
Dance Therapy: Communicating Through One's Own Body

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Abstract

The relationship between arts and therapy shows itself as a dynamic process that acts at psychological, cognitive and social-relational level, generating an open communication enhanced and supported by the creative, symbolic and metaphorical modalities suggested by arts. The use of arts as a therapy can explore the subject's feelings by reducing his emotional conflicts, stimulating greater awareness and enhancing a better management his of social behaviors. Dance therapy, as a form of art therapy, represents an alternative channel of expression, in which the subject's psychological and emotional aspects are involved. This type of therapy supports and strengthens the conscious use of one's own body, which takes on the role of main communication and expression channel of one's own emotions and sensations, managing to reach fragments hidden and preserved in every subject. Dance therapy aims at solving certain issues through the body, using it as a means of communication. The body, like the word used in traditional therapy, can represent an intimate channel expressing feelings and emotions: we act on our body to break down certain mental barriers and unleash places hidden by the resistance through a metaphoric, non-verbal language of great emotional and relational impact.

Keywords: *Mind; Body; Dance; Movement; Communication.*

Introduction

Dance therapy is part of the therapies described as expressive and/or creative, where techniques arising from artistic languages, like music and dance, are used for therapeutic purposes. These techniques are based on the concept that the individual can improve his life condition and experiences through the impact that arts exerts on our emotional and imaginative abilities, by means of a non-verbal message: through the mediation of a shape, a sound, a movement, a person is able to understand and express his own emotions, moods and feelings.

The therapy/arts combination emerges as a dynamic process that acts at psychological, cognitive and social-relational level, generating an open communication enhanced and supported by the creative, symbolic and metaphorical modalities suggested by arts. The basic concept underlying all this is that a subject can grow, improve and increase his own experience, in all its aspects, through imagination and/or through the use of creativity, which is invoked and stimulated by this mechanism.

It is shown that the use of arts as a therapeutic tool can explore the subject's feelings, reducing his emotional conflicts and stimulating his awareness. It also allows for a better management of behaviors by developing socialization, and increasing, at the same time, a conscious view of the reality surrounding him.

Art therapy is implemented on three different directives: the creative, therapeutic and educational-didactic aspect; through them, it allows for the free expression of the individual by encouraging the perception of himself as an original entity, and at the same time, by

opening up the individual to the outside world, to the community he belongs to, allowing him to have a contact with the reality and the social context surrounding him.

The concept, the metaphor behind all of this, is that a subject can grow, improve and increase his past experiences through the imagination, or in some other way, through the use of creativity that represents, in this context, a very important factor. The notion of creativity is very broad and ambiguous, but in all cases it encloses a generic cognitive ability to "create" or "invent"; more precisely, it corresponds to the ability to link existing elements in an unprecedented and productive way: it corresponds to the overcoming of the codified rules, setting up a new mechanism that leads to different rules and alternatives. According to Winnicott, creativity represents a space for creation and production for the human being, which lies between subjective and objective reality.

Dance therapy, an art therapy, is an important re-educational resource based on the mind/body interaction, an interaction that reproduces the conscious/unconscious link represented by the functional unity of every individual. The movement in dance, its sequences, postures and rhythms represent a non-verbal language with an intense symbolic value that exalts the subjective and intimate experience of feelings, of one's own being, of the complete individuality. Therefore, in art therapy in general and in dance therapy itself, there is a remarkable component of interiority that justifies and makes understandable the healing/educational effect achievable.

It has been shown that dance therapy can favor socialization through a dynamic relational process mediated both by its symbolism, rhythms and movements, and by the aspect of collectivity implicit in the practice of dance in which every individual can freely take part and, in this way, generate an active effect on different functions of the emotional and relational sphere.

In the United States, like in Australia, dance therapy has long been included in the family of psychotherapeutic resources as it can support intellectual, emotional, and relational aspects, and in this sense, various hypotheses have been developed about the mechanism through which to get these effects. Among them, for example, the related social component has been referred to, which, through the interaction between individuals, can generate benefits at psychological level; also the message conveyed by music used during dance sessions can reduce the anxiety component and bring mental relaxation. In all cases, it should not be overlooked the fact that dance also includes a training phase involving a learning period in which, on the one hand, a subject establishes a relationship with the therapist, and on the other, in parallel, there is the rediscovery of one's own body in an unprecedented perspective. Last but not least, it should take into consideration the strictly physical component linked to motor activity, which, indirectly, can bring benefits also in the mental sphere.

Essentially, it is thanks to a series of correlated mechanisms activating particular motor, emotional, cognitive and social functions, that there are beneficial effects on the individual who rediscovers new and more effective ways of communicating, and that allow him to elaborate and express emotions, feelings and sensations that could not be possible to express otherwise.

The Body that Communicates

Dance therapy is an alternative channel of expression, where different psychological and emotional aspects of every subject can converge. Through the practice of this discipline it is possible to promote a person's well-being, or help heal states of disease and/or illness. This

type of therapy supports and strengthens the conscious use of one's own body, which takes on the role of main communication and expression channel of one's own emotions and sensations, managing to reach fragments hidden and preserved in every subject. Dance therapy allows reflecting on one's own actions, going beyond the defenses, and thus promoting a process of greater closeness and intimacy with one's own body. This type of path stimulates and develops new levels of awareness and the ability to get in touch with certain "emotional" areas, through attentive listening to feelings, body perceptions, and mind states. Through a more conscious search for one's own emotional experiences, it is possible to be more sensitive to different situations and contexts, aiming at a more relational functionality that allows for a better subject's adaptation within the company.

The specificity of this discipline is inherent in the body language and in the creative process, which are key ways of evaluation and intervention within interpersonal processes, aimed at a positive and effective individual's evolution and development. Dance expresses itself through body language; it represents a non-verbal way of communicating allowing us to reveal our inner part, our thoughts and intuitions, more than we could do through words. Non-verbal communication, understood as gesture, posture and movement, is considered a relationship language, an analogical channel that defines and gives meaning to interpersonal relationships, supporting and completing verbal communication by acting as a free and authentic channel, since, being less easy to control than verbal communication, lets intimate and deep contents funnel through. In this regard, the Palo Alto School has identified, in every type of communication, two different types of signals: analog signals and digital signals. According to this approach, communication flows simultaneously on a digital level, considered as the content of communication, and on an analog, body-based one, through which the relationship between the interlocutors is established. This type of channel allows us acquiring a range of information that goes beyond the content, and to contextualize, to attach meaning to the relational and emotional world.

Through the dance and the movement we communicate with our body, which represents a fundamental expressive element, a chance to manifest our feelings and emotions. When we communicate, we use all the modes of expression we have available (whether they are verbal or not) and the language; therefore, it is not just made of what is expressed verbally, but even more of what is unexpressed. This implicit level of human communication, given by the body language, is made of all those non-verbal signals that go through the body and act by strengthening, replacing, and walking in parallel with verbal behavior. Man can use a series of attitudes and movements with considerable expressive power like verbal communication: we communicate with the body, with the gaze, with the posture, with the inflections and the pauses of the language. Thus it is a more truthful and spontaneous mode, which, in fact, is not subject to control as it occurs in the verbal channel, and plays a key role in interpersonal exchanges. Body language, communication occurring by means of it, informs us about the way people place themselves and move in space: every subject tends to express, with his own body, the way he represents himself in relation to the other, in a given context and in specific life moments or periods.

The signals that come from one's own body can be divided into signals expressing emotions and interpersonal attitudes. As for the emotional signals, gestures indicating the emotional state highlight the interlocutor's emotions, which are mainly represented by anxiety and tension states. Sensations and emotions are generally expressed by the way people stand on, sit down, stop, rest, or place their body in space, or better, by their posture. Interpersonal

attitudes can be related to the physical contact: to the sensations it arouses, thus expressing the attitude that an individual has towards the others and the world, and also to the self-contact meant as a relationship that every subject has with himself and with his own body: a meeting with his own "being".

All this fully justifies the inclusion of dance /movement in a communicative, symbolic and therapeutic context, since through our body and movements we express our emotional and interpersonal states, thus triggering an alternative expressive channel revealing an intimate part which could not be otherwise expressed and explained to the outside world. Dance therapy helps individuals get in touch with themselves and with others through their own body, representing every subject's home of uniqueness and intimacy, a community participation tool, a means for recognizing his personal aspects and a meeting point tool with others.

Dance therapy aims to solve certain issues through the body, using it as a means of communication. The body, like the word used in traditional therapy, can represent an intimate channel expressing feelings and emotions: we act on our body to break down certain mental barriers and unleash places hidden by the resistance through a metaphoric, non-verbal language of great emotional and relational impact.

Dance therapy is considered as a different expressive mode, which uses the analog level, the body and the space to be able to access other aspects, thus introducing additional elements and information than the verbal communication modes. The analog language allows exploring emotions and the most intimate and unconscious feelings, avoiding the difficulty and, in some cases, the inability to express affective contents through verbal language. Manifesting emotions in such a direct and profound way allows bringing out all those feelings that are less accessible and, in some cases, unreachable; opening the door to a wealth of meanings and words otherwise inexpressible, expressions of the personal experiences lived by everyone. The body in movement speeds up the process of change, supporting the subject in getting out from old patterns and the ability to learn different perceptions, and experiencing different experiences through the use of one's own resources. The analog language moves, transfers inner emotional states outwards, through a dance space that may represent a "transitional area", as defined by Winnicott, where every person can enter into a free zone between objectivity and subjectivity; an area free from the limits and inhibitions of the rational logics, in which it is possible to feel oneself, to listen to oneself, and create alternative connections, making it possible to look at one's own image through new eyes.

Dance therapy: history and application fields

The most modern and extensive conceptual approach of dance was developed in the first half of the last century, when the United States and Europe developed a new speculative theory which considered dance not simply as movement or as pure expressive arts, but as a whole of wider contents. But we must wait until the 1950s when, thanks to Marian Chace, dance began to be associated with therapeutic effects.

Marian Chace, dancer and therapist, studied dance and choreography at the Denishawn School of Dance and, thanks to the influence that Jung's theories had on her training, she convinced herself that there was a clear relationship between body and mind. The starting point was probably the fact that Chace saw her students showing a particular interest in the emotional aspect linked to dance, rather than in purely technical aspects. From these assumptions the correlation between dance and therapeutic effect arose and, after a long experience in her school, in 1966 she founded the American Dance Therapy Association

(ADTA), of which he was the first President. The aim of this association was the search for methodologies to be used in the treatment of mental illnesses. The ADTA played a central role in the development, affirmation and spread of dance therapy. In a first phase dating back to the Forties of the last century, before the foundation of the ADTA, Chace worked at the St Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, where psychiatrists too saw the emotional, social and cognitive effects that dance had on patients, and thus, over time, its psychotherapeutic use was recognized. Subsequently, between the Seventies and the Eighties, the term dance-movement-therapy (DMT) was defined and recognized as a real psychotherapy procedure. Based on these facts, and in the following years, dance therapy spread outside the US borders and arrived in Europe, Australia and Latin America.

Chace's intuition fostered not only the diffusion of dance therapy, but also its development at other levels mainly represented by: the Analytical Approach, the Expression Primitive, and Maria Fux's method.

The analytical dancer Mary Whitehouse, inspired by Jung's theory, developed the concept of authentic movement that combined, in an original and unprecedented way, psychotherapy with the expressive aspect of dance. This approach, born in the United States at the beginning of the 1960s, was aimed at increasing personal awareness and creativity in the subject, stimulating all the related perspectives: bodily, psychological and spiritual. Totally spontaneous movement facilitated the contact with the soul, with the unconscious, which was somehow referring to Jung's concept of active imagination, where a tangible image of the unconscious was proposed, creating a form of functional interaction between the latter and consciousness. Whitehouse, with the authentic movement, succeeded in obtaining quite relevant results through understanding and communication of emotions, and through the ability to get in touch with oneself and with others. The technique used included a mover, a subject that articulates a series of movements by letting himself be transported by the most intimate and deep sensations and emotions, and a witness, a subject that silently observes him in all his movements, and that will subsequently control the verbalization of this experience. In this sense, we can say that the two protagonists, mover and witness, represent the conscious and unconscious that are in all of us, and that show, in fact, how a good and effective exchange between these two worlds is possible, although seeming so distant.

Another approach is HERN Duplan's Expression Primitive; the dance teacher, through dance, links rituals of tribal societies and archetypes to psychological structures. Duplan defined this method as anthropological and universal, because through the gestures and rituals it is possible to express the oldest and most traditional cultures of humanity, creating a sense of wholeness and connection through the history of the origins.

Of particular importance is Maria Fux's approach to dance therapy, who saw dance as a form of expression that belongs to nature, and to the very nature of man. Fux, dancer and choreographer, discovered the benefits of dance as therapy, experiencing firsthand the usefulness of this methodology after a period of deep and difficult depression. This experience led her to develop a personal form of application and techniques of dance therapy related to the spontaneous movement/dance; a form of creative dance, of free and spontaneous dance, which, through the releasing power generated by movement that recalled the ritual, generated spontaneously benefits both in terms of social inclusion and at psychophysical level. The techniques used could somehow invoke the analytical method but that in fact, unlike the latter, unconscious contents and psychotherapeutic component were not involved. Maria Fux could use her technique both with non-disabled subjects and with handicapped individuals, expanding her experience to people with Down syndrome, those

suffering from mental retardation, autistic individuals, individuals with psychiatric illnesses, and to the outcasts. Her method has been employed by professionals trained at her school, and her technique has been used in the world of disability by psychotherapists, physiotherapists and doctors.

Dance therapy, given its evolution and its history, represents a valid approach recognized worldwide. It promotes the activation and connection of different emotional states with different parts of one's own body by supporting a global mode of perceiving and recognizing oneself as part of a whole. There are several areas where this approach seems to be quite valid and functional, as it can be applied both in people who do not report specific diagnosis or medical condition, and it is suitable for individuals with mental and psychiatric retardation, those with Down syndrome and people with autism spectrum disorder. Artistic activities and initiatives, aimed at people with cognitive, sensory, psychological and social difficulties, are increasingly found in the educational, diagnostic, rehabilitative and training areas, which use arts as a powerful tool amplifying communication and aimed at helping relationships and changes.

We can say that, in these cases, dance therapy plays an especially important role as, thanks to its intervention, it is possible to promote and enhance everybody's abilities and potentialities. The use of this approach is focused on the enhancement of motor, communication and emotional dimensions allowing for a deeper understanding and greater recognition of one's own feelings, sensations and possibilities, through a reflective and creative learning in an environment of cooperation and fellowship. Dance, movements and gestures are involved in the discovery and observation of interior and exterior worlds, cooperating with our perception, attention and creativity; it allows us getting in touch with ourselves and with the contexts to which we belong. This is particularly important for those pathological conditions in which there is a difficulty in connecting and dealing with life contexts and there are inner, emotional problems hindering the inclusion of these subjects in situations where being and getting in touch with others represent an important resource. This approach is seen as way to perceive, feel and discover, allowing both to disabled and non-disabled people to understand more deeply their own peculiarities. By using the movement as a way for communicating, and by entering in connection with space, environment and group, it is possible to live an experience of strong union between body and mind, between the individual and the community.

The intent behind expressing oneself through arts, through dance, in therapeutic, rehabilitative and educational situations is not only to improve the subject's abilities and skill, but to express his identity, his discomfort, to make him feel understood, to allow him perceiving himself as an integral part of an inclusive and integrating path, by recognizing the resources needed to be helped and to help himself.

Conclusion

The main objective of dance therapy is to support people in facing emotional, cognitive and behavioral difficulties and problems, or situations lived along the path of their existence. The action that this therapy supports is the discovery and recognition of one's own resources and tools, which can be extremely useful to the subject in order to recognize himself as an individual able to deal with difficulties with confidence, walking towards objectives that aim at his own well-being. Dance therapy offers us a perspective that goes beyond the analysis of single elements belonging to the subject, turning the interest to the whole, to all the feelings,

thoughts and emotions of the individual and of the entire group. Through a therapy focused on movement, and through the movement itself, it is possible to externalize our inner world, our intimate world. In this sense, the therapy aims at the creation of a space, of a place that stands between the interior and the exterior world, between subjectivity and objectivity, and allowing every subject to express his conflicts, his difficulties, while searching for and discovering his own resources and recognizing himself as able to meet his obstacles. In dance therapy movements, actions, gestures, strongly symbolic are carried out, which allow re-experiencing the key moments of our existence, actions holding a universal meaning. The practice of this therapy represents the meeting of different psychological and relational dynamics that are socially and culturally important, a communication which takes place at different levels and that supports a wide range of interpersonal relationships rich in meaning. A suitable and safe environment within which mutual resonance functions can take place, through which every subject can work on himself through the group, in order to discover himself through his emotions, through others' emotions.

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