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Dance, Somatics, and Self-Care

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For several months, I would wake up with pain in the back of my legs, the ache running from the heels to the calves. 'I didn't stretch properly after my gym classes; it's just a morning stiffness,' I would tell myself, limping a bit as I went about my morning routine. After a quarter of an hour or so the pain would ease. During that time, I was taking step aerobics, kickboxing, body sculpting, and Pilates classes. Sometimes one, oftentimes two classes a day. The classes gave me a sense of community and helped me relax and refocus the mind – my days consisted in reading a large number of books, thinking, and writing, in preparation for my doctoral exams and a dissertation prospectus.

Over time, the pain in my legs increased, even after I'd started to pay more attention to stretching after the gym classes. I cut down on the exercise classes and sought the help of physical therapists and sports doctors. I was diagnosed with Achilles tendonitis on both legs. Each step hurt. 'The legs have to do with movement forward; take some time to reflect on where you want to go in life,' my wise friends suggested. Indeed, I had to pause and revise my habits around wellness, movement, work, rest, and nutrition. I had to rethink the direction of my research and writing and my place in academia more generally. My feet were asking me to take care of myself, change my habits, and reorganize my life.

Self-care becomes paramount during challenging times and during times of loss and trauma. Difficult life situations and complex emotions, as well as physical injuries and chronic pain remind us of the need to turn to and commit to self-care practices, so that we can start processes of healing and feel more connected and more ‘whole.’ As research has shown, emotional pain, violence, and abuse can manifest physically and stay within the body.¹²³ Difficult life circumstances might ask us to look for new self-care methods and/or bring new depth and understanding to the practices that we already have in place.

Can movement, particularly dance and somatic movement practices, help us with self-care? During the time when I was healing from my foot injury, a process that lasted a year and a half, I had to stop performing the physical exercises that I had become used to. Even walking, let alone strenuous gym classes, was painful. Committed to taking care of my body, I realized I had to find gentler ways of movement: ‘no pain no gain’ approaches no longer worked.

Physical injuries often lead us to try out physical awareness methods, or somatic practices. Somatics, an umbrella term for various practices such as Feldenkrais Method®, the Alexander Technique, ideokinesis, Continuum, Authentic Movement, Body-Mind Centering, 5Rhythms, Contact Improvisation, Tamalpa Life/Art Practice, BodyLogos©, and SuryaSoul®, among many others, invite participants to *feel* their bodies in movement, to notice how their bodies feel and what changes are happening inside.⁴ We explore how the body communicates to us through sensations and movement can refresh our mental outlook and enliven the imagination.

Some somatic practices, such as the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method, refrain from rigorous and aerobic movement, focusing on small, subtle movements and physical awareness in how we use the body – for example, how we hold the head over the spine, how we sit, sleep, write, and walk. Some somatic practices, such as Nia dance, SuryaSoul, and JourneyDance, place improvisational dance movement at the center of the practice. The dance movements in these practices do not demand for previous dance expertise but are meant to be inclusive and open to different levels of movement ability and comfort with movement. Attention to sensations and embodied movement are vital in dance somatics.

When I was healing from the tendonitis, I discovered several mindful, holistic movement practices. Before the injury, I had bought several Yoga DVDs and would sometimes use them at home. One of these videos was a Kundalini Yoga DVD by Ravi Singh and Ana Brett. Most of the exercises are performed in a seated position – my feet were able to rest. The practice pays particular attention to different breathing patterns, and some of the movements are quite aerobic, even if done in a seated position. Singh's and Brett's guiding and inspiring messages accompanied by the mantras and meditation helped me attend to my body, emotions, and spirit more holistically – the practice was not only about movement or breathing but emotional and mental healing as well. Listening to Singh's and Brett's voices and following the movements on their DVDs became a ritual that I completed nearly every night.

When I was able to put more weight on my feet, I started to attend Nia dance classes. Nia combines elements from martial arts, dance, and healing arts, and the classes incorporate some patterned, choreographed movement and movement improvisation or

free dance. I discovered that this practice is gentle for my feet – it is a non-aerobic conditioning method. My upper body and arms were expressive; my legs and feet were not pounding and jumping and thus not aggravating my tendonitis. The music and the movements nourished my soul felt beautiful and full of sensation and expressivity. After each class I made sure to massage my calves and the Achilles area. I would hold my hands on the Achilles tendons, fingers together: I was present with this area of the body, inhaling and exhaling, trusting the hands that can heal.

Self-Care and Sensations

Somatic practices offer many self-care benefits to both the clients of medical professionals and medical professionals themselves. One benefit is the physical movement itself. Whether the movements are small, subtle, and slow, or aerobic, fast, and varied in scope, participants learn to *be with* their bodies and physical sensations. They learn to notice how their joints work, discover the sensations in the muscles, and feel the weight and structure of the bones. They explore balance, alignment, sensations of expansion, contraction, ease, warmth, tightness, pleasure, and connection, among many others. Somatic classes invite us to attend to the body deeply and to spend time listening to the body and its needs. By paying attention to which movements feel good, pleasurable, and safe and which movements cause discomfort, tightness, or pain, we learn how to adjust or modify our movements and make healthier choices for self-care. For example, in Nia dance classes, instructors show different adaptations and invite participants to “tweak” the movements. When the instructor performs a choreographed movement that does not feel good for the participant, he/she is encouraged to make the

movement his/her own, to adjust it, to slow down or to speed up, to let go of the movement of the arms and just move the legs, to make the movements smaller or bigger. There is a sense of freedom in these classes.

Somatics classes move far away from the 'no pain no gain' motto. Self-care can mean stepping out of the session or sitting and resting. It can mean being slower than others or leaving the class early. It can mean moving with less energy than usual and taking frequent breaks. It can mean doing just 15-30 minutes of an hour-long class or deciding not to perform certain exercises or movements. Instead of asking the participants to be *like* others, to do what the others are doing, somatic methods encourage participants to monitor what is going on inside, physically but also emotionally and mentally.

The time spent in *staying with, being with* the body can be healing. Participants direct their mind's attention to exploring what is happening in the body. Gently asking the mind to notice sensations creates space for experiencing something other than mental chatter, racing thoughts, and feelings of anxiety and insecurity. We are likely to feel better mentally after a somatic movement or dance experience: we might have more clarity, peacefulness, focus, energy, or hope. 'These classes give me a boost. They relax me. They put me back in touch with something that is more real to me than anything else. I have no control over so many things in the world but I have some control over my body and what I do with it,' Leo Spitzer, author and scholar of history, remarked (personal communication, Spitzer 2020). Among the things beyond his control, Spitzer was referring to the 2020 American presidential elections and the Covid-19 pandemic, both of which were causing anxiety, exhaustion, and stress. Since the onset of the pandemic,

Spitzer has been attending my mindful strength training practices online where we learn to sense the muscles and the bones as we sculpt the body. We develop bodily awareness, calm the mind, and attend to emotions as we perform strength training exercises.

Refocusing the mind on the body and taking time to be present with physical sensations can have a calming and centering effect. We build not only the muscles but mental and emotional resilience and resourcefulness as well. Practicing in a community with like-minded individuals who care about health and wellbeing, whether in person or online, can further support us and motivate us to stay committed to the movement practice.

Dance and Emotions

Dance and somatic movement practices can help us access, understand, and express emotions. Dancing to different types of music and using varied movements can put us in touch with parts of us we long to express or connect to less frequently. ‘I can do sit-ups on my own. But there is something missing emotionally. I am looking for a class that nourishes my emotions and my soul,’ Epp Annus, literature professor and theorist, told me recently (personal communication, Annus 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Annus, who lives in the United States and Estonia, has been joining my virtual Nia classes that I conduct from Paris, France. Through music and movement, in non-judgmental environments that support authenticity, our souls and hearts can open and express themselves: we access parts of us that we struggle to make heard verbally and understand cognitively. We access other dimensions of our being.

Movement can shows us ways to feel differently – to choose a different kind of response to a challenging situation. In Nia dance classes, where easy-to-follow

choreography alternates with movement improvisations, we set a theme for each class: in one class, I set the focus on joy, with the intention of observing what movement can reveal about joy. As I was teaching the class and moved in ways that made me feel connected to the body, I realized that I was able to *choose* joy, instead of the sadness, heartache, and confusion that I was in fact feeling before and at the outset of the class. Outside of a movement experience, the instruction to ‘be joyful’ would not have resonated with me. Through movement, this idea became more palpable and clear: I realized that I have some choice over how I respond emotionally to situations and people’s behavior that are beyond my control.. I was able to *sense* this idea through the body, music, and movement. The emotional uplift that dance and embodied movement can provide is not to be taken for granted: it helps us face stress and anxiety, offers inner resilience, and protects against burnout⁵

Movement and dance can help find, nourish, or rebuild our self-esteem and self-confidence, which can get damaged during traumatic events or due to stress, depression, and anxiety. In a study conducted by Anna Duberg et al, the authors investigated how dance classes impact adolescent girls with mental health problems and internalizing issues. The 8-month dance intervention showed that ‘with the non-judgmental atmosphere and supportive togetherness as a safe platform, the enjoyment and empowerment in dancing gave rise to acceptance, trust in ability and emotional expression. Taken together, this led to an increased self-trust.’⁶ The dance intervention was experienced as ‘a secure oasis where creative movements were allowed and gave room for joyful bodily expressions.’⁷ The authors report that over the course of the intervention, ‘negative thoughts of self-doubt or incompetence were increasingly replaced

with feelings of accomplishment, having fun, and being in control. [...] The girls stated that they had successively learned to enjoy different kinds of dance moves and thus put more trust in their bodies' (Duberg et al 2016, p.6).

In somatically attuned dance and movement classes, the atmosphere is non-judgmental; there is no need to prove, show, or perform. This is a welcoming experience if we encounter judgment and criticism in daily lives and feel like we “do not measure up” or “are not good enough.” Finding confidence as a mover in a dance studio can transfer to other environments and help us express our unique voices and needs.⁸ We learn how to take up space, if needed, how to access our embodied knowledge, how to improvise and deal with uncertainty, and how stay present in the moment.

Conclusion

Dance and somatic movement practices are one avenue toward self-care. They teach us to treat our bodies with care, to feel its uniqueness, its vulnerability and strength. We develop an attitude of having the responsibility of keeping the bodies out of harm's way. This care taking can manifest in numerous ways, such as regulating nutrition, looking for solutions for intermittent sleeping and insomnia, taking time to heal from heartache, and revising or ending toxic relationships and emotional and/or physical abuse. Developing self-acceptance, kindness, and compassion through movement can increase the sense of respect for the body and help clients make healthier decisions regarding food, sleep, relationships, and mental, emotional, and spiritual health and wellbeing more broadly.

People typically gravitate toward somatic, mind-body practices when they are healing from an injury, similarly to my story of healing from the Achilles tendonitis. During these times, we feel more vulnerable and need softer, milder approaches. However, this practice of bodily listening and mindful presence with the experience of the body should ideally be constant and not limited for times when we feel more fragile. Somatic practices can be an accompaniment for a lifetime: they teach us to turn again and again toward the body – our physical home. Through somatic movement forms we learn how to be kinder and gentler with our own selves and others. By drawing attention to different parts of the body, the functioning of the organs, the functioning of the mind, the functioning of the muscles and many other elements inside ourselves, we remind ourselves that we are here, present for ourselves and that we are or will be ‘whole’ again.

References

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⁵ Saumaa H. Healing Burnout with Movement and Imagination. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* 2020; 26; 2: 61-63.

⁶ Duberg A. et al. 'I feel free': Experiences of a dance intervention for adolescent girls with internalizing problems. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Wellbeing* 2016; 11;1:5.

⁷ Duberg A. et al. 'I feel free': Experiences of a dance intervention for adolescent girls with internalizing problems. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Wellbeing* 2016; 11;1:5.

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