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Anxiety and Somatic Dance

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Anxiety is an experience many people share. Racing thoughts and a racing heartbeat, loss of control, vertigo, inability to swallow liquids and foods, sudden headaches, throbbing at the back of the neck, twitching muscles, shortness of breath, and difficulties with falling and staying asleep can be some of the many symptoms. Can movement, particularly dance, help us counter anxiety? If so, how and when – during moments of anxiety or before or after these heightened states? In what follows, I will briefly discuss some of the research on this topic and explore some possible ways in which somatic dance and movement might aid us in how we engage with anxiety.

Exercise, Relaxation, Anxiety

Anxiety is a state similar to fear; in this state, particular thoughts and/or physical sensations can lead to experiences of being unsafe, unwell, and feeling unable to act in healthy ways. In their *Rewire Your Anxious Brain* (2015), Catherine M. Pittman and Elizabeth M. Karle point out that both anxiety and fear originate in

portions of the brain that are designed to help us deal with danger but they are different experiences: “[F]ear is typically associated with a clear, present, and identifiable threat, whereas anxiety occurs in the absence of immediate peril. We feel anxiety when we have a sense of dread or discomfort but aren’t, at that moment, in danger,” they explain.¹

Pittman and Karle note that anxiety can be initiated by the cortex or the amygdala. The pathway in the brain that begins in the cerebral cortex involves our perceptions and thoughts about situations. The other pathway travels through the amygdalas on each side of the brain, triggering the fight-or-flight response. Repetitive thoughts, obsession with doubts, preoccupation with worries and negative future scenarios are usually signs of a cortex-based anxiety. Anxiety created through the amygdala pathway leads to physical effects on the body. “In less than a tenth of a second, the amygdala can provide a surge of adrenaline, increase blood pressure and heart rate, create muscle tension, and more. The amygdala pathway doesn’t produce thoughts that you’re aware of, and it operates more quickly than the cortex can,” Pittman and Karle observe.

If the anxiety has no apparent cause and does not make logical sense, one is usually experiencing the effects of anxiety arising from the amygdala pathway. “The amygdala is on the lookout for anything that might indicate potential harm. If it detects potential danger, it sets off the fear response, an alarm in the body that protects us by preparing us to fight or flee,” the authors state. The physical sensations associated with anxiety might include lightheadedness, nausea, temporary loss of sight or voice, inability to move, muscle tension, increased heart

rate, shortness of breath, pain in the chest, and irritable bowel syndrome, among others.

Neuroimaging studies and neurophysiological experiments have shown that the amygdala can be strongly influenced by physical exercise. According to Pittman and Karle, “Exercise has surprisingly powerful effects on the amygdala, surpassing many antianxiety medications in effectiveness.” Studies by Conn (2010),² DeBoer et al (2012),³ and Johnsgard (2004)⁴ show that aerobic exercise can ease anxiety. Broman-Fulks et al (2004) have demonstrated that exercise can serve as a form of exposure that lessens people’s discomfort about the physical sensations of increased heart rate and breathlessness that can accompany both anxiety and physical exercise.⁵ Running or walking briskly during experiences of anxiety can be helpful because one is using the muscles that have been prepared for action in the fight, flight or freeze response of the sympathetic nervous system and the adrenaline levels will lower. Running, walking, swimming, and dancing can ease the reactions of the sympathetic nervous system as they involve large muscle groups in a rhythmic movement.

The parasympathetic nervous system, governing the “rest and digest” responses in the body, plays a major role in dealing with anxiety. When the parasympathetic nervous system is being activated, the heart rate slows down, the secretion of gastric juices and insulin increase, and the activity of the intestines speeds up. Jerath et al (2012) have shown that methods promoting relaxation, for example breathing exercises and meditation, reduce the activation of the amygdala.⁶ “When you reduce amygdala activation, you reduce SNS [sympathetic nervous

system] responding, and with practice, the PNS [parasympathetic nervous system] can be trained to intervene,” Pittman and Karle note.

Studies have reported actual changes in the brain when people practice relaxation techniques including meditation (Desbordes et al 2012),⁷ yoga (Froeliger et al 2012),⁸ and breathing exercises (Goldin and Gross, 2010).⁹ Deep breathing and relaxed muscles decrease the activation of the amygdala. “Slower breathing and relaxed muscles will send a message directly to the amygdala that the body is calming down, which is more likely to calm the amygdala than all the thinking you can do,” Pittman and Karle observe.

One study demonstrated that a combination of physical exercise, in this case dance, and relaxation techniques was more effective in lowering anxiety and depression than using relaxation therapy by itself.¹⁰ Dance researcher Peter Lovatt¹¹ has pointed out that the happiness experienced while dancing is measurable even after dancing and increased levels of happiness can be present for even a week after the last dance. Dance for therapeutic purposes can decrease depression and anxiety and increase quality of life and interpersonal and cognitive skills, a study suggests,¹² and research on the positive effects of dance on mood, cognition, and attention is prevalent.¹³

Dance can provide an outlet for self-expression, which might be particularly useful for people have difficulties with expressing their emotions and mental states: as one author notes, “With the help of dance, those struggling are provided with an alternate artistic portal with which they can comfortably express themselves,

utilizing the body as a tool to express emotions and communicating feelings they once could not.”¹⁴

Gaining Control through Movement

Performing an activity that demands the mind to focus on physical movements and move the body rhythmically can disrupt anxiety provoking thoughts and orient mental energy toward physical coordination and noticing bodily sensations. In personal communication, Jack Newsom, writer, entrepreneur, and one of the participants in my dance classes, noted:

Dance practices are incredibly helpful for relieving cycles of anxiety. I can get particularly stuck in my head with thoughts going round and round, and I recognize that I am creating the situations of fear which lead to moments of strong anxiety. One of the most effective ways I have found to get out of these circular thoughts is to move the body in some way. Not simply walking or doing stretches, but something that requires concentration and effort, as well as muscle coordination and physical force. I believe this works and is so effective because it forces my body and my mind to coordinate and work together, it brings me back down to the material world, and I focus, for the time that I am dancing, on the movement of the body, and nothing else.

Describing her experience with anxiety and grief, writer and Yoga practitioner Susan Leicher commented in an interview: “I was shaking like a leaf. Yoga got me out of there. I needed to get into the body and allow myself to shake. [...] When my father was dying, I felt complete hopelessness. I swam and swam and swam.

Swimming and crying and shaking all at the same time, my tears blending with water. Swimming calmed me down.”

In an interview, Kathrin Stengel, philosopher, publisher, and author of *Yoga for the Mind: A New Ethic for Thinking and Being* (2013), noted that anxiety feels like being out of rhythm: “If your mind is moving super fast and the body is stuck, you are not in rhythm. Going for a walk, dancing to music – these force you to have a rhythm. All of your being aligns in a rhythm.” Mark Momplaisir, strength training expert and author of *Strong Women, Fed Up Men, Defeated Sons, Broken Daughters* (2020), pointed out in an interview, “I find that when I’m exercising I no longer think about anything negative or thought provoking. I’m in the moment and it feels good and I feel in control.”

Lack or loss of control is one of the most prominent feelings associated with anxiety. As Momplaisir noted, “Anxiety usually occurs when you don’t feel in control, when you don’t feel like things are going to be okay, when you don’t feel safe, when you are not sure about a particular outcome. Exercising helps calming down the thoughts, the heart rate and helps breathe better.” The loss of control might manifest itself as a lack of control over a stressful situation or the inability to lead one’s life in a positive direction, but it can be experienced as a lack of control over the body itself – a sudden loss of vision or voice, involuntary physical movements, vertigo, shakiness in the legs, or an irritable bowel might make one feel that the body is unpredictable and unreliable.

Practices that promote kinetic awareness can help with repairing the sense of control. Somatic movement methods foreground tracing physical sensations and

noticing the effect of movement on the body, the mind, emotions, and the imagination.^{15 16} In somatic movement and dance classes, participants learn about the body through sensations and the freedom to move in their own ways.

The Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method©, Body-Mind Centering©, Continuum Movement©, 5Rhythms©, Nia, SuryaSoul©, JourneyDance™, and Tamalpa Life-Art Process are some of the somatic practices. In the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method, the movements might be quite minimal and done on a mat or in a seated position – in a somatic dance practice, the principle of connecting to our bodily sensations and moving from the inside out is applied to the dance experience. Participants might be moving vigorously in space and dancing by themselves or with other people, maintaining some of their awareness on subtle inner sensations of the moving body.

In a somatic movement class, participants are at the center of their movement experience: the teacher is a guide who holds the space but mimicking the teacher or mastering particular choreographic sequences is not the aim. Getting to know one's body and noticing one's energy levels and movement needs are central. Dance improvisations, typically a foundational component of a somatic dance class, give the participants an embodied experience of making choices in movement. "I could move this way, or I could also move in this way, or how about also this way?" is a realization that stands at the heart of free dance.

This freedom shows to participants that they have options; they are not locked into a rigid pattern. "Instead of moving to the front, I can move to the back. I can change directions and move to the left, then to the right," we might say to

ourselves as we dance in the space. These discoveries, available and clear to us through movement, are important because anxiety might be caused by life situations where we feel stuck and paralyzed. For example, a bodily insight of “I can change directions; I can choose my path” can be a major discovery for someone who is in an abusive relationship where she/he feels trapped, voiceless, and threatened.

During a creative free dance song in one of my classes, I asked the participants to imagine that they are moving with an imaginary magic sword in their hands. “What does it feel like to hold this imaginary sword in your hands?” I asked them. After some minutes of dancing freely with this image, I invited the participants to explore in movement the question of whether there is something in their life that they want to ward off or cut with this sword to promote self-healing.

Doing powerful sweeping movements with the intention of cutting toxic bonds can be playful but also meaningful on a deeper level – uniting intention, emotion, the imagination, and bodily movement might empower participants in their healing process. Participants might not necessarily be ready to exit abusive dynamics or situations that fuel anxiety after a somatic movement class but sensing their inner resources through movement might give them self-confidence and a sense of resolve. As Leicher noted in an interview, “If I can move then I’m free and then I have some control. If you can move, you can feel that you have some agency.” Starting with the body and the physical experience, participants can find new, healthier solutions and make different choices in life, which can ultimately lessen anxiety as well.

In a somatic dance class, there is no “right” or “wrong” ways of moving. There is always an invitation to move in one’s own way and to adjust the steps if the practice includes some choreography. Participants’ movements do not have to look like their teacher’s or fellow dancers’ movements. Somatic movement classes send the message that the participants’ unique movement expression, sensations, feelings, and the body shape and size are valuable and special.

Dancing somatically might take off some of the self-criticism, judgment, perfectionism, and embarrassment that can be a part of anxiety, such as the fear of making mistakes, being criticized or looking “ridiculous.” Practitioners learn how to not to judge or anticipate their next movement in free dance: they learn to trust the next step and trust that how they move is the “right” way to move. This atmosphere of allowance can promote self-trust and open up intuitive, kinetically based ways of knowing: we learn to listen to our bodily sensations and “gut feelings” as an intuitive guide in life.

Dance, Relaxation, and “Sitting With” Anxiety

Addressing the parasympathetic nervous system and calming the mind and the body are built into many of the somatic practices, which is one reason why these methods can be well-suited for dealing with anxiety. In Nia dance, developed in the 1980s by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas, many movement patterns are repetitive, done to slow or medium tempo music. Coordinating simple movements with breathing and feeling the body from the inside out while performing these movements can calm down the nervous system.

Dancing becomes like active meditation: the mind becomes calm and focused, in the body that moves slowly and breathes rhythmically. A meditation in bodily stillness at the end of the class is another common component of somatic dance classes. Lying on the mat, participants relax their muscles and bones and inhale and exhale slowly and deeply, sensing their abdominals lift and lower and the lungs fill and empty to the rhythm of their breathing. Listening to affirming words or going on an inner journey during a guided meditation that creates hopeful, positive imaginative experiences can further calm down the nervous system.

Monica Bennett, health coach and somatic movement practitioner underlines the need to take time to understand anxiety and allow it to exist. “I teach people to sit with it. We want to go to the quickest solution – feeling anxiety is painful. We want to not to feel it. We feel anxiety in our body. It will show up louder and louder unless we allow it to express itself,” she noted in an interview. She recommends asking questions about anxiety: “Where in my body do I feel it? Is it in the head, in the belly, in the eyes? Breathe through it, give it some space. What am I feeling anxious about? Write about it.” “If you have understanding, you have clarity. If you have clarity, you know what the next step is. If you have confusion and doubt, you go to fear. From fear you go to anxiety,” she emphasizes.

Patterns of thinking, like physical holding patterns in the muscles, run deep and to change them, we need to constantly repeat the new patterns we are trying to cultivate. Bennett noted in an interview, “I’m feeling anxious today – what can I do? I can do some movement. On a daily basis, over and over again. Make it into a routine that feels good. We have to give anxiety some movement, some space so we can

transform it. Anxiety and stress make us contract physically and mentally; we get stuck. When you feel good, you are expanding. You feel in abundance, joy, in creativity,” she notes. “Today I take an opportunity to move” is a mantra Bennett lives by and recommends to her clients.

Conclusion

Working on the mind and the body in order to understand and live with anxiety takes time, patience, compassion, and practice. Medical professionals might consider suggesting somatic or mind-body practices to their clients who are struggling with anxiety. Anxiety can be viewed as a “mind-body” phenomenon in that to understand it, we need to learn to look deeply into the kinds of thoughts we think as well as learn to notice and decode what the body is trying to communicate. It is useful to pay attention to the kinds of thoughts that surge into the mind during the states of anxiety, face them, write them down, and find alternative, more positive, healing, and hopeful thoughts to replace them.

Somatic movement practices support the healing journey, refresh the mind, calm the nervous system, make us feel the aliveness and the energy of the body in movement, and help us find inner joy, strength, and insights that come to us while we move. These bodily methods train non-judgmental awareness of physical sensations: the art of noticing can be applied to thoughts as well. We learn to detect thoughts and situations that trigger anxiety as well as notice subtle shifts toward new, healthier modes of thinking and responding to life situations and other people’s behavior.

By way of conclusion, I offer readers a movement exploration that calls on the imagination as well. It is an example of allowing anxiety to express itself without fear and resistance. In a safe and comfortable space, with or without music, what happened if we tried to dance with this force called anxiety? We could envision it as an imaginary dance partner. How would it move, what would be its size, and what would it be like to dance with it? Is it trying to tell us anything? We could also imagine this force as inside of us – where do you feel it in the body and how does it make you move? Is it possible that this force is here to protect us somehow, to guide us out of harmful situations or patterns of thinking and move us toward a new state of being in our lives?

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