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Healing Burnout with Movement and Imagination

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Many healthcare practitioners know what it is like to experience burnout, and we commonly see it in our clients. Fatigue, depression, quickness to anger and suspicion, reduced performance, alienation from work-related activities, lack of motivation, and increased frequency of physical ailments such as cold, fever or headaches – any and all of these can accompany burnout. Burnout can affect a variety groups in a society, from graduate students working on their dissertations to mothers attending to the needs of their children, and anyone facing the demands of their profession. Burnout can be the result of stress that has been accumulating over a long period, leaving one feeling empty and incompetent, lacking in energy, positivity, new ideas, and willpower.

With burnout, our clients have troubles with proceeding and leading their lives in healthy directions. "Time off" and a larger revision of life goals and habits are often needed to refuel inner sources of strength during the mentally, emotionally, and physically taxing experience of burnout. While many of us and our clients might have experienced burnout, understanding its symptoms and nature and distinguishing it from everyday stress might not be so easy. We might even be reluctant to acknowledge or speak about this experience, as admitting the fact that our batteries are running low might

make us feel like we are not strong, resourceful, and resilient enough or have not learned how to cope with stress.

In this essay, I turn to one area of burnout not often considered – the exhaustion of imagination. By imagination I refer to our mental capacity to project for the future, conjure up images of phenomena that do not exist immediately in front of our eyes, and to intuit the feelings and workings of the minds of other beings. I suggest that paying attention to one’s capacity to imagine is an important aspect of mental wellbeing, and that movement, for example dancing, can help nourish imagination and keep it healthy.

Burnout of Imagination

As a graduate student, my field of study was literature. My job was to imagine – the worlds of literary works, the experiences, feelings, and appearances of literary characters, the places where they lived, and the atmosphere surrounding them. I then had to analyze the works and build arguments about them, reading the texts closely and paying attention to details of language, structure, and style. I performed these tasks over many years in several academic institutions. During the year of my doctoral exams, where I had to write and talk about over a hundred texts, I started to feel unwell. “I have nothing to say about these works. I cannot see anything in my mind’s eye when I read them. These literary characters are words on the page; I can’t envision them as real, distinct people in my imagination. I have no arguments to make about these works,” I found myself repeating.

During that time, at one of the most prestigious universities in the world, where I was one of the 15 admitted students from the pool of around 750 candidates, I knew I was

entering a serious academic crisis, “a loss of faith,” as a friend put it. In hindsight, I realize that this challenging time was a burnout that manifested itself as an exhaustion of imagination. After many years of imagining literary worlds, reading three full novels per week for my graduate seminars, and writing commentaries on the books, taking quizzes, midterm exams, and final exams, and composing seminar papers and annotated bibliographies,, I had run out of fuel. I did not want to read, and I did not want to imagine.

This kind of burnout is not uncommon. My experience stemmed from my years in graduate school – for years I was asked to perform repeated tasks that demanded similar kinds of skills (mental skills of analyzing, argumentation, composing texts), working mostly alone, under criticism of my professors, and, as a foreigner abroad, without immediate contact with a supportive community. But burnout can manifest itself in any profession where the stress of repeated activities accumulates, the feelings of success in performing them decrease, and the activities no longer offer intrinsic motivation for the one who performs them.

My dance and meditative strength training classes saved me in that period. In a small, humble neighborhood gym on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, I found movement classes that paid attention to the body, the mind, and the soul. The body was free to move in the ways it wanted to and the heart was free to feel joyful or sad, empty or full. The music communed with emotions and vice versa. I let my mind’s eye wander inside the body and imagined the bones, the muscles, and the movement of energy. I learned to listen to the voice of the heart and trace subtle physical sensations, the body’s way to speak. These classes were somatic in their intent.

I practiced Nia technique, a holistic approach to exercising, where through dance, practitioners can tap into feelings of joy, connection, well-being, health, and pleasure. Nia (“neuro-muscular integrative action”) was developed by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas in the 1980s and incorporates movements inspired by martial arts, dance arts, and healing arts. Easy-to-follow choreography is interspersed with free dance. The presence of choreography gives participants a chance to try out movements they would not come up with on their own, which expands their movement vocabulary. Improvised dance allows them to find their own movements and kinetic expressivity. I also practiced the BodyLogos Technique – a meditative approach to strength training developed by Tammy Wise. In this method, strength training exercises are infused with the philosophy of Taosim, leading to an alignment based, mind-body approach to physical conditioning. Both of these practices embrace, educate, and increase awareness of different layers of the human being – physical, emotional, mental, and soulful. As I continued with these practices, I started to regain my strength, finished my academic program, became an educator of these two somatic techniques, and began to read and write about dance and movement.

Dance and Imagination

This personal experience with exhaustion in imaginative capabilities and the help of mind-body practices which allowed me to reconnect with different parts of my being in a holistic way laid the foundation for a set of questions that I now ask as a dance scholar and certified educator of Nia dance and BodyLogos, a strength training technique. Can movement help us use, expand, nourish, heal, and develop our imaginative

capacities? If so, how? What could be the health benefits of exploring imagination in movement? Can language stir imagination in movement – in the form of verbal instructions or metaphors provided by the teacher, or the voiced or unvoiced language of movers themselves? Is the kind of imagination that might open up in movement different from the kind of imagination that we tap into when we read and write?

Using verbal cues to engage imagination, increase physical expressiveness, or get at a nuance of the technique or the movement quality that a choreographer or teacher seeks is a common practice in dance classes. “Move like a bird,” “imagine you’re holding a cup of tea in your hand,” “imagine that you’re walking on sand, in water puddles, on the snow,” “imagine you are moving around on the Moon” – these are some examples that dance educators might use. Instead of studying the context of dance classes where the goal of such instructions is often that of perfecting an element of the technique or acquiring particular choreographies, what happens if we consider such instructions in the context of movement experiences primarily geared toward non-professional dancers where the goals might include greater wellbeing, joy and pleasure of movement, and enhanced quality of life through a holistic mind-body-soul connection?

Several somatic practices attend to participants’ imaginative capacities implicitly or explicitly. In Tamalpa Life/Art Process, a method developed by the revolutionary choreographer, performance artist, and author Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin, participants alternate between dancing, writing, drawing, and performing. Drawing the sensations, images, or feelings that arrive in connection with “dancing your spine” or “dancing your pelvis” – examples of prompts for dancing – adds a visual layer to the physical experience. Expressing these experiences in words – in the form of poetic

writing, fairy tales, or journal notes – engages the imagination in yet another way and can offer new insights into the participant’s physical and emotional state. Gaga dance, created by choreographer, dancer, and director Ohad Naharin, examines how participants’ freely moving bodies respond to the verbal language and images of the facilitator. In ideokinesis, originally developed as a mental practice for injured dancers, participants work on improving their postures, alignment, and fluency of movement by listening to and mentally embodying the instructors’ images, metaphors, and guided visualizations, without moving physically.

Engaging Imagination in a Movement Class

In my movement classes for private clients or small or big groups, I aim to engage participants’ imaginations in different ways. For example, I often dedicate a section of the class for story telling through movement. We typically begin by imagining a different place (I say, “Let’s go on a journey together! Where would you like to go, which country, city, or place? Are we taking the train, flying, swimming, biking, or walking?”). Through simple questions and movement, we create and enact a story together. We do not only tell it in words, we embody it physically and imaginatively. At other times, we focus on elements without stringing them into a narrative thread – we might be dancing different animals, insects or plants, imagine wearing different types of clothes, run under pouring rain, leap over puddles, imagine ourselves as circus artists, revel in magical gardens and wander at flowers and bushes or start to rake leaves and plant trees.

There is a difference between responding to an image, metaphor, or snippet of a story line coming from the instructor versus creating your own. Both experiences are

valuable. In a somatically attuned environment, the focus is on increasing the participant's physical awareness and mind-body communication. This should include creating spaces where the participants can come up with their own images, not necessarily or only respond to those of the teacher. As a teacher, I might create a starting point for imaginative movement journeys or contribute to the unfolding of the experiences by sharing my images, metaphors, questions, or movement suggestions. But a recurring invitation for the students to come up with, experience, explore, verbalize, and express kinetically their own imagination should exist. Ending the class in meditative stillness, I might invite them to turn their attention inward and observe whether any images surface, without giving them an image to follow, as is the case in guided meditation. Some participants are more inclined toward experiencing images that occur through embodiment, some less so – what is important to me as an educator is creating an environment where the participants receive the invitation to engage their inner eye.

The activities that aspire to connect imagination and movement are useful and significant for several reasons. These imaginative experiences can enliven us and suffuse us with new energy. They can refresh not just the body but also invigorate the mind. Examining the effect of movement on the health of the mind is of increasing interest in the field of dance studies, as evidenced, for example, in Sara Houston's *Dancing with Parkinson's*.¹ In group dance environments, movement can increase participants' abilities to empathize with the other, to imagine the feelings and the life situation of another person. As Miranda Tufnell states in *When I Open My Eyes. Dance Health Imagination*, "To sense and connect with the silent needs and messages of another's body depends on imaginative and bodily empathy."² In classes that aim to engage movement imagination,

instead of mimicking the movements of the instructor, the participants develop their own movement vocabulary and creativity. They move in ways they might not have in the past, which keeps them connected to a sense of newness, playfulness, and joy.

Exploring new ways to move – and perhaps to think and feel – through engaging one’s imagination can bring into the dance studio and into one’s life outside of it a sense of wonder. We might discover something new about the world, other beings, and ourselves as we move. As Francesco Dimitri points out in his *That Sense of Wonder: How to Capture the Miracles of Everyday Life*, we should not take the ability to wonder for granted: it is a quality that we should deliberately develop, particularly as we age.³ The experience of surprise, exploration, and fun are not trivial: they can be important in ensuring that the participants keep returning to movement classes and continue making choices that contribute to their mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

Health care professionals can increase their clients’ wellbeing by paying attention to and asking their clients about the state of their imaginative capacities. They can encourage their clients to reflect on what healthy imagination means to them and how they experience healthy imagination. Health care professionals can suggest to clients that movement and somatic dance classes can provide alternatives to stress, anxiety, nervousness, or depression, and can thus support the clients in their journeys toward greater mental wellbeing, ease, and holistic health that takes embodiment and physical sensations into account. But dance and movement can also aid in nourishing, developing,

and enlivening one particular aspect of our wellbeing – that of our connection to our imagination.

Hiie Saumaa, PhD (Columbia), is a dance writer and movement educator. She writes about interconnections between dance, language, somatics, embodied knowledge, and imagination. In 2018-2019, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University's Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris, France, and in 2017, she was a fellow at the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She has taught at Columbia University, New York University, and the University of Tennessee. Dr. Saumaa is completing a book on the multi-artistry and creativity of the choreographer Jerome Robbins. Her publications have appeared or are forthcoming in *Dance Research Journal*, *Dance Chronicle*, *The Journal of Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities*, *Somatics Magazine/Journal*, and *Routledge Companion to Dance Studies*, among others. 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.

¹ Houston, S. *Dancing with Parkinson's*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, Ltd., 2019.

² Tufnell, M. *When I Open My Eyes. Dance Health Imagination*. Hampshire: Dance Books, 2017, 105.

³ Dimitri, F. *That Sense of Wonder: How to Capture the Miracles of Everyday Life*. London: Anima, 2018.