

Dance Movement Therapy and Its Impact on Psychological Health

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Abstract

Today's society has been struggling with psychological health. While medicine has shown improvements in mental health, other forms of therapy have been explored. Since the 1940s, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) has been a recurring topic among researchers. DMT is a therapeutic approach that ties together different dance styles in which participants engage. Therapists are encouraged to consider DMT for patients who suffer from depression or stress or want to improve their quality of life. DMT can consist of group or individual sessions where they build relationships with the therapists and each other through mind-body exercises. Four intervention types with unique therapeutic techniques also emerged from DMT: *The Chace Approach*, *Psychodynamic Dance Therapy*, *Authentic Movement*, and *Integrative Dance Therapy*. Overall, based on the papers researched, DMT has shown significant results in improving the lives of those suffering from psychological conditions. Depression, compared to stress and quality of life, has shown the largest positive results from DMT. Therefore, therapists are encouraged to use DMT in their sessions. Adults previously diagnosed with a mental health disorder have been most likely to use DMT; however, further research is needed in children. From neurological impacts to research on children, there is still much to learn about DMT, and researchers are encouraged to explore this topic.

Key Words: Dance Movement Therapy, psychological disorders, mental health, therapeutic approach, mind

Introduction

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) and dance interventions significantly improve health-related psychological outcomes. DMT can include individual and group sessions where participants engage in different dance styles, such as contemporary or ballroom dance (Koch et al., 2019). This therapeutic approach ties together mental and physical health by incorporating psychological and therapeutic mechanisms psychosomatically. Dating back to the 1940s, DMT became an established occupation in Western countries (Kiepe et al., 2012). Often, therapy sessions are led by qualified therapists in partnership with specialized dance instructors who usually work in establishments such as psychiatric hospitals, rehabilitation centers, schools, and other private practices. The patients can consist of children (Tortora, 2019), adults (Millman et al., 2021), and elderly (Jiménez et al., 2019). Often, the patients have been previously diagnosed with a psychological disorder and use DMT to help combat the symptoms (Koch et al., 2019). However, adults and the elderly are most likely to be a part of a DMT session specially guided toward diminishing symptoms of a specific diagnosed disorder such as depression (Karkou et al., 2019).

The lengths of DMT sessions vary, but most last 30-90 minutes weekly, usually at the exact location to ensure emotional security (Meekums et al., 2015). Individuals can participate in group or individual sessions; interventions can last weeks or months. DMT also includes interventions such as *The Chace Approach*, *Psychodynamic Dance Therapy*, *Authentic Movement*, and *Integrative Dance Therapy* (Bräuninger, 2014). DMT's flexible techniques and applications are broken down in Figure 1 to reflect the magnitude of its effects. Interventions apart from DMT, like these, use specific individualized therapeutic techniques and activities to

help the patients with their particular condition. The DMT therapists analyze the patient's movements to determine their emotional state and the interrelations of the body and mind (Hyvönen et al., 2020). DMT focuses on how patients can use their movement and environment and many emotional and physical techniques to better themselves.


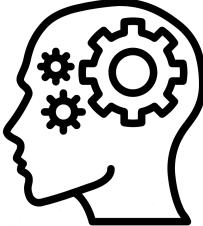


Dance Movement Therapy Intervention Types			
<i>The Chace Approach</i>	<i>Psychodynamic Dance Therapy</i>	<i>Authentic Movement</i>	<i>Integrative Dance Therapy</i>
<p>Developed by the founder Marian Chace, this group approach uses techniques such as mirroring and the Chacian Circle to prioritize fostering therapeutic relationships between participants.</p> <p>(Levy, 2005)</p> 	<p>This group approach uses body-mind activity and a psychodynamic perspective. However, it tends to be less structured. Overall, it shows that dance is a tool to express unconscious feelings.</p> <p>(Bräuninger, 2006)</p> 	<p>This approach, first developed by Mary Whitehouse, the founder, uses meditative therapy. Through movement, it explores the unconscious and is self-directed in a nonjudgmental environment.</p> <p>(Haze, 1993)</p> 	<p>Based on Integrative Therapy, this therapy integrates the processes of the other intervention types. Lived body concepts, dance improvisation, and dance compositions are essential components.</p> <p>(Willke, 2007)</p> 

Figure 1. Dance Movement Therapy Categories - information adapted from (Bräuninger, 2014)

DMT and Psychological Outcomes

DMT can potentially improve mental and physical health and decrease adverse symptomatology. Through improvements in depression, stress, and overall wellness, DMT has become a source of treatment for patients experiencing these disorders, especially older adults. DMT sessions can differ in length and the class's intended age range. The present article aims to show the correlation between DMT and psychological outcomes and provide readers with ways to use this to their benefit.

DMT Reviews and General Findings

Millman et al. (2021) report that DMT is gaining increasing recognition for its potential to enhance the well-being of individuals with physical or neurological conditions. The systematic,

comprehensive review of fifteen studies not only underscores DMT's potential in treating mental health disorders like depression and somatoform disorder. This mental health disorder leads the patient to feel physical symptoms. DMT also instills a sense of optimism about its future applications. Specific components included in DMT activities by a therapist tend to lead to more promising psychological results. Bräuninger (2014) experimentally evaluated the different elements and approaches to DMT on psychological outcomes for participants in individual and group sessions. The study identified successful DMT interventions, such as dance improvisation, spatial synchrony, and focused treatment sessions, associated with improved quality of life, coping, and reduced stress.

In a meta-analysis of 41 experiments by Koch et al. (2019), DMT interventions significantly enhanced psychological health outcomes. DMT was remarkably effective at reducing depression and anxiety and improving quality of life and cognitive skills. These findings reinforce that DMT interventions can benefit psychological health and motor skills. Age played a role in the relationship between DMT and psychological outcomes. Specifically, researchers found that children, teenagers, and seniors benefited more from the intervention than adults. Individuals without diagnoses benefited from the intervention. Furthermore, populations with medical diagnoses such as cognitive impairment or affective and stress disorder also experience psychological benefits. The following sections outline how DMT can support the psychological health of individuals with specific medical diagnoses.

Psychosocial Disorders

Depression

While depression is typically treated using therapy or medication, DMT has shown promising results in regards to treating its symptoms. A recent study done on DMT and Dance Intervention found that DMT decreases depression through its therapeutic mechanisms. These include mirroring, movement analysis, non-verbal metaphors, imaginative techniques, meditative techniques, introspection, and focusing (Koch et al., 2019). Apart from depression, the review also researched the effects of DMT on anxiety and well-being. When looking at DMT's effects on depressive symptoms, the statistical analysis reported a significant impact ($p < 0.001$) with a Cohen's D moderate effect size of 0.54. In adults 29-50 years old, the researchers also found a similar trend in depression and anxiety, with depression yielding slightly higher positive results from DMT (Koch et al., 2019). Similarly, a systematic review that studied the impacts of DMT on adults with depression also found positive results (Karkou et al., 2019).

One particular intervention by Punkanen et al. (2014) used DMT therapy to address depressive symptoms in adults aged 18-60 across ten weeks. Participants completed twenty sessions led by two trained therapists for one hour twice per week. The therapists incorporated dance improvisations, body awareness exercises, painting/drawing, verbalization, and writing. Statistical analyses reveal a relationship between DMT and depression indexes. There was a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in pre- and post-intervention depression scores collected using the Beck Depression Inventory. This is just one example of how DMT, along with other similar therapeutic mechanisms, can significantly benefit adults diagnosed with depression. DMT could benefit therapists trying to help their patients with depression find treatments for their psychological symptoms.

Stress

Stress, a natural human fight-or-flight instinct, can also be treated using DMT. While depression tends to show higher positive results in response to DMT, stress comes in a close second. A study analyzed the way qualified therapists used DMT to reduce stress and improve the quality of life (QOL) among patients (Bräuninger, 2014). A positive relationship was found between the interventions, QOL, and stress reduction. Each therapist used different therapeutic techniques in their interventions. Four DMT interventions were presented, including *The Chace Approach*, *Psychodynamic Dance Therapy*, *Authentic Movement*, and *Integrative Dance Therapy*. Specifically, *The Chace Approach* used rhythmic group activity, body action, symbolism, and kinesthetic empathy. Overall, these techniques improved expression and communication, which develops tools to help with stress or QOL. While each group was different, they used similar techniques, such as those presented in *The Chace Approach*, and all found positive results among their patients. The therapists also use different emotions or themes to focus on each session triggered by the patient, which causes them to pause and reflect on the moment. Overall, this study would encourage many therapists to consider DMT and the techniques used in the sessions to help improve their patient's QOL or stress management.

One specific example of DMT's application to support psychological health is in the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a paper by Dieterich-Hartwell (2017), the researcher outlines specific techniques by which a DMT therapist could support a patient with PTSD. The therapist often would assist the patient in grounding techniques, such as physical tapping, while educating them on brain functions and processes. Using these techniques, the therapist can connect with the patient on a higher level, which fosters a sense of security, which is crucial for recovery. These techniques enhance the patients' psychological well-being, which reduces PTSD symptoms. DMT continues to demonstrate how therapists can use it to better their patient's well-being and reduce symptoms from psychological disorders.

Another similar study on DMT was done to see how it impacted stress-related hormones, specifically in patients with fibromyalgia - a chronic disorder that causes pain in the muscles and joints throughout the body (Bojner-Horwitz, 2003). Fibromyalgia patients, which consist primarily of women, often suffer from symptoms such as anxiety and other psychological concerns. The study used a video method to analyze changes in movement patterns before and after a session. The treatment lasted six months, with an 8th-month follow-up period afterward, during which data was still collected. The patients consisted of 36 female patients with an age average of 57 years who were previously diagnosed with fibromyalgia, recruited from rheumatologists within the Stockholm Rheumatological District. However, at the end of the study, there was not much correlation between DMT and stress-related hormones.

The study suggests that more extended treatment periods may be needed to observe significant hormone changes. However, DMT can still help improve body image, reduce pain, and enhance body awareness. Both studies on DMT studied the impact of the therapy and stress, but there were different results. The first study found a positive correlation between DMT and reduced stress symptoms. In contrast, the second study, which focused on patients with fibromyalgia and stress-related hormones, did not find a strong correlation between that and DMT. A review of DMT studies found that DMT positively impacts quality of life and stress management (Brauninger, 2014). However, it has a more significant impact on depressive symptoms, suggesting that DMT's effect may depend on the psychological symptoms that the individual is experiencing.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the research papers show a correlation between DMT and psychological improvements. This suggests that professionals should consider DMT as a tool to relieve psychological symptoms. Overall, DMT has had the most substantial impact on patients with Depression. In addition, it can improve symptoms from stress and enhance quality of life. From building relationships with the qualified therapist to bonding within group activities, the patients' experiences were generally positive. The patients were primarily adults with specific mental health disorders. Four subgroups also emerged from DMT: *The Chace Approach*, *Psychodynamic Dance Therapy*, *Authentic Movement*, and *Integrative Dance Therapy*. Each approach used specific techniques to individualize the experience for each patient.

However, while DMT has shown excellent results within psychological disorders, there are some limitations to note. While DMT helps guide the patient in the right direction, medication may still need to be provided. More research on children and DMT also needs to be done. This could be because mental health is not as diagnosed in children as it is in adults. Neurologists also still determine the biological mechanisms by which DMT impacts brain structure. The studies could be narrowed down by considering how different therapeutic mechanisms differ in brain structure. Scientists could extend DMT research by measuring neurological brain activity and the cortical regions affected.

Overall, Dance Movement Therapy is a positive way to improve the lives of many suffering from psychological disorders. Therapists should include this form of therapy in discussions with their patients. It is most effective if the sessions are done consistently for a long time. DMT can be shaped in many ways to impact the patient and situation best. From individual to group therapy, there are endless possibilities with DMT. A dance professional to help guide the sessions is recommended but optional. DMT, with more research and time, will continue to show ground-breaking results for patients and their psychological disorders.

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