Using Dance as Therapy for Depression

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Using Dance as Therapy: Dancing Away Depression

When you consider types of treatment for depression, you may think of a person sitting in a room with a therapist, or meeting with a prescriber like a psychiatrist or physician to initiate medication to treat the depression. Often, these are the only two methods people think are available to them to treat depression.

In fact, effective treatments for depression consist of a wide variety of models, including expressive arts therapy, which can encompass everything from drawing to dancing.

Dance therapy or dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a treatment for a number of conditions and is supported through extensive research and testing. The goal of DMT is to use movement and dance as a means of improving the individual's emotional, cognitive, physical and social progress in the world.

Dance therapy might be appropriate for people with problems related to:

- Social limitations
- Developmental disabilities
- Medical or physical health complications
- Psychological conditions

Aside from treating a number of problems, dance therapy has the flexibility to be completed in a number of settings. This versatility makes dance therapy more available to a greater number of people. Settings include:

- Mental health agencies
- Rehabilitation centers
- Nursing homes
- Schools
- Correctional institutions
- Day cares

You do not have to be a trained ballerina for DMT to be advantageous. Dance therapy can be completed by anyone old or young. Even people with significant limitations can find modifications that are appropriate to still benefit from DMT.

DMT can be completed alone or in group settings. Again, the flexibility and inclusive nature of dance therapy makes it a promising form of treatment for almost anyone.

Dance as Therapy for Depression

So, dance/movement therapy is helpful for a range of people in a range of settings, but what can it do for

depression? DMT has been helpful in treating people with depressions because it aids in improving a number of facets like:

- Self-esteem
- Self-image
- Communication skills
- Mood
- Optimism
- Aggression
- Memory

Dance therapy is grounded in the understanding that motion and emotions are tightly linked. For example, if someone is experiencing high levels of sadness, their movement will be reflective of this — it will be slowed and smooth or nonexistent at all.

If someone is very excited, their movement will be upbeat and fast paced. Motion can affect mood as well; this will be experienced when someone reports that completing a high energy dance improved their mood.

Dance is an expressive art, which means the movement of their body helps people express how they think and feel.

People may not fully understand how they feel; others may not have the ability to put their feelings to words. Dance/movement therapy allows these people the forum to communicate more clearly and accurately through dance than they can with words.

The DMT Session

Dance/movement therapy sessions will vary widely depending on the therapist, client, setting and treatment style. One session may be highly structured with the therapist directing the movements of the client to complete some goal or move the session in desired directions.

Another session may be completely improvised with the therapist and client working in a collaborative nature to explore presenting problems. In many cases, the therapist will acknowledge or emphasize certain aspects of the movement while increasing the client's awareness of their body and what surrounds them.

Sessions generally begin with a warm-up period, a dance/movement section in the middle, and cool-down at the end. During the session, your therapist might use interventions like:

- **Mirroring** – the process of matching or mimicking the client's movements as a way to provide accurate empathic understanding.
- **Jump rhythms** – jumping, especially in a rhythmic way, is shown to trigger a positive reaction in the client.
- **Movement metaphors** – using dance and movement to symbolically express a situation taken from real life.

The Role of Exercise

It is no stretch to consider DMT as a form of physical activity. There are mountains of research that indicate exercise is a helpful tool in battling many mental health complaints like depression and anxiety.

It is believed that exercise produces higher levels of mood-boosting neurotransmitters into the brain. Chemicals exercise releases, like serotonin and norepinephrine, are the same ones antidepressant and antianxiety medications attempt to increase.

Also, there is evidence to support the act of warming the body relates to improved moods. People routinely seek saunas, hot tubs, and other means of warmth to improve their mental health. Certainly, dance will increase the

feelings of warmth.

Starting the Process

Dance/movement therapy is available across the U.S. and in more than 35 countries over the world. Finding a DMT practitioner will prove more difficult that finding other types of therapies, like cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), though. Whereas hundreds or thousands of CBTs are available in each state, there will be far fewer DMTs.

Here, you can locate therapists that are accredited with the American Dance Therapy Association. This organization has existed for 50 years with the mission of establishing high standards of professionalism through education, research, and clinical practice.

DMT may not be the first choice someone thinks of when considering therapy for depression, but maybe this view should change. With a long track record of success across many populations and many settings, DMT could be the treatment style best suited for you.