

Saumaa, Hiie. "Dance Therapeutics: Movement as a Path Toward Healing." *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, 2019, Vol. 25, No. 5, 238-240.

Dance Therapeutics: Movement as a Path toward Healing

Hiie Saumaa, PhD

Dance/movement therapy in the United States and Australia and dance movement psychotherapy in the United Kingdom are forms of therapy where participants use movement and dance for therapeutic purposes. Non-verbal cues, body language, gestures, and characteristics of movement such as the use of space, tension and energy give therapists insights into the well-being and physical, mental, and emotional state of the clients. Movement improvisation allows clients to explore their feelings through kinesthesia and uncover latent responses and bodily insights that might be unavailable through language-based therapy. The American Dance Therapy Association and the Association for Dance Movement Psychotherapy in the United Kingdom are among organizations that regulate the required education of dance/movement therapists.

Dance Somatics

A number of dance practices are emerging in the field of somatics, an umbrella term for methods that focus on accessing participants' embodied, inner, sensation-based experiences rather than on copying the steps and physical expression of an instructor. In several somatic practices, bodily movement is not necessarily vigorous: in Feldenkrais

Method® classes, participants learn about movement and physical awareness mostly by lying on their backs on a mat, and in an Alexander Technique class, they might learn about how to use the body efficiently in sitting, standing, and walking. Dance somatics, a subgroup of somatic techniques, employ dance movements, simple choreography, free dance, and movement improvisation. In a somatically oriented dance class, students explore their physical sensations, emotional and mental states, and imagination through being in motion. Participants move across the dance space; they dance individually but also in pairs, different size groups, and as a community.

Nia, SuryaSoul®, JourneyDance™, Tamalpa Life/Art Process, Soul Motion®, 5Rhythms, Body Groove, and Shake Your Soul®, to name a few dance practices, do not claim to fit under the category of dance therapy: these practices are not necessarily used in therapeutic and medical contexts – although they might be introduced and adapted to communities with particular medical needs – and their foci, philosophy, and teacher education and accreditation differ from those of dance therapy. However, participants often remark that somatic dance classes have a healing effect. What exactly is healing about these movement practices? How aware are we of healing qualities of movement when we dance? Can our needs for emotional, physical, mental and spiritual healing be monitored and developed via movement?

Feeling Well as We Move

As several contributors to the recent impressive *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing* (2017), edited by Vicky Karkou, Sue Oliver, and Sophia Lycouris, admit, defining what it means to feel well as we move is not as simple a question as it might

seem. How do we know we are feeling well? How do we know that dance could help us manage stress and disorienting experiences? Why do we derive more pleasure from executing and watching certain movements rather than others? Performer, dance educator, and writer June Gersten Roberts defines wellbeing as a sensation that is “internalized, but also vibrant in connectivity, perhaps in communion with other people, but not exclusively.”¹ For her, wellbeing resides in “sensuous empathy with places, memories, and music, through diving into the experience of colour and dwelling within the visual nuances and auric presence of particular objects.”² For author and dance artist Diane Amans wellbeing is a “sense of vitality, as individuals are engaged in activities which are meaningful to them and help develop their resilience in challenging circumstances.”³

What is healing in a somatic dance class is an equally complex question. I attempt to think through this question by relying mostly on my embodied experience, by exploring the somatic dance methods in which I have trained and which I practice and teach. I choose this limited route to emphasize the importance of embodied inquiry and reflection upon one’s physical practices as a source of knowledge. At the heart of my inquiry lies the question, “Is there a need for a term ‘dance therapeutics’ and if so, what possibilities could this term open up?” A distinction in terminology is needed in order to differentiate somatically oriented dance methods from dance therapy, which in the Anglophone world has become associated with a particular professional and educational path.

Somatic Dance Methods

It is important to keep in mind that each method in dance somatics has a different lineage, philosophy, and delivery of dance experience. The placement and the role of the instructor, to take one element, can vary. In Nia, developed by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas in the 1980s in the San Francisco area, the class is led by the instructor moving in front of the classroom for the majority of the session. However, students are not expected to mimic the teacher's movements but have the liberty to make the movements their own – to tune into their own sensations, to personify, tweak the movements, to choose the level and range of movement most appropriate for them. Students thereby develop their ability to mold movements and to listen to their own movement preferences and needs. The class includes free dance where students move freely across the room: the frontal formation disappears.

SuryaSoul®, created by Sabine Zweig and Philippe Beaufour in Auroville, India, includes two main class modalities: SuryaSoul® Soma and SuryaSoul® Spirit classes. In the Soma classes, participants stand in a circle or face different directions and follow easy choreographic patterns offered by the instructors. The Spirit class is conducted as a free dance, exploring particular foci, such as one of the chakras in Hindu tradition. The Spirit class includes student-led partner and group exercises that stimulate participants' imagination, movement creativity, and sensitivity toward their dance partners.

In JourneyDance™, developed by Toni Bergins in 1997, the facilitator's role is to hold the space, to intuit the needs of the group, to take them through a particular flow of music, emotion, and experience, starting from movements on the floor (crawling, creeping, rolling) to gradually bigger movements for all joints and body parts in vertical

position. Bergins describes her method as a contemporary movement ritual, and the practice has a potential to evoke subconscious knowledge. Insights into questions such as “what do I need to release in order to move forward in life?” or “what helps me heal a broken heart?” can emerge through dancing. The facilitator gently guides participants through elements of physical theater and improvisation, a shamanic dance, a prayer dance, and meditation. The facilitator does not demonstrate preexisting choreographic patterns and frequently only appears in the outskirts of the group, holding the space, rather than in the front and center, and offers guidance through language and his/her own kinesthetic energy when joining the group dance.

The Dance State

A vital element that somatic dance classes from different lineages share is inducing in participants what I call “the dance state” – a state of absorption in dancing and sensing one’s embodied self in movement. This state differs remarkably from dancing where participants attempt to copy the teacher’s movements exactly, what they perceive as “correctly,” and focus on the outward, visual shape of the movement rather than on sensing and moving from the inside out, from their own experience. Dance states give rise to experience of flow where the mental capacities of analyzing, verbalizing, and conscious thinking move to the background to give space for an embodied inquiry.

Dancer, choreographer, performance artist, and writer Simone Forti describes the dance state as “a state of enchantment. As in chant. Or the French *chanter*, to sing. As a kind of being be-songed. I have experienced it as a state of heightened awareness where one possibility after another presents itself as an unfolding path. As I rise, sink, and turn,

my eye catches the shadow play of leaves on the far wall, suggesting the next move. I think it's a state of being. Like sleeping, figuring out, or panicking are."⁴

Forti emphasizes the importance of dance state for a dance performer who uses improvisation to gather ideas. What her description and my definition of the dance state share is the idea that the dance state creates an opportunity to explore one's movement with curiosity. This freedom of expression can be deeply healing: moving the way that my body wants to move feels akin to discovering, developing, strengthening, and nuancing my voice.

Group Dance Experience

Somatic dance classes do not only attend to an individual's experience with movement but also pay attention to group dynamics and the environment. The role of the community is crucial in the SuryaSoul® practice: the circle formation is prevalent in the Soma classes, students often interact with each other as they dance, and the sessions begin or end with small rituals that emphasize togetherness and heartfelt contact with others. A simple act such as sitting back to back with a partner on the floor and feeling the support of their back as we gently sway side to side in rhythm to the music and jointly create a dance for our arms can be a healing experience and remind us of the strength that others can offer us. A class might end with participants standing in a circle: my right hand is on my heart and the left hand on the back (the back side of the heart) of my neighbor. As I breathe, I silently say inside myself, "I inhale love and exhale peace" or "I inhale peace and exhale love."

The creators of the SuryaSoul® practice emphasize that dancing is not merely a physical exploration but can also affect and give voice to the soul and the spirit. Their retreats and training programs are structured so that a particular focus of the day – such as the third chakra, emphasizing intuition and inner vision – carries over to the rest of the experience of the day. This practice develops mindfulness and attention in how one interacts with members of the community.

In Tamalpa Life/Art Process, created by dancer, performance artist, and choreographer Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin, contact with nature and the environment is paramount: an exercise might include, for example, finding elements of nature that resonate with participants in their immediate surrounding and incorporate them into a movement exploration to stimulate creativity. Often inviting students to dance outside, amongst trees, the sky, the air, and the earth, this practice underlines the healing potential of nature.⁵ Bare feet sensing the contours of the earth, the skin responding to the movement of the wind, and the body touching the textures of the tree trunks or stones can bring participants alive to their senses, physical sensations, and connection to the environment in profound ways.

Healing Through Dance

What exactly is therapeutic about somatic dance practices most likely depends on the needs of the individual participating in the experience. The freedom of expression, the release from having to perform to someone else's standards, particular qualities of music that bring back memories, images and verbal guidance, directing attention to one's

physical sensations, or being part of a group and feeling the energies of others can have a healing effect.

But one important lesson that somatic dance practices teach us is precisely to become more conscious of potential therapeutic qualities of movement. “Dance therapeutics” as a term can help emphasize and develop participants’ awareness of healing effects of somatically oriented dance experiences and encourage them to notice how therapeutic effects of movement can transfer to their lives outside of the dance class setting. One of the strengths of these classes is that they invite participants to pay attention to their needs on a regular basis and to treat the process of healing with curiosity. For example, we can tune in to the healing potential of movement before and during the class by asking the questions, “How does my body feel today? How does my mind feel? How does my spirit feel?” We can reflect after the class: “What movements or images made me feel better – mentally, physically, spiritually? Can I carry these sensations and images into the rest of my day and see if they reveal even more to me?” Constantly attending to sensation and inner experiences, somatically oriented dance classes train participants’ ability to monitor their states of physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. We learn to pay attention to what heals us at particular times and with our particular needs.

Medical professionals can suggest somatically based dance classes as options for clients who are interested in holistic approaches to the self. These practices might not be designed to provide release from traumatic experiences where more individual, nuanced, and therapeutic attention is required. However, dance therapeutics support participants’ wellbeing, create outlets for expression through movement, and by constantly asking

participants to check in with their sensations, develop their ability to monitor their physical and mental health. In dance therapeutics, movement, not stasis, and self-expression, not mimicry, is the primary path toward healing.

Hiie Saumaa, PhD, is a dance writer, scholar, and somatic movement educator. Her work explores interconnections between dance, language, somatics, embodied knowledge, and imagination. Dr. Saumaa is working on a book on the writings and artwork of the choreographer Jerome Robbins. She is a certified instructor of Nia dance, The BodyLogos© Technique, and JourneyDance™, and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, creative movement, expressive arts, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness. In 2018-19, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University's Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris, France.

References

¹ Roberts, J.G. in Karkou, V. et al, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017: 353.

² Roberts, J.G. in Karkou, V. et al, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017: 353.

³ Amans, D. in Karkou, V. et al, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017: 758.

⁴ Simone, F. *Oh Tongue*. Los Angeles: Beyond Baroque Books, 2003: 130.

⁵ Halprin, D. *The Expressive Body in Life, Art, and Therapy: Working with Movement, Metaphor, and Meaning*. New York, NY: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003.