

Dance and Therapy: Exploring the Role of Dance in Psychological Healing



Jun Zhang^{1,2*}, Shungui Xiang¹, Chenchen Tan¹ and Tiantian Lu¹,

¹Tourism College of Zhejiang, Hangzhou, China

²College of education, Sehan University, Republic of Korea

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*Corresponding author: Jun Zhang, College of education, Sehan University, Republic of Korea

Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of dance in psychological healing. As mental health issues become increasingly severe in contemporary society, dance, as an art form, is gradually being integrated into the field of psychological therapy, demonstrating unique healing potential. This research examines the therapeutic effects of dance from the historical development of dance and the principles of psychological healing. Given the significant impact of this treatment, there is a need to promote this innovative therapeutic approach across society to enhance people's physical and mental well-being.

Keywords: Dance; Psychological Healing; Ballet

Introduction

In ancient times, people used dance to celebrate, perform rituals, and express emotions. In the early 20th century, with the rise of modern dance, artists such as Martha Graham and Isadora Duncan began to explore dance as a means of expressing emotional and psychological experiences. Their work laid the foundation for the development of dance therapy. Dance therapy is a method that combines dance and psychological healing, using physical movement to promote emotional expression, mental health, and overall well-being. Its origins can be traced back to the mid-20th century, particularly within the contexts of mental health and art therapy. The formal establishment of dance therapy is generally considered to have occurred in the late 1940s to early 1950s. Psychologist and dancer Mary Ann Hoffman and her colleagues began to incorporate dance into therapeutic practices, believing that dance could help individuals release emotions, enhance self-awareness, and increase body awareness. In 1950, Hoffman founded the American Dance Therapy Association, further advancing the field.

The theoretical foundations of dance therapy draw from various psychological theories, including Jungian psychology, humanistic psychology, and somatic psychology. These theories emphasize the importance of an individual's inner experience, body awareness, and emotional expression in mental health.

Research has shown that physical movement can influence emotional states and help individuals process psychological trauma and stress (1). In recent years, dance therapy has gained widespread recognition and application globally. Numerous clinical studies support its effectiveness, particularly in treating conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Dance therapy is not limited to the work of mental health professionals; it is also widely applied in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and other settings to promote social interaction and enhance mental health (2).

The Origins and Development of Dance

The origins of dance can be traced back to prehistoric times, when early humans used dance to express emotions, celebrate harvests, worship deities, and engage in social interactions. Archaeologists have discovered dance-related artifacts in various prehistoric sites, such as cave paintings and sculptures, indicating that dance held significant importance in early societies (3). The earliest forms of dance were likely closely tied to religious rituals. Many primitive cultures had traditions of performing dances as part of their worship practices. For instance, indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas often used dance to communicate with nature and deities during religious ceremonies (4).

Ancient Dance

With the development of civilization, dance gradually evolved into an art form. In ancient cultures such as Egypt, Greece, and Rome, dance was regarded as an important cultural activity. In ancient Greek theater, dance elements were incorporated, becoming a vital component of both tragedy and comedy (5). Ancient Rome combined dance with competitive elements through entertaining performances, leading to the development of various performance forms. Similarly, China has a long history of dance. As early as the Shang Dynasty thousands of years ago, dance became part of ritual activities. The "Book of Songs" records many forms of ancient dance, showcasing the lives and beliefs of the ancient people (6).

The Middle Ages and the renaissance

During the Middle Ages, dance was primarily popular in religious festivals and court activities. As society evolved, folk dance began to emerge, especially in rural areas across Europe. The Renaissance period saw a revitalization of dance as an art form, with the development of music, drama, and other artistic expressions leading to increased diversity in dance techniques and styles (7).

The rise of modern and contemporary dance

From the late 19th to the early 20th century, modern dance began to emerge, challenging traditional forms of dance. Choreographers such as Martha Graham and Isadora Duncan promoted innovations in dance, emphasizing personal expression and bodily freedom. Dance gradually transitioned from a mere form of entertainment to a significant artistic expression (8). At the same time, ballet underwent major transformations, developing various styles and schools. In the late 20th century, the emergence of new dance styles like jazz and street dance further diversified the dance art form, reflecting social and cultural changes. Today, dance is not only a performing art but also a vital means for emotional expression, social interaction, and physical exercise. Dance has spread widely across the globe, with various styles merging to create a rich and diverse dance culture.

Principles of Dance Psychotherapy

Dance psychotherapy emphasizes the close connection between physical movement and psychological states. Movement can stimulate inner emotions and memories, helping individuals physically experience feelings and promoting emotional expression and release (2). Dance psychotherapy is typically conducted in a group setting, where interaction and communication among participants enhance feelings of belonging and support. Social interactions contribute to improving interpersonal relationships and strengthening social support networks (2). Through bodily movement and expression, individuals can better process and cope with negative emotions, achieving psychological healing (9).

Dance psychotherapy and emotional expression in interpersonal relationships

Dance psychotherapy provides individuals with a non-verbal platform for expression, enabling them to convey emotions that are difficult to articulate with words through physical movement. This form of emotional expression helps participants release repressed feelings and reduces anxiety and stress (10). The fluidity and freedom of dance allow individuals to explore and express their inner worlds in a safe environment (2). Dance psychotherapy is often conducted in group settings, where interaction and communication among participants can enhance the sense of social support. In dance, individuals learn to collaborate and communicate with others, fostering better social relationships. This interaction not only improves individual social skills but also enhances their sense of belonging, helping them feel supported by the community (11).

Improvement of mental health through dance psychotherapy

Research indicates that dance psychotherapy can effectively improve individuals' mental health. Participants typically experience emotional changes during dance, such as feelings of joy, relaxation, and satisfaction. Through the medium of dance, individuals can effectively cope with and manage their emotions, alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety (9). Multiple studies show that dance psychotherapy significantly enhances individuals' quality of life (2).

Results and Discussion

Dance, as a unique form of expressive art, is gaining increasing attention for its role in psychotherapy. First, dance is not merely a physical movement; it also involves emotional expression and psychological exploration. Through dance, individuals can release emotions in a non-verbal manner, particularly those feelings that are difficult to articulate. This process not only facilitates emotional release but also enhances individuals' understanding and awareness of their feelings. Research indicates that dance can effectively alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression. Dance activities activate neurotransmitters associated with pleasure in the brain, such as endorphins and dopamine, thereby improving individuals' mood. Furthermore, the physical movement involved in dance increases heart rate and blood circulation, further enhancing feelings of health and vitality. The integration of dance in psychotherapy can not only improve emotional states but also enhance overall psychological resilience (12). Secondly, dance fosters a connection between the body and the mind. In modern society, many people often experience a sense of disconnection from their bodies. Dance, as a means of physical expression, can help individuals re-establish this connection. This connection not only enhances body awareness but also promotes self-acceptance and an improved sense of self-worth (13).

However, the implementation of dance therapy still faces several challenges. For instance, the lack of professional training and theoretical support may limit its promotion and application. Future research should focus on establishing a more systematic theoretical framework and empirical foundation to support the application of dance in psychotherapy. Additionally, exploring the integration of dance with other therapies, such as music therapy or art therapy, may open new therapeutic perspectives.

Conclusion

The role of dance in psychotherapy cannot be overlooked, as its unique forms of expression and physical activity provide effective avenues for emotional release, psychological guidance, and self-awareness. Research shows that dance can evoke emotional experiences, promote the connection between body and mind, and help individuals explore their inner feelings and experiences in a safe environment. Through dance, individuals can not only express emotions that are difficult to articulate but also enhance self-confidence, improve body image, and boost overall mental health. The practice of dance therapy offers flexible treatment methods for various populations, demonstrating significant effects, especially in addressing psychological issues such as trauma, anxiety, and depression.

As research on the effectiveness of dance therapy continues to grow, more mental health professionals are adopting this approach, promoting diversity within the field of psychotherapy. In the future, dance therapy can further expand its applications, particularly in schools, communities, and among elderly populations. With a deeper understanding of the relationship between body and emotions, dance will continue to serve as an important therapeutic tool, contributing to the promotion of mental health and overall well-being. Therefore, advancing research and practice in dance therapy and increasing public awareness of its value hold significant social significance and practical application value.

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