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**Moving Sensually:  
Sensuality, Sexuality, and Somatic Dance**

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Sexual well-being is an integral part of a holistic approach to health. Body shame, negative self-talk, high expectations for performance, emotional or physical traumas involving sexuality, the impact of social media and popular culture, religious norms, and the inability to feel at ease in one's body and find pleasure in sexual acts can all impact how we behave in intimate contexts and how satisfied we feel about our lives in general.

Physical contact, touch, affection, and intimacy are crucial for human development, emotional health, and overall wellbeing. Satisfying sexual relations and orgasms lower blood pressure, promote restful sleep and relaxation, reduce anxiety, release oxytocin and endorphins, and may improve immune function. "As intimacy can be an important contributor to mental and physical health, having a sound preventive and problem-solving strategy for sexual difficulties can yield great rewards over the lifespan in vitality, health, and happiness in marriage and intimate relationships," note doctors Barbara Bartlik and Janet Mindes in their article "Clinician Wellness – Self-Care for Staying Healthy" (2022).<sup>1</sup>

Can dancing have a positive impact on our sexuality and sensuality? How exactly? A strong link between dancing, courtship, sexuality, and fertility has always existed. Some dance forms are more overtly associated with eroticism – such as tango, salsa, bachata, kizomba, zouk, and other partner dances where the dancers touch each other, or belly dancing, erotic pole dancing and striptease, which are danced mostly without a partner. In the field of health and wellness, we find somatic dance practices – methods that develop awareness of physical sensations as we move. These practices, with the exception of contact improvisation, are generally danced without a partner in dance and yoga studios, gyms, and home settings. What would be their benefits for one's sensual and sexual self?

Somatics is an umbrella term for a range of dance and movement methods that emphasize noticing how movements make us feel physically, emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even spiritually. Some practices, such as the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method, raise awareness of how we use the body when we move and perform daily activities. Other practices such as Nia, 5Rhythms, JourneyDance, Gaga, Continuum, and Tamalpa Life/Art Practice use simple choreographic patterns and/or free dance to enhance participants' cardiovascular health, range of movement, joint health, and cognitive functioning. They cultivate participants' sense of freedom, joy, and creativity through movement.

Somatic practices teach us to be aware of what we sense: do they also teach us to be sensual? The impact that dancing and somatic movement can have on one's sensuality and sexuality is often present but not explicitly addressed in these practices. However, as I will explain, the potential benefits of somatic practices for one's sensuality and sexuality are significant.

## **Sensuality and Sexuality**

“Sensual” and “sexual” are related but not necessarily overlapping phenomena. Sensuality refers to the awareness of the senses and physical sensations. Sensuality implies slowing down and being fully present in the moment, noticing what we feel in the body. Sensuality can be found in a range of contexts: the senses and the body are a part of everything we do and experience. We can express our sensuality in how we speak, look at someone, and touch ourselves, other people, living beings, or any surface or object. We experience our sensuality in how we move, dress, respond to music and sounds, and how we interact with the natural elements and our environment.

Sexuality has to do with the sexual organs, sexual expression, and the physiology of the body. It refers to sexual preferences and practices, sexual desire and sexual needs, and behavior in sexual acts. In the act of sex, we might be aware of our sensuality and tap into it or this aspect might be subdued. We can choose to make love – and to live – more or less sensually.

Sensing the body in movement, as in dancing, offers one way to connect to our sensuality. Dancing becomes sensual when we feel the physical sensations in the body and derive pleasure from these sensations. Sensations of warmth, tingling, expansion, ease, weight, openness, contraction, vibration, calm, exhilaration, and pulsing can feel pleasurable. Sensing the sweat on the skin, the air touching the face, and the feet finding new patterns on the ground can feel pleasurable and sensual. Fast or slow movements, undulations with the spine, scooping movements with the arms, sliding the ribcage side to side, reaching the arms into the space, and circling the pelvis can feel freeing and sensual.

Holding the hands on the head, low back, hips, the chest, or the belly as we dance can feel sensual. Feeling the closeness of the partner's body, their breathing, and the skin and the movement of their muscles as we move in the same rhythm can feel sensual.

Sensuality is not necessarily related to certain types of movements, body parts, and music. Many different movements can make us feel sensual and we can infuse many different types of movements with our sensuality. Slower movements where there is time to sense are generally perceived as more sensual. However, discovering which movements make us feel sensual is an individual journey. Sensuality is not necessarily about performance and "dancing sexy," with preconceived images about what attractive movements look like. Rather, it is a sense of felt intimacy within our own selves, inside our own body, and possibly between the bodies of partners. For this felt intimacy inside of ourselves to arise, we need to be fully in the present moment, with mental awareness resting in the body.

Dancing sensually, in a state of absorption, affects the state of the mind. We enter a state of flow where mental analysis, judgment, negative self-talk, perceived criticism by others, vicious thought circles, and worry disappear. In case of chronic pain or discomfort, dancing sensually can give practitioners new ways of being in their body: they might discover sensations of ease which might be occurring simultaneously with the chronic pain but be less easily detectable. Magnifying sensations of pleasure can alleviate some physical discomfort or mental distress by directing the mind's awareness elsewhere in the body.

Dancing sensually puts us in deep connection with the body. The mind might feel alert and receptive or "soft" and "melting" – instead of hearing inner thoughts, there is a pleasurable sense of letting go, relaxing into and being with unfolding physical sensations.

As Julia F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang, authors of *Dancing is the Best Medicine*, note, “When we dance, our bodies experience similar biological processes as when we have sex: endorphins, testosterone, and oxytocin are released and trigger feelings of happiness and exhaustion, just like after we’ve made love.”<sup>2</sup>

Dancing sensually does not need to imply the intent of seduction or having sex. We can enjoy the body in movement and feel the pleasures of physical sensations without sexual arousal or desire for physical intimacy. Yvonne Zivkovic, scholar of comparative literature with an interest in feminist embodiment theory and practice, and participant in my somatic dance classes commented in an interview with the author on the liberating feeling of “sensuality without sexuality” that she found in blues dancing. Recovering from a breakup, she was not looking for a new relationship but wanted to connect to her body: “Dance floor was a space where I could explore my sensuality, the sense of touch, intimacy, and physical affection in a safe way.” The boundaries about touch and expectations were clear and a good dance chemistry was not read to imply sexual intention. “In blues dance you are in a close embrace with someone, cuddling with someone. It’s like having sex with your clothes on. It’s slow, sensual. Being close to another person is a basic human need,” Zivkovic noted. Indeed, in human development and progression through life, touch and physical affection are key to cognitive, emotional, and physical health.<sup>3</sup>

### **What Can Somatic Dance Do for Sensuality?**

Several accounts on sexuality and sexual life refer to the inability to enjoy sex as one of the main barriers to a healthy sexual life. “Thousands of women think of sex as routine, boring, one-sided, and/or painful. [...] This in turn means that they are uninvolved or disconnected

from their sexual experience. This kind of detachment occurs for many reasons. Some women withdraw from their partners because they are angry or hurt, or both. Some women withdraw because sexual intimacy makes them feel too vulnerable. This type of reaction is usually related to a painful or traumatic situation in the past, which for many women can have a lasting impact that closes them off from sex psychologically, emotionally, and physically,” notes Patty Brisben, author of *Pure Romance Between the Sheets: Find Your Best Sexual Self and Enhance Your Intimate Relationship*(2008).<sup>4</sup>

According to Emily Nagoski in *Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life* (2015), for both women and men, “too many worries, too much stress, anxiety, shame, or depression, including stress, anxiety, shame, or depression *about* orgasm” can cause problems with orgasm.<sup>5</sup>

Getting “away from the head and into the body” and looking for pleasurable sensations inside and outside of the bedroom are among some of the key factors for developing better intimate relationships according to these accounts. These suggestions are in direct alignment with the principles that guide somatic movement practices – we practice listening to the body, search for pleasure, and learn to notice physical sensations through movement and dance.

In her innovative *Whole-Body Sex: Somatic Sex Therapy and the Lost Language of the Erotic Body* (2021), Melissa Walker has started to highlight connections between somatic practices and sexual therapy. She offers somatic body-listening practices and visualization exercises that help participants understand their sexual selves. Walker points out that “sexuality is rich with wisdom for us about what ignites our vitality and the nature of our growing edges. Shifts in sexual interest, expression, and function offer valuable information

about sexuality, your level of life stress, the quality of your relationships, and your overall wellness.”<sup>6</sup>

Somatic practices create a safe space where participants can learn about their bodies in a non-judgmental way. Nia, JourneyDance, SuryaSoul, and Tamalpa Life/Art Process, among other somatically oriented dance practices emphasize dancing freely, in our own body’s way. Many of these practices are fully improvisational, with gentle guidance of images or questions. In some practices, such as Nia and SuryaSoul Soma, easy-to-follow choreography alternates with free dance. Even with pre-given choreographic patterns, participants have the invitation to modify the movements according to their body’s needs and their emotional state. There is no need to “perform” in front of others and there is no “perfect” way to move. Exact copying of the teacher’s movements is not necessary; rather, we find our own expression via movement. Cardiovascular exercise, conditioning, enhanced joint mobility, and flexibility that we receive from dancing tone the body and make us feel physically fit, which impacts our mood and helps us enjoy our bodies more, inside and outside of intimate contexts.

Participants can tap into their sensuality at their own pace and without the pressure of the outer gaze. A safe atmosphere of acceptance and no inner and outer judgment creates the foundation for exploring sensuality through movement if one chooses to. In the words of Chicava Honeychild, founder of a program that combines sacred dance and burlesque dance, to find one’s sexuality and sensuality in movement, it is essential to “forget about the audience. That even means the media that we’re brought up in. The gaze of your boyfriend and the judgment of your family and friends about however you should be. And start exploring what’s really going on with you and what’s authentic to you.”

## **Nia Dance**

Nia is a somatic dance practice developed by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aia Rosas in the 1980s. This practice was inspired by martial arts (Taekwondo, Tai Chi, Aikido), dance arts (Isadora Duncan dance, modern dance, jazz dance), and bodily awareness practices (the Feldenkrais Method, the Alexander Technique, and yoga). The inspiration from these movement practices contribute to the variety of movements – soft, undulating, flowy, punchy, angular, slow, fast, to name a few – energies and emotions that we explore in each class. Each class incorporates patterns of movement and free dance exploration.

Kelle Rae Oien, Nia technique faculty trainer and choreographer, noted in an interview with the author that Nia helps participants discover their sensuality by its strong focus on sensations (for courses and additional info, see <https://kellerae.com/>). “The payoff for choosing sensation, sustaining it as we move and increasing sensation by becoming more body aware is more life force. More energy moving through us. I have more energy at 49 than I did at 25. Orgasm too is about life force. As we build our life force, we can sense more and feel more. Being sensual is about being okay with my body – we teach people to become more and more comfortable and intimate with their bodies. How would that not blend into a participant being more sensual or sexual?” Choosing movements that bring ease and pleasure is still radical in fitness industry, where the mindset of “powering through it” is more prevalent.

In Nia, participants can adapt and modify the movements, choose a different range of motion, add more or less energy, and discover their movements in free dance. Engaging in a practice where one is constantly being reminded to find one’s own way of movement is

bound to impact one's self-confidence. "The more people access their own self-advocating – what they want in the moment, what range of motion feels better, the more sensual their movement is. My body says 'do it this way. I'm not going to reach my arm out as high. Or I will.' The more someone access more of themselves, they naturally become more sensual," Oien explained. "Being embodied means, 'I'm a sensual person. I'm paying attention to the experiences in my body that I receive through the senses,'" she added.

### **Can Dancing Make Us Better Lovers?**

The effects of confidence and freedom in movement counter body shame and negative self-talk which cause people to feel ill at ease in their body and negatively impact their sexual well-being. We start to feel more at ease in our bodies and derive pleasure from our movements. As Barbara McGrory, psychotherapist, licensed clinical social worker, and a participant in my Nia dance classes, noted, "Dance naturally gets us more in tune with our body and how it moves sensually. These sensual moves can make us feel sexier and more attuned to our bodies in the bedroom."

A dance practice that invites participants to notice their sensations and make choices based on their sensations makes them more skilled at feeling their body. "The more I'm able to feel, the more it translates into sexual experience. The more I can self-advocate for my own pleasure since I know what I do and don't enjoy, the more pleasurable my intimate encounters become," Oien noted. "A part of being good in bed is telling someone else what you like. First of all, you have to know what you like and then you have to be confident enough to do it. There's that confidence that we find when we practice Nia. I

know what my body needs – it doesn't matter what the teacher is doing. And that translates into confidence in bed.”

Epp Kärsin , coach of sexual wellness and former dancer, noted in an interview with the author that in her work with clients, she has seen dance do wonders (for courses and additional info, see <https://www.amareluna.com/>). She recommends 5Rhythms to her clients and sees rhythm as key in sexual pleasures as well: “The different rhythms are very important – your body moves in one way in one rhythm and in a different way in another rhythm. Pleasures are about rhythm too. One person cannot be dancing a waltz while the other is dancing a polka. It is a metaphor for one's intimate life. If there's a polka, then that's the dance for both partners. We need to feel where the pause is. Where the moment is where you stop and then you go on. The people who feel well on the dance floor – who dance freely, with self-confidence, in the flow – these people are amazing in the bedroom because they simply have such a good contact with their body.”

Julia F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang point out that authenticity and genuine expression are more important than any specific moves when it comes to perceiving the eroticism of someone else's dancing. “Being yourself, it turns out, is what entices observers the most. Data shows that authentic movements seem to reveal a dancer's emotions and the truth about their physical power and mental strength. An observer's brain is able to decode this without even being aware of it. Without really knowing why, they are able to tell that they like what they see. A whole series of studies about dance and dating suggests that our movements while dancing tend to be a kind of code. If our brain decodes the information successfully, we'll discover much more about the unique 'inner data' of someone's personality than we might ever find out through conversation.” Through seeing

someone dance naturally and freely, we subconsciously intuit what the person is like, including their potential qualities as an intimate partner.

## **Sacred Sensuality**

Chicava Honeychild incorporates the spiritual physiology of Taoism in her classes. Taoism teaches us how to be “fully, soulfully ourselves,” she notes, without fragmenting sexuality, sensuality, and the soul. “You are sensual and you are soulful. You’re a ‘once in a forever’ moment. It seems lofty but what shifts when you play with that idea as you go through your day doing your most pedestrian things. How do you treat people? How do you treat yourself? How can you cherish yourself and appreciate yourself? You are alone in a room with nothing at stake in your reputation, how much you make, what your ambitions are but how much can you grow the idea that you’re just supposed to exist and it’s really awesome that you do,” she explained.

Appreciating and cultivating our sensuality allows us to tap into our centeredness, in her view. “No matter what you might want to change – your tummy, your hair, your height – there’s a sensuality in just letting yourself be. Sensuality can give you the opportunity to focus on being present in the moment because you can always touch yourself and come back to your senses. You need your sensuality to come back to your sense of centeredness and taking that sensuality deep inside yourself and inviting any sensual play from that deep place of comfort inside yourself.”

Her burlesque classes help women see themselves in a new light and incorporate more playfulness and eroticism in their lives. For example, Honeychild might teach her participants how to play with their gloves. “It’s amazing what a pair of gloves does to

change a woman. When you decide that you're taking them off in this particular way, it highlights you in a new way and how you feel about yourself." The woman might then take off her coat, scarf, and gloves differently when she goes to a party. "It's got a different meaning now. You've found a different thing with it. It can help you cast yourself as the heroine of your story," she noted.

### **How to Get Started**

To explore sensuality through movement, dancing by oneself, without any pressure and perceived judgment from the outside, is a good starting point. We can put on some music that we like and see how the body responds. The intent is to get comfortable with moving to music and letting the body, rather than the calculating mind, be the guide. When you dance by yourself or with others, start to notice what movements feel sensual. Are these movements for the upper body, the hips, the arms, the legs? Small or big movements? Wild or gentle? Does a certain type of music bring out the sensuality in you?

Honeychild recommends putting on one's favorite slow, sultry song and taking time to dance or strip to it. "When it's over, lie down in a savasana or whatever position is comfortable, and notice what you notice in your body. You can do it for 8 minutes. Or you start with a body scan, lying down, and do a 'this is how I feel' check-in and then you put on your sexy groove and dance for 3 minutes, 15 minutes, however long you want, and then lay back down and notice what's different." Taking time to notice what is happening inside the body is key in developing one's sensual self. Oien recommends moving the major joints – the ankles, knees, hips, the spine, shoulders, elbows, and wrists – to a song every day. Creeping, crawling, and rolling on the floor, and getting up and down the floor is another

way to get into the body and in touch with bodily sensations without having to go to a class or watching a video.

Online classes are excellent for exploring sensuality – participants can create their own experience by turning their cameras off, yet be connected to the structure of the class and be a part of a community. One of my students reported the feelings of joy and wellness she felt in one of my online classes: she turned the camera off, removed the clothes, and danced in front of a full-length mirror. It was an exhilarating experience that put her in touch with the beauty of her body and helped her soothe the negative body image that she had developed after putting on some weight.

When we dance in our own spaces, we can add elements that help us feel sensual – we can experiment dancing in clothes that make us feel attractive and sexy and incorporate self-massage, essential oils, and candles. Creating a sensual atmosphere and a sensual place and taking time to explore our sensuality through movement communicates an important message: “I take time for myself. I treasure my sensuality and my sexuality. They are an important part of who I am.”

We can explore imagining the presence and gaze of someone we desire or that of an imagined spectator. How would I move if this person was present and looking at me with his/her full, non-judgmental attention and desire? Where would I look – or would I keep my eyes closed? What does it feel like in my body to feel the desiring gaze of this imaginary person? Can I add some playfulness to my moves, a sense of lightness and flirtation? Or would I rather explore a different kind of energy?

Dancing this way in the privacy of our home feels safer and we might feel bolder and less concerned with what sensual movements are “supposed to” look like. Practicing

awareness of our sensations in the face of an imagined viewer can help us when we are in the actual presence of someone. The imagined – or real – eyes of a viewer, if we are being witnessed in an accepting, safe manner – can be healing and transformative.

In free dance, we can explore and “act out” different roles, such as “the lover,” “the seductress/seducer,” and “the queen/king,” among others. Dancing these roles can give us information about our sexual selves, our desires, what we yearn for, and what we fantasize about. This kind of play might send a message: “Your sexuality, your desires, your femininity or your masculinity are an important part of your whole self. There might be a side of your sexuality and sensuality that needs expression, development, or healing.”

Betty Dodson, in her classic *Sex for One*, recommends putting together a self-loving ritual that could include a sensuous bath, body appreciation, self-massage, genital exploration, mirror dancing, and sexual self-touch. She says, “Be free. Try any outrageous moves you can think of. Rotate your hips, do bumps and grinds, shimmy and shake. Wear a jeweled belt around your hips and make the moves of a belly dancer. Or pretend you’re a priestess performing temple dances of erotic love. Or become martial artist dancing with power, standing in the ‘horse posture’ while using your vibrator. [...] Learn how to be your own sex object as your erotic personas emerge. It’s all about having fun playing with yourself, getting off on the energy of your own sexual image. Be your own voyeur and exhibitionist.”<sup>7</sup>

The more we practice dancing with inner awareness, the more we might start seeing our body as capable, attractive, creative, expressive, playful, both gentle and powerful at different stages in our lives. Finding these capacities in the body is important for both men

and women. The benefit is significant also for people who have experienced sexual trauma and abuse and turn to movement to heal and feel safe in the body again.

## **Conclusion**

Once we start practicing exploring our sensuality and/or our sexuality through dancing, by ourselves or with others, we can start noticing whether and how our deepening connection to sensuality emerges in other realms of our life. We might start paying attention to the colors of the sky each day, the texture of a tree under our fingers, the aromas and flavors around us. We might start noticing how our body responds to someone else's presence, how our voice changes, and how our skin responds to another person's touch.

We might become more aware of our sensations during intimate encounters, say yes and no more clearly, be more courageous, curious, and confident. We might feel our bodily sensations more clearly and more subtly. We might start to feel the pleasures of life more often and more fully. Our sensual self starts to awaken and dancing can support and continue this awakening. Dancing is particularly well-suited for enhancing our sensuality because it stimulates the brain, the body, the emotions, and the imagination through music, kinetic movement, and the sense of pleasure.

Developing awareness of our sensuality is important: it awakens our awareness of our senses and enriches our sexual lives. It also puts us in touch with the mystery of being alive. We develop an attitude of awe toward our own bodies and what we can do and how we can move. We start to realize that none of our physical, emotional, and mental functioning can in fact be taken for granted. Sensuality – which slows us down, makes us

live in the moment, in deep connection to our own body and perhaps that of another – reminds ourselves of this gift of aliveness.

#### Acknowledgement:

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlik, B and Mindes, J. Clinician Wellness – Self-Care for Staying Healthy: Attention to Sexual Life. *Integrative and Complementary Therapies*, 2022. 28; 72-74.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Saumaa, H. 'I hate my body': Somatic Movement Practices and Body Image. *Integrative and Complementary Therapies*, 2022. 28; 235-239.

<sup>4</sup> Brisben, B. *Pure Romance Between the Sheets: Find Your Best Sexual Self and Enhance Your Intimate Relationship*. New York: Atria Books, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Nagoski, E. *Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, M. *Whole-Body Sex: Somatic Sex Therapy and the Lost Language of the Erotic Body*. New York and London: Routledge, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Dodson, B. *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996.

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