


DANCE AND MOVEMENT THERAPY

Ćeremiđić Tatjana, Ćeremiđić Dejan 

Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, University of East Sarajevo, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: *Since human prehistory, dance has been used for therapeutic purposes, and on that basis, dance and movement therapy was conceived, which over time developed into a distinct (psycho) therapeutic approach. Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), sometimes abbreviated as "dance therapy," developed in the 1940s in the USA and reached Europe in the 1970s. Dance therapy is a body-oriented therapy based on the use of dance and movement as a creative process, with the goal of integrating the emotional, cognitive, social, and physical characteristics of each individual, that is, connecting body, mind, and spirit. This type of therapy includes the therapeutic use of movement and psychomotor expression as the main means of analysis and intervention. In addition to focusing on the way of moving and body posture, importance is also given to other nonverbal signs such as breathing, gestures, facial expressions, muscle tone, rhythm of movement, use of space, etc. Dance and movement therapy has proven to be extremely useful for different groups of people and is intended for all ages. This therapy can be performed individually, in pairs, or in groups. Through analysis, we come to the conclusion that this special form of therapy purposefully uses movement and dance for healing and health improvement, and it affects general cognitive functioning, especially memory, enhances nonverbal communication skills, and reduces stress levels, as well as influencing affective processes in people. Spontaneous movement improvisation enables clients to try new ways of being and to experience.*

Key words: *dance, movement, therapy.*

INTRODUCTION

Dance, as a specific anthropomotor activity, holds an important place in various areas of life and work of both children and adults. Due to the specificity of its content and application, dance is studied within the theory and practice of sports, physical education, recreation, rehabilitation, and other social sciences. The fundamental element and means of dance is movement. Dance is a way of expressing a person's spiritual states, and throughout human history, it has become the most immediate celebration of the mind and body. In all epochs of civilization, it has been given great importance.

It is a fact that the need to dance lies in human nature. Throughout history, dance has taken many forms, yet one thing remains constant — there has never been a period in which dance was not part of culture, whether as a social custom, a ritual, a way of marking events, or simply an occasion for joy and entertainment. Dance can be described as an ideal and efficient form of physical activity, playing an essential role in modern human life by contributing to the development of motor, functional, and cognitive abilities, as well as having a positive impact on emotional and social aspects. What is especially important is that it is not limited by age; it teaches people to master their bodies and minds, increases working capacity, promotes a positive mood, and, most importantly, enables individuals through movement and dance to express what cannot be expressed in words

Dance and movement therapy, or Dance/Movement Psychotherapy (DMP), is a therapeutic approach that relies on physical movement and dance as the primary methods for exploring inner emotional and psychological states. This form of therapy has deep roots in human history, as dance has always been used as a means of emotional expression, ritual, and healing. Developed as a specific therapeutic approach in the mid-20th century, DMP has since become an important tool in contemporary psychotherapy, known for its ability to integrate body, mind, and spirit through the creative expression of movement.

In the 21st century, the entire world is turning toward recreation as a means of improving health. Physical exercise — and dance as a form of physical activity — plays a significant role in achieving and maintaining health. Being healthy is the greatest wealth, yet it is often not appreciated enough while we have it. Health should be viewed not merely as the absence of disease but as the ability to adequately respond to the many challenges of everyday life through its physical, psychological, and social

dimensions. In this type of therapy, dance is applied either as a preventive measure or as a means of specific treatment. The focus of treatment is directed toward neuropsychic hypersensitivity

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF DANCE AND MOVEMENT THERAPY

Numerous studies have been conducted in an attempt to demonstrate the positive effects of dance on an individual's health and quality of life. These studies have established that dance plays a multifaceted role in contemporary psychotherapy. Dance and movement therapy is a holistic approach that integrates the body, emotions, and mind. Its effects are not limited to physical expression but also include psychological release, personal growth, and the restoration of a sense of wholeness. Dance therapy is based on the relationship between physical movement and emotions, and in this therapy, dance movements and techniques are used to improve multiple functions of the body.

Previous research has confirmed the effectiveness of this therapy among children and adolescents with emotional and social difficulties and developmental disorders (autism, ADHD), among adults with psychological issues (anxiety, depression, PTSD, body image disturbances, and low self-esteem), and among elderly individuals (dementia and cognitive impairments).

Through the application of dance and movement therapy, it has been found that children with illnesses who attended dance classes read better, had improved concentration, and were more open to cooperation — they engaged more in conversations and activities.

Gillan (1992) observed improved communication through dance movements in children. Dance activities enhance psychomotor, cognitive, and socio-affective functioning. This therapy enables children to express themselves better, gain self-confidence, relax, develop communication skills, and achieve greater socialization, among other benefits.

A pilot study examined the effects of a classical ballet program designed specifically for children with cerebral palsy. At the end of the program, therapists noted that the children experienced enjoyment and satisfaction during the training, showed increased motivation for other extracurricular activities, and parents positively evaluated their children's participation in the therapeutic program. Dance and movement therapy has also proven highly effective for individuals with Down syndrome, as it combines physical activity, emotional expression, and social interaction — all of which have a positive effect on the motor, cognitive, and social development that is often impaired in these individuals.

Some researchers have also focused on examining the connection between feelings of pleasure and changes in neurohormonal status under the influence of dance/movement psychotherapy. For instance, Jeong et al. (2005) reported that, after a 12-week therapeutic program, adolescents with mild depressive disorder showed a statistically significant increase in plasma serotonin and dopamine levels.

For blind and visually impaired individuals, dance therapy leads to greater confidence and freedom of movement, improved spatial awareness and perception of the environment, as well as easier recognition of sounds and rhythm (Hećimović et al., 2014).

A group of authors (Koch et al., 2007), in their study *"The Joy Dance: Specific Effects of a Single Dance Intervention on Psychiatric Patients with Depression"*, investigated a sample of 31 patients (18 women and 13 men) diagnosed with depression as a primary or secondary condition. The participants were divided into three groups: (1) the dance therapy group (group circle dance with jumps), (2) the music listening therapy group (listening to the same music used in the dance therapy group), and (3) the exercise group (stationary cycling with a heart rate matching that of the dance group). Among the patients in the dance therapy group, a significant reduction in depressive symptoms was observed, while the health condition of participants in the other two groups remained unchanged.

Research results indicate positive secondary effects of dance/movement psychotherapy compared to pharmacotherapy. While medications may cause fatigue, changes in muscle tone, nervousness, and similar side effects, dance and movement psychotherapy has a positive and empowering effect on the body, acting preventively against cardiovascular diseases, obesity, anxiety, and more.

Neuroscientific studies suggest that dance and movement stimulate brain regions associated with emotions, motor functions, and cognition. Dancing activates the limbic system and prefrontal cortex, which can contribute to emotional regulation. Kattenstroth (2013) noted that dance increases synaptic plasticity and improves memory function in older adults. Kattenstroth emphasized that dance, as a tool

for enhancing synaptic plasticity, can be crucial for improving the quality of life of older people. This research supports the use of dance not only as a form of physical activity but also as an important factor in preventing cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's. Therefore, dance is beneficial in therapies for elderly individuals, as it not only contributes to physical fitness but also provides cognitive stimulation, making it a comprehensive approach to maintaining mental health in aging.

Among adults with mental health disorders, dance improves coordination and motor skills, communication, and self-confidence, corrects movement stereotypes, and reduces psychological tension.

In the largest neuropsychiatric hospital in Buenos Aires (Argentina), tango is used as a therapy to help psychiatric patients and depressed individuals who feel lonely. It is considered highly effective because it involves calm and measured movements that are not performed in a fast rhythm, and the social aspect of the dance, combined with its physical benefits, improves the quality of life of patients and reduces feelings of loneliness. For this reason, tango therapy is increasingly used in the treatment of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, social phobia, marital and sexual therapy, and depression. Consequently, tango has for years been used as a form of therapy to awaken (or strengthen) sexual energy among couples.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DANCE AND MOVEMENT THERAPY

The application of dance as a targeted therapy is still relatively little known in professional literature. Dance therapy uses dance movements to address emotional, cognitive, social, behavioral, and physical difficulties. It is based on the understanding that movements and emotions are directly connected, thereby creating a healthy balance between mind and body. As early as the 19th century, dance therapy was known, with the first written documents on the subject dating back to that time, but it was recognized as a formal therapeutic approach only in 1940. Dance and movement therapy emerged from various cultural and psychotherapeutic traditions.

During the 1940s in the United States, dance therapy began to develop as a specific approach within psychotherapy. Dance therapies relied on ideas from psychology, particularly theories emphasizing the role of the body in emotional and psychological processes. In Europe, dance therapy was recognized as a therapeutic method in the 1970s, and today it is practiced worldwide.

The pioneers of dance/movement psychotherapy are considered to be Marian Chase, Mary Whitehouse from the United States, and Elsa Gindler from Europe. All three were initially dancers who observed the therapeutic effects of dance in the participants of their dance workshops. During their professional dance careers, they noticed the psychotherapeutic impact of movement and dance on their students and, in collaboration with doctors and psychiatrists, began treating patients with psychological difficulties or disorders through the use of movement and dance.

After World War II, Marian Chase conducted dance workshops in psychiatric clinics with individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Mary Whitehouse worked primarily with participants experiencing issues related to modern life. Professional associations also began to form, such as the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) and the European Association for Dance Movement Therapy (EADMT).

Education for dance psychotherapists varies worldwide: it may be offered at universities as part of postgraduate or undergraduate programs (USA, United Kingdom, etc.), through institutions with a set number of dance therapy hours, or within psychotherapist associations in individual countries (Germany, Poland, etc.)

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK OF DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY (DMT)

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) is defined as the use of movement and dance in a creative process with the aim of developing emotional, cognitive, social, and physical integration in an individual. The primary goal of dance or movement therapy is the process of raising awareness and improving three key elements in a person: self-perception, nonverbal communication skills, and the range and quality of emotional experiences.

It helps individuals enhance their functional and motor abilities and serves as a highly effective intervention for mental health issues, including stress reduction and alleviation of symptoms associated with conditions such as anxiety and depression. This therapy is used to address a variety of physical and mental health problems, including anxiety, arthritis, dementia, depression, multiple sclerosis, autism, Parkinson's disease, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and others.

The objective of dance therapy is not the perfect execution of movements, but the expression of inner states through bodily movement. It is important to emphasize the connection between body and mind—our emotions often manifest in the body through various movement patterns, and dance allows us to become aware of and release them. Therefore, Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) supports the integration of body and psyche. Individuals do not need prior dance experience to participate, and the therapy is experiential, creative, and often nonverbal.

Psychotherapists in this approach frequently rely on Laban Movement Analysis to observe clients' movements. According to this framework, movement can be examined through four main factors: space, time, flow, and weight (force or strength). In terms of time, movements can be fast or slow; in relation to space, movements can be direct or indirect; regarding flow, movements can be free or bound; and in terms of weight, movements can be light or strong. These four factors correspond to the individual's internal psychological state: the use of space relates to thinking, time to decision-making, flow to feelings, and weight to identity. Consequently, different emotional states (e.g., joy or anger) elicit different types of movements.

PRINCIPLES, METHODS, AND TECHNIQUES OF DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY

Theoretical Principles in Dance/Movement Therapy

Dance/Movement Therapy is based on several key theoretical principles:

1. **Holistic Approach** – Therapy connects body, mind, and spirit, creating a unique dynamic between the client's physical and emotional state. The goal of therapy is to enable the integration of internal processes through creative movement expression.
2. **Bodily Expression** – Movement and dance allow clients to express themselves in ways that often go beyond verbal communication. Through bodily expression, clients can explore suppressed emotions and deep inner processes.
3. **Rhythm and Space** – Therapy focuses on the rhythm of movements, how the client uses space, energy, and breath, all of which can provide insight into the person's emotional state.
4. **Improvisation and Spontaneity** – Spontaneous movements, which are not pre-planned, allow clients to explore unknown parts of themselves, fostering personal transformation and self-awareness

Methods and Techniques in Movement and Dance Therapy

Movement and Dance Therapy uses various methods and techniques to achieve therapeutic goals:

- **Individual work** – The client focuses on the internal process through movement, using improvisation to express emotions and thoughts.
- **Partner work** – Dancing or moving with a partner allows for the exploration of relational dynamics, helping to develop social skills and resolve interpersonal conflicts.
- **Group therapy** – Group exercises facilitate social interaction and collaborative creation, fostering a sense of community and understanding among participants.

There are several key techniques in dance psychotherapy:

- **Movement improvisation** – Free movement to music, without rules, to release suppressed emotions.
- **Mirroring** – The therapist observes and imitates the client, building trust and connection.
- **Emotional dance** – Expressing specific emotions through dance movements.
- **Dance meditation** – Focusing on conscious breathing and slow dance movements to achieve relaxation.

Structure of a Therapeutic Session

Sessions can be individual or group-based, and their structure depends on the client's goals and the therapeutic approach:

- **Warm-up** – Involves simple movements that help establish body awareness and connection.
- **Main part** – Utilizes guided or spontaneously expressed movements that allow for emotional expression, exploration of internal experiences, or work on specific psychological themes.
- **Reflection and integration** – Involves conversation or other nonverbal exchanges that enable processing and understanding of the experience.

Applicability to different groups

Movement and Dance Therapy can be used with various ages and populations:

- **Children and adolescents** – Therapy is used to address emotional difficulties, reduce aggression, and improve social skills.
- **Adults** – It can help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as work with trauma and emotional challenges.
- **Older adults** – In this group, therapy can enhance motor skills, balance, and social interaction, while reducing symptoms of depression

EFFECTS OF MOVEMENT AND DANCE THERAPY

Movement and dance therapy has proven effective in working with various groups and issues, including:

1. **Reduction of stress and anxiety** – Through physical activity and the release of emotional blocks, therapy reduces stress levels and promotes relaxation.
2. **Enhancement of emotional regulation** – Through dance and movement, clients can learn to better recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions.
3. **Improvement of social skills** – In group therapy, participants develop better interpersonal skills, learning about cooperation and emotional interaction.
4. **Increase of cognitive abilities** – Therapy can positively impact cognitive functions, including attention, memory, and problem-solving skills.
5. **Physical and mental integration** – The integration of body and mind through movement enables clients to achieve balance between physical health and emotional well-being.

As previously mentioned, dance therapy helps individuals express feelings and thoughts. Through dance, the body sends messages to the mind that help process various emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Age, talent, and dance skills are not important, as the emphasis is on movements that emerge from within. Dance and music encourage suppressed content to surface, making the unconscious conscious.

The most important aspect is to create a sense of comfort for the individual and encourage them to surrender to music and dance movements, allowing suppressed feelings and thoughts to emerge. In addition to focusing on movement and body posture, other nonverbal signs shown by the client are also important, including breathing, gestures, facial expressions, muscle tonus, rhythm of certain movements, use of space, and more.

Body expression, whether in daily situations or in spontaneous dance improvisation without predetermined movements, is spontaneous and unconscious. Verbal expression is easier to control because word choice can be consciously manipulated, making verbal content more subject to alteration. Nonverbal signs, however, are usually truthful as they directly relate to the unconscious, reflecting suppressed attitudes and therefore are less controlled.

Therefore, movement is linked to deeper layers of the psyche, making expressive movement the best way to channel unconscious psychic content, which then takes visible form and is released. Movement is the primary medium the therapist uses for observation, assessment, exploration, therapeutic interaction, and intervention.

APPLICATION OF DIFFERENT DANCE STYLES ACCORDING TO THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS

For physical health and fitness:

- zumba, hip-hop, afro dance – high intensity, excellent for burning calories and strengthening the heart.
- ballet – develops strength, flexibility, posture, and balance.
- contemporary dance / modern dance – dynamic and varied, strengthens the entire body.

For emotional expression and mental health:

- contemporary dance, improvisation – allows freedom of expression and emotional release.
- argentine tango – has therapeutic effects, especially for depression, anxiety, and loss of sexual energy.
- dance therapy – used in clinical psychology to work with trauma and emotional issues.

For social connection:

- salsa, bachata, kizomba – sensual partner dances that develop communication, trust, and intimacy.
- folk dances – connect participants with tradition, community, and culture.

For the brain and cognitive development:

- standard and latin-american dances (competitive dances) – require precise steps and coordination with a partner.
- ballroom dancing for older adults – proven to improve memory and reduce the risk of dementia

CONCLUSION

Dance, due to its holistic impact, significantly contributes to the balance of mental and motor abilities and promotes a positive mood. It both stimulates and soothes emotions, which is why it is also used for therapeutic purposes. In dance therapy, patients are given the opportunity to exercise, reducing muscle tension and improving bodily system functions, which has a positive effect on both physical and mental health. Considering dance as a human need—manifesting the desire for pleasure, recreation, and happiness, as well as the pursuit of spontaneous activity and freedom of movement—it becomes evident why dance can be applied for therapeutic purposes. If dance can, through dance therapy, help humanity, then it holds complete meaning, especially today in the times we live in.

Due to the highly effective effects of dance and dance movements on physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health, a relatively young field in psychotherapy has emerged, known as movement and dance therapy, often referred to as dance-movement therapy.

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) is a form of psychotherapy that uses movement, the body, and dance as primary means of expression and communication. It developed in the 1940s in the United States. This therapy is based on the idea that the body, emotions, and mind form an integrated whole—everything that happens in the psyche is reflected in the body, and vice versa. It is used with a wide range of individuals, especially those for whom traditional verbal forms of therapy are insufficient or challenging. The main goal of this therapy is not to “teach someone to dance,” but to enable self-expression through movement and to raise awareness of one’s internal state through the body. Dance therapies help individuals to better feel and understand their emotions, express what cannot be put into words, develop self-confidence and body awareness, and improve communication in relationships with others.

Therapy sessions can be individual or group-based and are led by a dance therapist, following various structures (warm-up, main part, reflection, and integration), using different techniques (movement improvisation, mirroring, dance meditation).

It can be used to treat a range of physical and mental health issues, including anxiety, arthritis, chronic pain, dementia, depression, multiple sclerosis, autism, Parkinson’s disease, PTSD, and more. Dance/movement therapy utilizes movement and nonverbal communication, alongside talk therapy, to address psychological and behavioral issues that words alone cannot resolve. It is about finding an inner

space that we may not know exists or have chosen to deny, and giving voice to those experiences and emotions.

“Dance is the language of the soul—a movement that transcends words. It not only strengthens the body but heals the mind, releases emotions, and connects us to our own truth. In the rhythm of music, one finds a freedom that everyday life often conceals.” So, let us dance!

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TERAPIJA POKRETOM I PLESOM

Ćeremiđić Tatjana, Ćeremiđić Dejan

Sažetak: Ples se, od ljudske praistorije koristio u terapijske svrhe te je na toj osnovi koncipirana terapija plesom i pokretom koja se s vremenom razvila u zasebni (psiho)terapijski pristup. Psihoterapija pokretom i plesom (PPP), ponekad se skraćeno zove „plesna terapija“, razvila se 40-ih godina u SAD-u, da bi u Evropu stigla 70-ih godina prošlog vijeka. Plesna terapija je tjelesno orijentisana terapija koja se temelji na primjeni plesa i pokreta kao kreativnog procesa, a cilj je integrisati emocionalne, kognitivne, socijalne i tjelesne karakteristike svakog pojedinca, odnosno povezati tijelo, um i duh. Ova vrsta terapije uključuje terapijsko korištenje pokreta i psihomotornu ekspresiju kao glavni način analize i intervencije. Osim fokusa na način kretanja i tjelesno držanje, važnost se pridaje i drugim neverbalnim znakovima, kao što su disanje, gestikulacija, mimika, tonus mišića, ritam izvođenja pokreta, način korištenja prostora i dr. Terapija pokretom i plesom pokazala se izrazito korisna kod različitih grupa ljudi i namjenjena je svim uzrastima. Ova terapija može se izvoditi individualno, u paru ili grupi. Analizom dolazimo do zaključka da ovaj poseban oblik terapije ciljano kristi pokret i ples radi izliječenja i unapređenja zdravlja, te djeluje na opšte kognitivno funkcionisanje, ponajviše pamćenje, poboljšanje neverbalne komunikacijske vještine i smanjenje nivoa stresa te uticaja na afektivne procese kod ljudi. Spontana improvizacija u pokretu omogućava klijentima isprobavanje novih načina bivanja i novo iskustvo samog sebe, odnosno razmišljanja i osjećanja.

Ključne riječi: ples, pokret, terapija.