’Dea’s creative solution. “The next thing we knew, some people from Massachusetts in America were contacting us, wanting to join the classes. Soon, we had people from Iceland, London, and Italy joining us,” says O’Dea, who now has more than 120 people registered to attend his online classes.

Delivering Great Benefits

O’Dea has since been running virtual classes for groups of 30 from his home in Limerick, with Condon providing technical support. While set dancing exercises take up the bulk of the one-hour sessions, O’Dea sets aside at least 20 minutes just for chatting. “There are a lot of issues when it comes to living with Parkinson’s,” he says. “Movement is one, but apathy and depression also affect a lot of people with Parkinson’s. Being able to communicate with others really helps repair people enormously.”

Boyle, who has been attending O’Dea’s classes for many years, attests to this, saying that the conversations he and others have now are better than during the in-person

classes. Boyle has been living with Parkinson’s for 12 years. Through therapy and exercise such as set dancing, he has greatly slowed the progress of the disease.

“I think the chat at the end of each session is something people never expected to be so beneficial,” says Boyle. “They’ve learned an awful lot about dealing with Parkinson’s. People have swapped stories they never would have a chance to swap at all because they never had that kind of conversation. Now, by pressing a button, they see what they want to see.”

This chance to communicate has tremendously benefited participants’ mental health, according to Boyle. In his case, it has also helped him maintain the volume of his voice. Parkinson’s can cause people’s voice to become soft, but they can overcome it through therapy and staying mentally active. “It’s incredible how people open up during chat time, and this is a real opportunity to help with mental health issues,” says Boyle.

To make chat time even more useful, O’Dea, Move4Parkinson’s, and the Parkinson’s Association of Ireland Midwest would invite doctors, physiotherapists, and other guests to speak.

Empowering People with Parkinson's

Overall, the transition to online classes has been empowering, says Boyle. “Before, people would talk about the weather, the news, and about sports. They would never talk about technology. You should hear them now. They’d say, ‘Are the broadband a bit slow today?’ ‘Oh, the internet is down.’ It’s been just spectacularly successful.”

Many have also realized how a platform like BlueJeans can provide so much convenience. “A lot of people have to travel for a few hours from the south of Ireland to Dublin just to see a doctor or another practitioner,” says O’Dea. “Now, they realize how easy they can get into BlueJeans and have a consultation with their doctor online.”

But the most dramatic change has been participants’ ability to stay connected, according to Boyle. “They know they can use this technology with their kids who are maybe living in Australia or 50 miles away but couldn’t come and see them because of travel restrictions,” he says. “It really is a wonderful use of technology. And it has shattered the fear people had of technology.”

O’Dea attributes this newfound confidence to BlueJeans’ ease of use. “And the quality is so good. I haven’t used any other platform — everything I do now is through BlueJeans.”

Continuing with Online Classes

O’Dea’s lessons via BlueJeans have been so successful that Move4Parkinson’s has asked him to continue an online class that will be open to anyone with Parkinson’s, anywhere they are in the world.

“We are going to take this far, there’s no question about it,” he says. “Some of the participants have said that they’d love to do another class on another day of the week online. And I’m still getting calls every week from people from different countries looking to join our exercise group. So, it has been a great success story.”

ABOUT PATRICK O’DEA

Based in Limerick, Ireland, Patrick O’Dea has been teaching dancing since he was 15. He has taught in schools and provided therapy for children with disabilities. Ten years ago, he learned about the research neurologist Daniele Volpe was doing on people living with Parkinson’s disease. O’Dea then trained in the techniques Dr. Volpe developed and has since focused on helping people with Parkinson’s improve their balance and mobility through Irish set dance and music.