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Dance Emotions

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Emotional wellbeing is an important aspect of health. Loss, grief, anxiety, joy, shame, fragility, fear, jealousy, sadness, anger, frustration, excitement, compassion, and tenderness – we experience these and many other emotions. How to navigate through emotionally difficult periods or tap into the power of emotions that can heal and uplift us? What is the role of dance in emotional wellbeing? Can dance, particularly somatic dance, help us connect to, understand, and regulate our emotions? How?

By somatic dance I refer to movement practices in which participants have the freedom to move according to their own comfort and needs.¹ Copying the movements of the instructor and rehearsing particular steps are not the goals. Rather, we learn about our own selves through movement – our physical sensations, thoughts, the imagination, creativity, energy levels, mood, and emotions. Somatic dance practices include Nia©, JourneyDance™, SuryaSoul©, the Tamalpa Life/Art Process©, Gaga, contact improvisation, 5Rhythms©, Body-Mind Centering©, and Continuum, to name a few. Previous dance background is not expected. These

methods do not aim to prepare participants for performance, although aspects of performance or witnessing are sometimes used in these practices.² Current and former dance professionals can also use somatic practices as a foundation or inspiration for their work as dancers and/or choreographers.

Releasing Emotions

In somatic dance classes, participants search for pleasure, joy, and resilience through dancing. We do movements that feel good or new and different for the body – flowy movements with the arms and the upper body, sinuous movements with the spine, extending the body toward the sky or bending it close to the earth. Chopping, skipping, jumping, rolling the arms, flickering the fingers, and countless other movements make participants feel creative and able in the body. Sometimes dancers act out imaginary story lines through movement, skip, run, and let the body experience movements that feel lighthearted, fun, and carefree. These movements, accompanied by music, can help us put aside stress and challenging life circumstances for a certain amount of time, so that we can gather up positivity, resilience, and new energy to face them.

Dancing in a non-judgmental environment, without the need to “look perfect” for anyone and tapping into the energy of the music can be liberating: we allow ourselves to be who we are, in movement. One of the participants in my dance classes, Marie Stephenson, noted: “I feel very liberated while I’m dancing and it allows me to let go of the constraints of daily life. When I dance I feel like I can enter

my deeper being and connect to a feeling of joy and lightness. It's really a moment to tune into my free being and simply have fun."

Even though many somatic dance practices, such as Nia, emphasize the joy and pleasure of movement, other emotions can naturally surface as well. Music that we not only listen to, but also move to, might allow us to tap into deep areas of the psyche and memories. During one emotionally difficult period, for about a year, I would cry in each dance class that I took. Others did not necessarily see it. My body was moving, following the rhythm, catching the waves of the undulations, and tapping into the energy of the staccato like, jolting, bursting, and angular movements. At the same time, tears were rolling down my cheeks. Dance can give us solace during times of emotional turmoil or difficulty..

Dancing can bring emotional release without the mover necessarily feeling the need to explain the situation verbally. In the JourneyDance practice, participants do not rush to talk to the person who is experiencing an emotional wave. Either a participant or the instructor holds the dancer in their arms, typically standing behind the participant or in a seated position, so that the person experiencing the emotional release can lean against the supporter. This "JourneyDance hug" is a part of how the community attends to the needs of an individual. No words are being exchanged: the mover can lean into the nonverbal support of the other and feel accepted and included. In my Nia dance classes, I often notice that the participants have tears in their eyes during the lyrical cooldown songs during which we do simple, slower, gentle movements. There is a release, a letting go, or a moment of

emotional healing, the exact nature of which often stays in the private experience of the dancer.

Expressing Ourselves to Ourselves

“How are you feeling?” is a seemingly simple question but understanding what the emotion is exactly might not be so easy as several emotions or alternating emotions can move through the consciousness rapidly. Dancing can create a space and time to explore what we feel. Kathrin Stengel, philosopher and co-author of *Yoga for the Mind* (2013), noted in an interview with the author that she is able to access deeper emotions only through dancing while at other times thoughts can be overpowering: “When you move, you shut down the ‘radio station’ of constant thoughts, a stream of language. You are more available to emotion. You start to feel it.” Wells of deep sadness and longing might emerge, as well as gratitude, empathy, and compassion. Or we might feel relaxed and enjoy being in a different mental state. Line Scamps, a Nia dance practitioner, noted that “trance rhythms make me dive inside myself and disconnect my thoughts to be only in the pulse and live the present moment. It is very pleasant not to think anymore!”

“When I dance, I can feel what I feel. I am not accountable to anyone else. I find inner clarity about my emotions myself first. This is dancing the emotions – I understand my feelings first before I put my emotions on others and hold them responsible for something that they are maybe not even responsible for,” Stengel added. Her comment points to the idea that dance offers a space where we can feel the feelings first rather than describe them in language. Allowing ourselves to feel

these emotions and physically express them in movement can help in the healing process: we put the emotions into movement rather than let them remain unexpressed and unattended to. Online dance classes offer a valuable option for participants who feel more comfortable exploring their emotions through movement and sounds in the privacy of their own homes rather than in a group environment where they might hold back.

Dancing can help us connect to challenging emotions mindfully and with a sense of self-care. A participant in my Nia dance classes noted:

I discovered Nia many years ago and took to it immediately. It was fun and felt mostly unstructured. It wasn't until my son started going through a divorce that I used Nia to physically express my sadness and anger.

Consciously and literally, I used my hands to "brush" anger and disappointment off my body. Stomping my feet and using my fists helped me express what I was feeling. When I became upset or angry I would say to myself, "don't think about it now, you'll deal with it later, in Nia." It's not that I could think about how I felt or talk about it, but dancing it out and expressing my feelings with my whole body was so much more effective and satisfying. I didn't avoid how I was feeling – I just knew that dancing it out would help me.

Some months later, she noticed that these movements did not resonate with her anymore. "I knew those feelings had been worked out," she said. Currently, she uses Nia to express joy and gratitude. "There too, dancing my joy and gratitude is a much more significant experience than simply thinking it," she observed. For her,

dancing is a time dedicated to “expressing myself to myself and exploring how I am feeling.”

We can use dancing to regulate the mood and have a more cheerful disposition. Somatic movement educator Anke Feuchter said in an interview with the author that she takes care of her emotional wellbeing through dancing:

Dancing affects my emotions, mostly when I am not in a very good mood in the beginning. While dancing, joy and positive emotions take over. It is the mix of music and the awareness of my body that always generates a feeling of being alive and grateful for all the opportunities. I witness those changes while dancing; they are conscious. Dancing is a very powerful tool for me every time I need a change in my emotional state.

Dancing gives an “emotional high” because both the exercise and emotional responses to music can increase the release of dopamine in different parts of the brain. “Low levels of dopamine are associated with feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, fatigue, demotivation, pain, lack of energy and mood swings,” explains Peter Lovatt, psychologist, dancer, and author of *The Dance Cure: The Surprising Science to Being Smarter, Stronger, Happier* (2021).³ With increased levels of dopamine, some of the negative feelings decrease. Putting on a favorite song and dancing offers a healthy way to boost the mood, an alternative to snacking, scrolling on social media, dozing, being irritable with others, and other similar options.

Watching others dance can evoke emotions in the observers. In one of the Nia classes, we explored the eyes and the gaze – how do we use the eyes while dancing and where do we direct the gaze? For the cooldown songs, I asked the

students to partner with someone: I put on a slower, softer song, and one of the partners moved to it while the other was witnessing, holding the space for the mover and giving him/her their undivided attention. After a few minutes we changed the roles. Seeing dancers of different ages and movement capabilities, expressing themselves authentically was a touching and inspiring experience: the movements reflected their vulnerability and strength. In the words of Feuchter, “Witnessing others when they dance generates a strong sense of what we all share – it makes every body so rich and human when it moves to music, when you see feelings expressed through the dance. There is a kind of empathy that connects to the emotions expressed and when I get the impression to know those emotions myself, I feel them too in that moment. Watching people dance is a strong connection to life itself.”

Rehearsing Emotions

Dancing allows us to rehearse roles and mental stances that might not be readily available for us in daily life. A timid person who has troubles asserting him/herself can practice standing, moving, and dancing with confidence and willpower. Nia dance, a soulful combination of self-guided free dance and easy-to-follow choreography, includes elements inspired by martial arts such as Taekwondo, Aikido, and Tai-Chi. The power and agility of Taekwondo punches and kicks, the calm rootedness of Tai-Chi, and the fluidity of Aikido can put the practitioners in touch with outer and inner power that they did not know they had.

Punches and kicks, accompanied with shouting “ha,” “yes,” or “no” can evoke emotions and embodied feelings of empowerment and self-confidence.

The kicks and punches often feel “un-natural” to female participants as they are easily associated with “aggression” and “masculine movements.” Even though Nia is not a self-defense practice and the martial arts movements are done in the context of dance and self-expression, one of my students, a 65-year old woman, told me that the martial arts elements have made her feel more confident when walking on the streets of New York City. She now believes that her body can communicate the stance of “do not mess with me.” While many of my Nia students are less inclined to go to a martial arts class, they might receive some these emotional benefits of increased self-empowerment in the dance-versions of the martial arts.

In the words of neuroscientists Julia F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang, authors of *Dancing Medicine: The Science of How Moving to a Beat is Good for Body, Brain, and Soul* (2021), dancing is “a wonderful method for ‘trying on’ emotions. The dance floor is perfect for that in the floor we can feel whatever we like. [...] We can switch from feeling sad or furious to feeling happy or cheerful in a dance, and adolescents might feel affirmed while posing and looking important during a hip-hop song.”⁴ We can enrich our movement vocabulary and make the dance experience more playful by “acting out” emotions: we do not necessarily have to feel a particular emotion ourselves but could imagine and act out the movements of someone who is feeling surprise, frustration, hopefulness, or being freshly in love. Moving ungracefully, being “silly,” clownish, or “over the top” can be emotionally

healing and liberating as well – new roles and movements can dislodge habitual patterns of moving, thinking, and behaving.

Femme!

A number of somatic dance forms focus on noticing physical sensations – a specific attention to emotions might not necessarily be at the forefront of the practice. *Femme!*, a somatic movement practice created by Bernadette Pleasant, centers on exploring emotions through movement.⁵ Pleasant refers to the practice as a “homecoming,” as a chance to remember, again and again, what it must have felt like to live in a world where sensations, not language, was the primary experience, as a toddler. “People think that they need to already know how to do it, how to dance. But no one taught a toddler how to move,” Pleasant said in an interview with the author. “We move what you feel and add sounds,” she noted. In *Femme!*, participants connect to their anger and joy, express with their hands, face, the skin, and the whole body. They grunt, exhale loudly, utter sensual sounds, whisper, and yell. The practice is meant for both women and men and can also be adapted to children and young adults.

The participants dance freely to the accompaniment of live African drums, with no pre-given choreography. They go through a journey of emotions such as joy, grief, anger, desire, confidence, and flirt. “This is a 90-minute experience, an emotional tour. We’re going to visit some emotional tour stops, and the drums take us there. You can be yourself without judgment. Go visit this emotion, make a sound, move the animal body,” Pleasant described the practice. What would it feel like to

dance joy? To dance desire or being desired? The instructor guides the participants through verbal cues, open-ended questions, and affirmations. One of the goals is to release guilt, shame, and self-judgment that we often feel about our emotions, our movements, and the body itself.

The Femme! practice helps people discover and find an outlet for their emotions in a safe container of a community of movers. Pleasant created this method out of her own need to heal and take up space. Recollecting an experience in her youth when her family did not respond to her joy after having won a competition, Pleasant noted, "I realized that there was no space for my joy. My joy was tempered. I had joy that I was unable to share. I started to notice where joy cannot be expressed. Joy gets dimmed down so as not to be annoying."

Pleasant draws our attention to the way in which we modify and police our emotions in everyday life: "Is my emotion okay here? Do I try to blend in, do I try to negate what I feel so I can fit in?" Sentences such as "don't laugh too loud," "don't annoy other people with your joy," "don't get too serious," "suck it up," "be a big girl," "men don't cry," "aren't you over that yet?" are examples of how people learn to monitor their emotions. "For example, we learn that grief needs to be contained and not bleed out on other people so that others don't get uncomfortable," Pleasant noted. "Between sensations and pure emotion that course through us is a filter that speaks to political correctness. Our emotions get shut down, measured, and accepted socially," Pleasant noted.

The Femme! movement practice creates a space where participants can address the emotions that they cannot easily share or express in their daily life. For

example, when one grunts as one moves, the outcome is messy, “not so polite.” “By using the drums, we help relax the nervous system – in utero, we heard outside noises in the form of sounds that are like the drum beats. We bring out the truest, most unfiltered you,” Pleasant noted. This safe container of a movement class is like a cocoon but also a place where the participants are encouraged to take up space and express who they are, fully and boldly.

Practicing expressing emotions through movement can aid us honor emotions in everyday life. “We learn to not to say we are fine when we are not,” Pleasant gave as an example. Using physical expression to move through emotions can help us experience emotionally challenging experiences such as grief, loss, depression, and heartache in a healthy way. “[Producer and director] Jamie Anderson has said that grief is love with nowhere to go. When you see grief as love with nowhere to go, you start to view it as an experience that needs more love and compassion. You learn to care for your heart with so much love and compassion that you are able to move through this emotion soberly,” she added.

One of the goals of the practice is to help people move forward in their lives with more allowance of emotions, both in themselves and others. Adults who do not have a chance to emote face the danger of getting sarcastic, irritable, and annoyed, Pleasant pointed out. Feeling and expressing emotions in a healthy way can lead to being kinder to one another, Pleasant hopes. “You are not holding back and therefore you can tolerate that in others,” she noted. Pleasant noted that when we ask the question, “how are you?” from the place of care and slow down to really be

present with the other person, they feel that they matter and can be honest. “That’s how he become a kinder world,” Pleasant said.

Conclusion

Practitioners of holistic healing methods and integrative therapy can suggest dance as one method for emotional wellbeing. Dance provides a unique avenue for exploring emotions physically. As Peter Lovatt argues, “The body is brilliant at communicating emotion, but other than in a dance class, where do we get the chance to act out with our body what is going on deep down in our heart? Most of our lives are spent disconnecting our emotions from our physical expression of them. We feel things, but we cannot express them.”⁶

Through dancing, we learn to notice physical sensations that might have their origins in emotional experiences, explore how we feel, value our emotions, and express them through different movements and sounds. We tap into the richness of our emotional lives and treasure the experience of witnessing the emotions of fellow movers: our vulnerability, tenderness, resilience, fortitude, sadness, despair, compassion, and love, among many others.

References

¹ Saumaa, H. Dance Therapeutics: Movement as a Path Toward Healing. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* 2019; 25; 5:238-240.

² Saumaa, H. Healing Performance and Somatic Choreography. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* 2021; 27; 6: 285-288.

³ Lovatt, P. *The Dance Cure*. New York: Harper Collins, 2021.

⁴ Christensen, J.F. and Chang, D-S. *Dancing is the Best Medicine: The Science of How Moving to a Beat is Good for Body, Brain, and Soul*. Vancouver, Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2021.

⁵ For more, see <https://www.theemotionalinstitute.com/> Accessed on April 21, 2022.

⁶ Lovatt, P. *The Dance Cure: The Surprising Science to Being Smarter, Stronger, Happier*. New York: Harper Collins, 2021.

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