

Dance/Movement Therapy: Using the Body as a Vehicle to Mindful, Healthy Living



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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to become educated in the field of the psychotherapeutic practice of Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) and implement its techniques into a group within the Tallahassee community. Specifically, monitoring the group for positive behavioral and emotional progressions throughout the project. Originally executed as an IDEA Grant recipient, I conducted the research in two parts: the attendance to a five day workshop in DMT at Antioch University New England in Keene, New Hampshire, and, the adaptation of DMT exercises to work with homeless and at-risk youth at Someplace Else Crisis Shelter in Tallahassee, Florida. Video and photo evidence was strictly prohibited at the shelter because the organization acts as a safe haven for a transient community of 10-17 year olds with varied living situations. Throughout the project I noted and analyzed physical, verbal, and emotional responses from the children before, during, and after the movement exercises. The results of the project support the growing idea in Psychology that DMT can benefit clients in ways that typical Psychotherapy (Talk Therapy) cannot offer alone. Incorporating DMT into Someplace Else Crisis Shelter's program provided evidence that movement affinities and conscious interventions within those affinities can reflect and alter psychological health.

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An Explanation of Dance/Movement Therapy

As defined by the American Dance Therapy Association: “Dance/ Movement Therapy [is] the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual.”¹ To expound on that definition, Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), like other professions (Occupational Therapy for example), can address physical limitations, their possible physical causes, and how to correct them. That approach often applies to working with the physical motor developments of infants and toddlers. Otherwise, DMT uses carefully cultivated movement exercises typically paired with verbal analyzation, in part, with the client. According to Joan Chodorow, Ph.D., former president of the American Dance Therapy Association, and Jungian Analyst— “There are three aspects of dance/movement in analysis that we gradually learn to remember: 1) What was the body doing? 2) What was the associated image? 3) What was the associated affect or emotional tone?”² Those three questions provide the platform for cognitive reflection and growth through discussion.

Chodorow’s paper, “The Body as Symbol: Dance/Movement in Analysis,” discusses how practitioners often look at DMT as “a form of active imagination in analysis” and that it calls upon Jungian Depth Psychology for understanding actions or reactions occurring in the body.³ Anita Green, Ph.D., Jungian Analyst, and instructor at C.G Jung Institute, further explains that, “for Jung, matter and spirit, body and psyche, the intangible and the concrete were not split or disconnected but always remained interfused with each other.”⁴ Like Jungian Depth Psychology, DMT uses the evidence of movement to explore and understand the unconscious mind.

Insight to the Dance/Movement Therapy Workshop at Antioch University New England through IDEA Grant Progress Report

The following is an edited progress report required for my 2016 IDEA Grant project. I wrote it immediately after my time at Antioch University New England to give a brief account of my experience. I studied with Alice Thayer Scudder, Susan Loman, Danielle Fitzpatrick, Kim Burden, and Christina Devereaux. Alice Thayer Scudder is an adjunct faculty member at Antioch University New England and a

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senior counselor at Phoenix House in Keene, New Hampshire. Susan Loman is the Director of Antioch's Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling Program. Loman is also a world renowned Kestenberg Movement Profile expert. Danielle Fitzpatrick serves as adjunct faculty at Antioch University New England and is an alumna of the program. Fitzpatrick has worked with the geriatric population, using DMT, for over 15 years. Kim Burden is also an adjunct professor, as well as a Body-Mind Centering Practitioner. Christina Devereaux is the Assistant Professor and Director of Clinical Training at Antioch University New England.⁵

June 5th-June 11th, 2016 at the Antioch University New England kick-started my project. It was a week equally split between the

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exploration, understanding, and the application of the psychotherapeutic benefits of Dance/Movement Therapy to various populations. On day one, my seven peers (all either practicing Psychotherapists or Counselors) and I (an undergraduate Dance Major)

plunged right into the delicate tactics attached to understanding the unconscious mind through the revelations the physical body creates. Our guide for the day, professor Alice Thayer Scudder, instilled in us the need to begin each exercise with the promotion of mindfulness, self-compassion, and the tolerance of/moving through discomforts. The exercises that we learned, participated in, and discussed afterwards focused mostly around the effects the exercises could have on clients battling substance abuse and those that had undergone any trauma. Every day that followed stuck to a similar, intuitive process that not only gave insight to diverse groups of people, but also created intense self-reflection that promoted empathy within our group of eight. We truly put ourselves in both pairs of shoes—the practitioners' and the clients.' Day two with Susan Loman was all about working developmentally with children from the ages of 0-6 years old. This included children on the Autism spectrum and children with anything from physical disabilities, to attachment issues, to intellectual uniqueness. Day three shed light on

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the vast amount of people that Dance/Movement Therapy can assist, as Danielle Fitzpatrick took us through her experiences with clients throughout the entire lifespan, infants to geriatrics. Day four reiterated the necessity of bodily awareness in order to be attuned with one's mind and emotions. Kim Burden took us through the practices of Body-Mind Centering and Authentic Movement and we found for ourselves the fierce emotions and mental connections that occur within each practice. On day five, Christina Devereaux wrapped up the program by taking us through a review of each day (both through the movement exercises and through discussion) and opened the floor to any questions that needed refreshed answers. The questions included clarification on the application of movement exercises, things to look for/be cautious of, and options for tracking data and progress. Throughout the week, my peers and I continued to relate the information back to the different populations we each served. Since then, I have been organizing everything that I recorded in my notebook during the workshop into the following categories—Populations, Exercises, Causes/Effects, Personal Insights.⁶

Why I Chose to Work with the Youths at Someplace Else Crisis Shelter

As I have grown older, my awareness of the homeless population has grown, as well as the numerous causes, choices, and effects regarding hopelessness. As a person who has not been a stranger to economic instability or the feeling of not belonging, I desired to share tools with others that could assist them in finding a home within themselves and could catalyze a supportive community. I felt the need to work in my own community—Tallahassee, Florida. It seemed most appropriate to me to focus more on the children or youths, especially when it came to homelessness because they have the most to lose developmentally—physically and psychologically. The 2015 Annual Report Council on Homelessness led me to discover that, “nationally nearly one-third of all homeless people are children and youths; Florida school districts identified 71,446 children and youths who were homeless or unstably housed.”⁷ The count of Homeless Students was 702 for Leon County in 2014. Thus, I contacted Someplace Else Crisis Shelter because I

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admired and wanted to assist them in their, “providing [of] a safe...open and homelike environment.”⁸

At Someplace Else Crisis Shelter, youths ranged from the age of 10 to 17 years old. The facility can house up to 18 youths; the age and numbers of the youths fluctuated from week to week. The part of my project at the organization occurred once a week for five weeks in the facility’s approximately 25 x 15-foot lunchroom. The lunchroom provided a larger space than their multi-purpose room because the lunch tables could be easily moved to fully clear the room. Two employees remained with me during every session. During the duration of the study, the number of youths remained between 10-13. There were a consistent 4 youths throughout the study; others remained for 2-3 weeks at a time, while some were only present for one week.

“I chose Someplace Else Crisis Shelter...because the opportunity to benefit its community...seemed plausible”

The inconsistency in age and quantity was not the most ideal for this project. However, I chose Someplace Else Crisis Shelter for this project because the opportunity to benefit its community through DMT seemed plausible. While Someplace Else Crisis Shelter facilitated extensive arts and event programming throughout the year, at the time, the organization did not yet offer anything along the lines of Dance/Movement Therapy. In support of the organization’s “individualized approach to each youth,” DMT provided an environment for the youths that allowed them to be introspective and to healthily navigate themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally with relation to the group.⁹

My Project at Someplace Else Crisis Shelter

According to a presentation on “Arousal Regulation in Traumatized Children” at the 2009 International Trauma Conference—given by Elizabeth Warner, PsyD, SMART Program Director, along with, with Jane Koomar, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA, and, Anne Westcott,

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LICSW, Certified Sensorimotor Therapist—when youths face developmental trauma, such as “emotional abuse, neglect, attachment disruptions, physical abuse, and sexual abuse,” symptoms occur such as “interpersonal trauma and attachment disruption, somatization and biological dysregulation, alterations in attention and consciousness, affect and impulse dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, and distortion in self-perception and meaning-making.”¹⁰

Many of the correlations mentioned above could be recognized at Someplace Else Crisis Shelter. I began my project there by establishing a level of trust and the acknowledgement of a new routine with the homeless and at-risk youths. I sat with the youths as they ate their snacks, chatted and explained that I would be filling the proceeding time block for the next few weeks. It was originally suggested by the facility to split up the girls and boys to deter any rowdiness. However, after the first week, I felt it best to keep them together because the goal of healthier, friendly and respectful, interactions between group members remained.

I began the project with a simple survey—anonymously asking how comfortable, on a scale from 1-10, each individual was dancing when around others. I recorded the answers in the following table. Subjects and their answers are not listed in any particular order. I only conducted the survey once to get a general feel for any discrepancies between how subjects individually felt about the content and what occurred later during the exercises.

First Week Subjects	First Week Answers
Subject 1	8
Subject 2	9
Subject 3	1 (originally 2 but then slashed out)
Subject 4	10
Subject 5	No Answer
Subject 6	7 1/2 (1/2 added by subject)
Subject 7	7
Subject 8	4

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First Week Subjects	First Week Answers
Subject 9	10
Subject 10	10

Contrary to the several high numbers that suggested that most of the youths were comfortable dancing when around others, the sessions started off with hesitant participants. I then played a non-explicit Top 40 playlist as background noise in attempt to give the participants a sense of familiarity so they would feel more at ease during the exercises. Gender norms became extremely evident on the first day once the youths were split up. The boys elicited enthusiastic vocal responses to the activities overall and tried each exercise; each desired to “out move” the other five boys. There was one outlier who remained seated but still moved his torso and vocally participated. Other than the one subject’s act of sitting, no further pushback was received from the boys during the first session. Their urge to outdo one another declined throughout the session, replaced by fun encouragement that mimicked that of the two Someplace Else Crisis Shelter employees in the room. As opposed to the boys, the four girls would only participate half-heartedly from their seats and wearily asked me questions about myself during the first session. Once I was accepted by the girls, they started to brag about one particular youth who was a dancer. However, they all remained to timidly complete the movement exercises from their seats. The girls made a song request near the end of the session, James Bays’ “Let it Go,” and instead of initiating more movement exercises, I was asked by one youth to sing with them. The lyrics, specifically the chorus, “So come on let it go. Just let it be. Why don’t you be you and I’ll be me,” evoked a touching, soft acceptance of independence from the tween and teenage girls that I was asked to share.¹¹ I verbally noted that each girl had relaxed her shoulders, that eyes had dropped either halfway or all the way closed, and a comforting sway had overcome everyone’s body. I then explained to the girls that I had been taught by a professor at Antioch, Susan Loman, that rocking or swaying is a way for the body to calm down the central nervous system. From then on, music playlists were left up to the youths (if it was dubbed clean by the organization and did not lead to “aggressive behavior”). Their ability to choose playlists added to the information about the group’s mood on a session

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by session basis. Also, after the first session, I refrained from labeling any exercise as “dance” to minimize preconceived notions about dance. Unless the youths requested “dance,” “movement” was used in its place.

Following that first session, the youths would greet me eagerly at the entrance and update me on their day. Those that remained from a previous week confidently requested certain exercises and activities. The consistent youths began seeing the sessions as something that they could contribute to and tailor to what they needed as a group. Responsibility for oneself and the consideration of others started taking root and boys and girls remained together.

One of my sessions (July 16th, 2016) is outlined by the movement exercises listed below:

Deep breaths began the session. For it to be a more conscious experience, I gave rhetorical cues such as, “Can you feel the physical space between each rib expand? Can you imagine that your chest has been unlocked?” I encouraged that the breathing exercise be executed with eyes closed, or with eyes downcast if eyes closed was uncomfortable. Eyes closed is intended to allow for more introspection, but also anonymity within the act in case anyone felt self-conscious at the time. The cues not only called for a more conscious practice of breathing, but also offered imagery that could prompt the most efficient, deepest breaths—creating relaxation and focus. Most youths found this to be their favorite part of each session. One mentioned that they “didn’t know their lungs were so big.”

Simple stretches occurred next, interlaced with efficient blood-pumping exercises like Jumping Jacks and Marches. This was simply to wake up the body of each youth and the group energy.

Freeze Dance followed. Seen more as a game, Freeze Dance is done to open up the view of the individual to include the group. There is only one rule. When one person freezes, everyone freezes—when one person begins again, everyone else also begins again. All the youths found that they needed to be extremely vigilant to follow

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the rules and to not run into anyone. They also voiced that they felt noticed, listened to, and a level of command and accomplishment. One youth exclaimed, “People are actually watching me.”

On this day (July 16th, 2016), some of the youths did not want to continue dancing, while others did. Discourse began to erupt. I proposed an icebreaker game that had nothing to do with their preconceived knowledge of dance/movement. Icebreaker games are simple and can be improvised to use whatever resources are around. I had the youths stand in a circle and throw a volleyball to each other. I established that eye contact before throwing the ball was the number one rule. Once someone caught the ball, they were to share a simple, non-vulgar, “I like ___” statement. For example, “I like to play soccer.” The next person to catch the ball would then make a choice to stick within the theme of the previous person’s subject, or, to change the subject. Such as, “I like to play baseball,” or, “I like to eat chocolate.” The group became more lively and they also began to look out for/support each other. They all reminded each other to make eye contact before throwing the volleyball and would apologize if a throw seemed aggressive. The eye contact rule held the participants accountable for safety and the chosen subjects of discussion reminded everyone how much they had in common—evident by now enthusiastic shouts of agreement.

A request to dance again was then made by one youth and each member of the group either agreed or decided to sit the next exercise out. I had those participating remain in a circle to make the transition less jarring for the entire group. The instruction was then to pass along dance moves rather than a ball. One person did a move and the rest replicated it to the best of their ability. This went on in an accumulating fashion. It was an act intended to make the youths feel seen and validated by having their movement reflected to them by the group. After a few rounds, those that had opted to sit out excitedly decided that they wanted to join in. While none of them gave a reason why, I suspected that they noticed that it was a safe environment because their peers were having fun; thus, they felt comfortable enough to contribute to the hodgepodge of moves

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being made.

By that time in the session, another youth requested to try freeze dance again because they “thought they could do it better now.” Their confident appeal seemed to make it agreeable to the entire group. They were more successful the second time around. From my observations, because of their small disagreement after the first round of freeze dance, paired with their reconciliation during the icebreaker game and the accumulating dance move game, the youths had developed a greater attunement to each other. That enabled them to freeze or unfreeze almost immediately when one person froze or unfroze during this second round of freeze dance.

Further Responses

A famous Modern Dancer and Choreographer, Martha Graham, once said, “movement never lies.”¹² I would like to add to it, “if you know how to pay attention to the movement.” Often the body reveals what cannot be immediately expressed verbally. This idea greatly applied to the age group at Someplace Else Crisis Shelter. Youths generally lack the sophisticated language comprehension that even adults struggle with to express their emotions. By working backwards—creating sessions of movement exercises and interventions that attended to the symptoms of somatization and biological dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, distortion in self-perceptions and meaning-making, etc.—participants had a say in how their all-around self-discovery unfolded and began to open up about past issues as they rose to the surface from the unconscious. And because there are numerous movement exercises, each with the ability for creative and situational consideration, the process could be tailored every session for where I was attempting to guide the group.

Not only did the participants begin to speak more candidly about past and present issues, not available for repetition here, certain behaviors improved significantly from the first session to the last. Those behaviors were discussed between the youths and I and they are shared below:

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The youths could control their anger and began to think clearly simply by tuning into their breathing and their heart rate.

To have their movement reflected to them meant to be seen, understood, and accepted.

They could commend, even celebrate, their existence by intensely focusing on their body and how it physically felt to be alive on a day to day basis.

What's Next

The project is by no means as comprehensive as I desired. Without sufficient funding and other resources, many curiosities could not be studied in an already underestimated field, Dance/Movement Therapy. If given an opportunity to progress, I would apply for a master's or doctoral degree in the field of DMT. I would create a long-term study through an institution in fulfillment of that degree and new participants would go through a more extensive process with additional expectations such as monitoring brain activity and Sensorimotor Therapy.

For now, my project successfully instilled in the youths at Someplace Else Crisis Shelter that the only home that you are guaranteed is your body. And you can move it wherever you please.

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