

Dance therapy application and benefits as a psychotherapy method

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Everyone who has ever lived, no matter where they live, has a universal language: movement. Body language or nonverbal communication is everyone's native language. Nonverbal communication is how everyone (even babies, those that speak another language, people who cannot speak) can express their needs, feelings, and emotions. Dance can be used as nonverbal communication. Often when people dance or view a dance, an expression, feeling or story is felt and communicated. Many feel connected and empowered when they dance or view a dance. Dance can bring healing. Dance can bring hope. Dance can be used to help treat those with eating disorders and autism.

A branch of therapy utilizes dance to help patients, it is entitled Dance Movement Therapy or movement psychotherapy. It involves the use of various movements and dance moves to bring healing to a variety of conditions including behavioral, mental, social, physical, and emotional issues. Also, it is used to enhance communication and motor ability ("Benefits"). One does not have to be a dancer to benefit from this type of therapy as it primarily emphasizes creative movement rather than dance styles or technique.

Using dance as a form of psychotherapy is based on the principle that the body and mind are interrelated, meaning a change in one influences the other, and feelings are expressed nonverbally through actions and movements (Ekern). Kleinman, a Dance Movement Therapist writes, "Dance/movement therapists weave together dialogues that incorporate an emphasis on nonverbal communication by helping their patients experience

feelings, express these feelings through body language and strengthen authentic communication between the body and mind” (Kleinman, “Treatment”). Numerous studies have been conducted on its effectiveness in treating those with developmental disabilities, depression, trauma, addictions, eating disorders, dementia, and wellbeing of those with chronic illnesses. Dance Movement Therapy is an effective form of treatment for those with autism and those struggling with an eating disorder.

Signs and symptoms of autism may include lack of social and communication skills, repetitive behaviors, avoidance of touch, obsessive thoughts, delayed development, and difficulty showing empathy (“Benefits”). Dance Movement Therapy can help with and improve all of these signs and symptoms of autism. Every scientific study, along with numerous antecdotal accounts, have shown that autistic participants of Dance Movement Therapy show an increased sense of social skills, body awareness, well-being, and empathy (“Benefits”).

For everyone, dance is beneficial for proper brain development because several areas of the brain have to work together simultaneously. Susan Moffitt explains in Autism Key, “The hearing, listening, processing, executing, and repetition enable any child to forge new brain pathways, engaging both sides of the brain” (Moffitt). Some doctors believe that autism is caused or worsened by the two hemispheres of the brain not connecting or communicating, so by engaging in dance the two hemispheres can be connected and return to a more normal state.

Each Dance Movement Therapy session for individuals with autism is different, as each individual has different needs. It can be in a group or individual session; it can be strictly planned or more unstructured, and there may or may not be a dance performance at the end of the sessions. It is the job of the therapist to determine what will be best for the individual's needs.

Several techniques may be used in each session. One technique is mirroring, which requires the patient to copy the movements and expressions of the therapist (or another participant). These mirroring movements are generally slow, flowy, and weighted because those are the easiest to mirror; however, the movement can be whatever the leader decides. Mirroring increases social belonging and interaction and the movement vocabulary and range of the patient. Often props like scarves or balls are used to promote a wider range of movement. Often the movement of these children in the beginning of therapy is repetitive, jerky, and flaily; however, the movement goal in therapy is to have them able to do a wider variety of movement, learn how to control their bodies, and develop fine and gross motor skills ("Benefits").

Dance Movement Therapy can also be used in the treatment of eating disorders. Eating disorders encompass those suffering with anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating, which are completely unique disorders from each other (for clarity though they all will be referred to by the umbrella term eating disorders); however, a common characteristic of eating disorders is the sufferer trying to control their feelings and emotions with obsessive thoughts about their body and food. One patient explains, "It is much easier for me to focus on how many calories I have consumed or how much I have

exercised than it is for me to deal with day to day events such as arguments, or feeling accepted” (Kleinman, “ Connect”). Essentially people with eating disorders have shifted the focus of their life to food, exercise, and their body, while ignoring feelings, desires, and bodily cues. The purpose of any type of therapy for eating disorders is to reverse this pattern of behavior and thinking.

Those with an eating disorder avoid emotional issues by detaching from bodily experiences. To them the body is an “ internal burial ground where feelings are stored, restricted, and avoided” (Kleinman, “ Treatment”). Another characteristic of an eating disorder is having a negative self-image or body dysmorphia, which makes it hard for them to accept their body, and most feel disconnected from their body. Dance Movement Therapy can help improve this as it heightens the communication between the mind and the body and connects the two (Kleinman, “ Treatment”). Dancing is a safe way to improve body awareness and learning to respond to its sensations and needs. The healing process will not take place unless the individual is willing to challenge themselves to live in their body and accept their body.

Those suffering with an eating disorder often have a hard time talking about negative situations or experiences. Dance and movement can be used to tap into these situations or experiences and express them. What cannot be expressed through words can be expressed by movement.

Susan Kleinman researched three elements that are improved by Dance Movement Therapy for anyone: rhythmic synchrony, kinesthetic awareness,

kinesthetic empathy, and expressing emotions through movement. Rhythmic synchrony is the sense of being in tune and connected with others. This could occur by doing movements at the same speed in unison or breathing at the same rate, these movements of unison promote unity in people. Kinesthetic awareness is the ability to sense oneself in space. Exercises that may increase kinesthetic awareness are moving your body in a specific way (e. g. raising an arm) without looking at oneself, or by mirroring a partner's movement. Kinesthetic empathy involves feeling an emotion that is happening to someone else. By watching a dance about someone acting sad, the viewers may in turn feel sad. This is especially beneficial for autistic children, as they often lack empathy skills (Kleinman, " Treatment").

Children's Hospitals of Colorado produced a video of a girl named Katie who has suffered through an eating disorder for three years, but is doing well now because she went to a Dance Movement Therapist. It tells the story of her journey through it. In the beginning she is seen awkwardly moving around the dance room only stepping slowly side to side with rigid, jerky movement with a blank expression on her face. At the end of the video (after she has been through Dance Movement Therapy) Katie is shown dancing again; however, this time she is seen moving her whole body, on all levels, across the whole room, her movement was expressed freely and cheerfully with a happy expression. Katie's change in movement shows the change in recovery; before Dance and Movement Therapy she felt uncomfortable and detached from her body as evidenced by her small awkward movement, and afterwards she is shown moving freely and happily which indicates that she

is more comfortable and happy with her body and with life. Some examples of what she did in her sessions were mirroring the therapist, pushing hard against walls, identifying emotions on her body, and improvisation. She said that now when she is stressed she dances and that because of Dance Movement Therapy she has better self-confidence, has hope for the future, and is more honest. Primarily, though, it has given her an outlet to express herself without destroying her body.

Dance can and will bring healing to anyone who participates in it. It has numerous widespread benefits for everyone. Those with eating disorders or autism will improve their condition and lessen symptoms because of participating in dance. There is a quote that states, “ The roots of dance therapy can be traced to earliest human history, when disease was seen as the loss of the soul, and dance was an intrinsic part of the healing ritual” (Kleinman, “ Treatment”). This quote shows that dance has and always will be an important part of healing a person.