

Saumaa, Hiie. "Developing Self-Confidence Through the Body and Dance." *Integrative and Complementary Therapies*. Volume 28, Issue 6, 2022, 281-285.

## **Developing Self-Confidence Through the Body and Dance**

*Hiie Saumaa, PhD*

"Am I a confident person?" We might have a direct answer to this or the question might make us pause. A healthy sense of self-confidence is not to be taken for granted – past wounds with early caregivers, perceived lack of success in a career, failed or traumatic personal relationships, negative feelings toward one's body, difficulties of finding a sense of community and belonging, and many other life challenges can affect our sense of self-confidence. An accurate sense of self-confidence is an important aspect of a person's overall wellbeing: with a low sense of self-confidence, a person's ability to function well in society, have satisfying relationships, realize one's potential in one's work, set purposeful goals, make decisions, and navigate life's many challenges are compromised.

Can connecting to the body through movement and dance help us enhance self-confidence? Practicing movement techniques, like any other skills, would improve our abilities in that skill. We gain in movement confidence as we engage in a regular physical practice. But can movement practices also give us self-confidence to help encounter challenges effectively and guide ourselves through life?

In this article, I will focus on somatic movement practices and their potential for developing self-confidence. Somatic methods encompass physical awareness techniques that emphasize the importance of not only performing movements but developing an inner connection to the body and the unfolding movements.<sup>1</sup> Somatic movement practices are intriguing for a discussion on self-confidence because they work with multiple layers of the self and can potentially impact self-confidence from several angles – we engage the body, the mind, the emotions, the imagination, and the voice of the heart in these practices.

### **Self-Confidence**

Self-confidence includes a realistic and trustworthy relationship with one's skills, abilities, and one's inner world. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy notes that "the source of secure high self-esteem is internal. It doesn't need external validation to thrive, and it doesn't crumble at the first sign of a threat. People who have a solid sense of self-worth reflect that feeling through healthy, effective ways of dealing with challenges and relationships, making them both more resilient and more open."<sup>2</sup> In her view, a confident person knows and believes in his/her identity and is able to be present to others and hear their perspectives. In his *Self-Confidence: A Philosophy* (2018), philosopher Charles Pepin underscores confidence in others, confidence in one's own capabilities, and confidence in life as three main factors in an individual's self-confidence.<sup>3</sup> He shows how confidence is gained through trustworthy and supportive relationships, practicing a skill, listening to one's intuition, making decisions, encountering beauty, taking action, and cultivating trust in life.

Connection to the body and feeling at home in the body are key components of self-confidence. Allison Pagano, dancer, choreographer, and founder of a program Embodied

Dance, in an interview with the author defined confidence as “a pathway through and into self-trust and into what makes you feel safe in your body and okay being in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Pagano noted that “true self confidence comes from a place of owning who you are and being unapologetic about it. Not in the way of being unkind but in the sense that you’re at peace with who you are, at peace with your mistakes and your journey. And you’re also simultaneously able to be in an intimate relationship with others and with your life.”

Lack of self-confidence and the need to improve and solidify self-confidence is one major theme in discussions on self-confidence. However, a very high self-confidence veering toward arrogance and extreme self-assurance is a topic that receives less attention and can be a challenge as well. “When we lose touch with humility, with love and compassion and gratitude, the arrogant side of self can get turned up to a higher degree,” Pagano remarked in an interview with the author. “The melding of love and truth keeps the arrogance away,” she added. A sense of vulnerability and human imperfection are important in a healthy sense of self-confidence.

### **What Can Dance Do for Our Self-Confidence?**

Coming to somatic dance classes is a challenging step for many. “I am not a dancer. I feel clumsy in my body. I don’t have the body of a dancer. I am shy. I don’t have a sense of rhythm. I do not know how to move freely without pre-set steps. I feel awkward and am not graceful.” These could be some of the thoughts running through the mind of someone for whom moving the body in a non-judgmental, free-flow way is alien. “Move your own way,” “there is no judgment,” and “there is no right and wrong movement” are ideas that might take some time to get accustomed to. Like with any other skill, a sense of greater

ease and trust in the body and movement develop as one keeps doing the practice. The persistent voice of the inner critic uttering limiting beliefs will eventually start to quieten down. As Pepin notes, “Confidence develops in tandem with a growing competence that, as it becomes integrated in stages and incorporated, has a liberating effect. Confidence is not innate but something that is largely acquired.”

Somatic dance practices such as Nia, SuryaSoul, 5Rhythms, Gaga, JourneyDance, Biodanza, Continuum, Shake Your Soul, and Tamalpa Life/Art Process, among others ask participants to connect to their own inner dancer and dance from the inside out, rather than always follow set choreographies. While easy-to-follow choreographic patterns can be used in somatic dance practices, there is a lot of improvisational, free movement and the freedom to adjust the movements to fit one’s own needs. This atmosphere of allowance, non-judgment, and the invitation to move in one’s own way form the groundwork for developing confidence.

Teachers play a significant role in students’ development of self-esteem in somatic dance classes. Teachers can facilitate this process by emphasizing the focus on each individual’s unique experience with learning. In Nia, instructors use the concept of “natural timing”: we emphasize that every participant has a different tempo when it comes to learning new movements or getting in touch with one’s physical sensations. There are “no mistakes” and “no perfect” tempo in learning. Teachers can emphasize that confidence in movement and in one’s voice and personality is likely a process that unfolds over a longer period of time. Teachers can guide the students verbally and ask them questions such as “how does this movement make you feel? What happens if you play with the volume of

these movements – make them bigger? Smaller? Do larger movements or crossing the space make you feel different?”

Confidence can be set as theme that one can focus on throughout the movement session. Instructors can guide participants to develop awareness around what movements, sensations, types of music, images, words, thoughts, and emotions enhance or decrease one’s self-confidence. We can ask participants to respond to these prompts during, before, or after the class. We can ask for spontaneous feedback throughout the class or in a circle after the session or encourage participants to keep a movement journal.

The leap in self-confidence is particularly remarkable for shier participants. Little by little they start to feel more at ease in the classroom and in their own bodies. They learn to make and trust their own decisions about the types of movements that feel good and needed. Particularly for the more timid movers, dance can lead to a transformational experience that changes how they relate to the body, their confidence, and the world. It is likely that a shy person has been holding him/herself back for a long period of time. Through dancing, nonverbally, participants can discover how to express aspects of themselves that they might have been suppressing because of the judging inner voice, perfectionism, fear, and the absence of movement opportunities where they can feel safe and not judged. Developing a connection to the body and allowing oneself to move authentically, freely, without the fear of judgment is liberating and healing.

Pagano recounted a similar experience. “I spent the first 15 years of my life not even talking to people. I was a complete stranger in my body. I was awkwardly introverted. I used to spend my time mostly stretching and writing stories. I used to dance in the backyard every day and I wanted to go to dance classes but my family didn’t get it. I put

myself into dance classes once I started working. I realized that dance gave me a way to feel and to move energy. I realized I can do something about the heaviness I was constantly feeling. I realized that I can connect with other things when I am moving my body that I cannot connect with in any other ways. I understood almost immediately that movement was medicine and that movement was healing. And everything that has happened in my life since then up to now has confirmed it," she said.

Feeling connected to one's body is a source of personal power. Somatic practices educate us to our inner resources of resilience and compassion. Somatic practices are asking participants to constantly pay attention to physical sensations and explore different types of movements: we turn to the body for guidance and wellbeing, again and again, which can be a radical move for someone who would rather not feel and engage the body. "When we're truly in our body and we're feeling, we're able to connect with our own body's wisdom. We're able to be in a relationship with our own inner self and don't push it away. We have that self-trust," Pagano noted. Building a sense of a strong relationship with the inner self through the body and learning to trust it is not something we are commonly being taught: "We're being taught to live from the head up. You don't feel. You want to be thinking, to be logical. You want to get the steps right. You leave the softness and the sensations lesser value," Pagano pointed out.

In dance experiences where we can express our inner self freely, we can start exploring and accessing a different – more confident – version of ourselves. Changing our movements and trying out different movements can change how we perceive ourselves and our sense of agency. For example, in Nia dance classes, we mix flowy and sensual movement sequences with blocks, punches, and kicks inspired by the martial arts. With

feet shoulder width apart, rooted through the feet, grounded in the legs, solid in the torso, I keep the fingers long but close them so there is no space between them and slice the air with my arm. I do the same with the other arm. The movements feel clear, resolute, concrete, final. I feel a sense of inner power as I keep slicing the air with the forearms. I do not simply move the arm down and up: I slice the arm down with force, a sense of exactness and fortitude.

The dance shows me that I can act with a sense of clarity, direction, inner conviction, and power. These slicing and cutting movements help me feel like I am making decisions firmly and efficiently. In my life outside of the dance studio, I go back and forth in my mind endlessly about a question and have a hard time deciding. The movement accompanied with an inner state and emotion convinces me that I can do a similar type of fast, effective, decisive movement in real life and not feel confused about it. This is an example of how dance can enhance self-confidence.

Dancing can also impact how we create our life story. Dancing can allow us to “feel bigger” and embody aspects of ourselves that we typically find hard to access. We can move with and embody certain images, elements (such as water, air or fire) or archetypal figures (such as Queen, King, Magician, Lover, and Jester). Participants can observe what qualities, emotions, and movements emerge when they move as queens. Pagano said, “Structuring choreographies that are heavily based in a certain element helps people embody those qualities differently and archetypes give people permission to be bigger than they can be or take on a different energy. How does this archetype want to move from within you? If that archetype were to become you, how would it move? How would you be in relation to dancing with it, if it were outside you?” She added, “It gives people permission to go that

extra step into something that they're otherwise uncomfortable with. I can imagine Queen. I can imagine Earth Angel. There is a variety of things that are helpful for people to imagine. We did it when we were kids.”

The idea of taking on the role of a jester, a seductress, a wild woman, or a sacred rebel in playful movement can be new and surprising to us, sparking new insights and allowing us to see ourselves differently. As Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger note in *Surprise: Embrace the Unpredictable and Engineer the Unexpected* (2015), “If we’re thinking about the same thing in the same way, our thoughts become surprise resistant, and we need something different to spark insight. The longer we spend pondering down the same path, the more desperately we need a dose of surprise (and the less comfortable it is to let surprise in). Mixing routine with surprise creates an unbeatable creativity concoction.”<sup>5</sup>

The way we use space in dance classes can help participants with self-confidence. In daily activities, movements tend to be limited. For example, the arms might be moving in front of the body – typing, texting, writing, chopping vegetables, carrying items, and so on – but rarely go over the head or toward the back. We use the legs and the feet to carry us forward in space but hardly do sweeping motions with the knees, move laterally, or lift the leg high off the ground in daily tasks. If one’s job is conducted in a seated position behind the computer, the entire body stays in one type of position for an extended period of time. We walk through the space in a certain direction – but we do not jump, skip, move in circles, triangles, and zigzags. We do not use our full range of motion and a variety of different movements that our bodies can do.

In Nia and other somatic dance classes, we use a range of different movements – flowy, angular, close to the ground, to the side, above the head, and to the back of the body.



Participants move through the space at different speeds, in different directions. We take up space, we use the space, we interact with the space. We let the body travel, explore, do expansive movements. Even a simple movement of lifting the arms to the side and over the head can make us feel expansive and give us an uplift – we open the chest, lengthen the abdominal area, and lift the eyes to the sky. The body communicates a sense of freedom, trust, and confidence in the world.

### **Gaining Confidence through Postures and Gestures**

Social psychologist Amy Cuddy, in a widely popular TED Talk “Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are,” introduced the idea of “power posing.”<sup>6</sup> She showed how the use of certain expansive physical poses can increase confidence in face of challenging situations, such as public speaking, interviewing, having a difficult conversation, and so on. In her *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges* (2015), she develops these ideas further and advocates for paying attention to the ways in which we “pose” or encode in our physical stances both power and powerlessness.<sup>7</sup> When we stand, sit, walk, or do any daily activities with a sunken chest, shoulders drooping forward, the ribcage sunken toward the pelvis, and the back hunched, we are “posing powerlessness.” “The way we carry ourselves from moment to moment blazes the trail our lives take. When we embody shame and powerlessness, we submit to the status quo, whatever that may be. We acquiesce to emotions, actions, and outcomes that we resent. We don’t share who we really are. And all of this has real-life consequences,” she notes.

Citing her own and other scholars’ studies, she shows that the way we hold and move our body impacts what we think and how we feel. In one study, the researchers were

looking at the effect of the cobra position in yoga on circulating hormone levels, including testosterone and cortisol. In the cobra pose a participant is on the ground with the abdomen on the floor, legs long. She/he places the hands on the ground underneath the shoulders and lifts the chest up and moves the head back. The researchers collected blood samples immediately before the participants took the pose and after they had stopped holding it. Each participant's testosterone levels increased by 16 percent and cortisol levels decreased by 11 percent. The findings showed that holding a single expansive pose can make significant differences in the hormones related to confidence (testosterone) and anxiety (cortisol). "As power increases, testosterone rises and cortisol drops. This hormone profile is associated with high assertiveness and low anxiety, the ideal combination for facilitating presence in challenging moments."

Cuddy's account is a powerful testament to the power that alignment, posture, ease, and how we feel in the body have on the effectiveness with which we navigate life challenges. Whether we feel powerful or powerless in the body plays a key role in our confidence. Cuddy's theory of presence places the body at the center of our experience of power: "[Presence] is the state of being attuned to and able to comfortably express our true thoughts, feelings, values, and potential. [...] Presence emerges when we feel personally powerful, which allows us to be acutely attuned to our most sincere selves. In this psychological state, we are able to maintain presence even in the very stressful situations that typically make us feel distracted and powerlessness."

She shows readers how to achieve presence through self-nudges, changes in body language and mindsets. "This is about allowing your body to lead your mind," she notes. Cuddy shows how expansive poses – not only yoga poses but any movements where the

body takes up space and feels expansive, such as moving the legs apart and spreading the arms diagonally up – can help people feel more powerful. “The way you carry yourself is a source of personal power – the kind of power that is the key to presence. It’s the key that allows you to unlock yourself – your abilities, your creativity, your courage,” she notes.

Power-posing is an effective way to gain confidence in order to bring one’s best skills forward in challenging situations such as interviews, public speaking, exams and tests, and performances, among others. To bring about long-term effects, however, addressing other layers of the whole self is likely necessary. Allison Pagano pointed out that to bring about lasting results, working with changing body language is likely not enough. “The mind has to be acknowledged, the emotions have to be acknowledged, and the body too, simultaneously, for it to be a long-term transformation. This is what I’ve seen in terms of healing and how people truly shift from a long-term chronic state of having this body language, this feeling of themselves, and what’s possible when you’re actually working with the whole person,” she said.

In my somatic strength training classes, we do not power pose per se but we do use the body, posture, and movement to gain confidence and to prepare ourselves mentally and emotionally for possibly challenging tasks.<sup>8</sup> For example, we place one foot to the front, the knee slightly bent and the other leg is at the back. We put the resistance band under the front foot, hold on to the band, and start a set of biceps curls, pulling the band toward the chest. As the participants are performing these repetitions, I ask them to tune into the power of this bodily position: their chest is wide and open, clavicles long and horizontal, the abdominals lifted, the shoulder blades down and relaxed, the feet rooted and the legs strong under the weight of the torso. I ask them to feel how they are performing the action

of pulling from this very stable, strong, and powerful stance. The act of pulling signifies determination: the arms are actively bringing toward the chest an object that has resistance. The posture and the exercise are excellent opportunities for practicing mental stances of determination, feeling grounded, stepping into one's power, and asserting one's will while keeping the heart/chest open.

To this attention to the posture and alignment, one can add further layers, so that the exercises do not feel repetitive and boring but rather engage aspects of the whole person. Following the teachings of the personal trainer, author, and creator of the BodyLogos Technique, Tammy Wise, we can add to conditioning exercises contemplations on a question, affirmation, or a theme.<sup>9</sup> Physically, participants are performing an exercise such as squats, triceps extensions, or abdominal crunches. Mentally and emotionally, they can choose to engage with a question that is connected to the trajectory of the movement or the muscles of a particular body part.

To the earlier exercise of biceps curls, I could add an invitation to contemplate the following question, "What are your true desires and wants – today, this week, this month, or in this period of your life? What kinds of qualities or opportunities would you like to pull toward you, like you are pulling toward you the resistance band?" When I was working on my dissertation – a long and arduous process – the regular practice of strength training and connecting to the weights was my preparation for the cognitive and intellectual tasks of a writer. Picking up the weights and imagining developing strength for a difficult task helped me stay connected to the cognitive and intellectual work on the dissertation, instead of procrastinating. Leaving the weight room or somatically inclined strength class, we feel

calmer, stronger, more self-confident about our abilities to meet challenges in our lives and more in touch with our inner resourcefulness.

### **How to Get Started**

Many somatic dance and movement classes are being taught in person and online.

Participating in an in-person or online class or workshop is an excellent way to start exploring whether and how somatic movement can support one's search for greater self-confidence, connection to one's inner voice, and trust.

One could also explore moving and dancing freely on one's own, without the structure of a class setting. A participant in my Nia dance classes shared how she used dance to tap into feeling confident for her interview: "I was super duper nervous and when none of my breathing exercises nor mindfulness meditation exercises worked, I decided to turn on one of my favorite songs and do a mini improv somatic dance session, using some of the movements you do and improvising my own. It really shifted my energy and helped me to release my nervous feelings! I was imagining how I would build confidence and love around me, allowing my body to move. And it worked! I felt more embodied and went into the interview with very positive energy. It made all the difference." Even a few minutes of dancing can positively impact our emotions and mindset, and one does not need to have extensive dance background or identify oneself as a dancer. A few minutes in an expansive physical pose or sensing one's easeful alignment can also quickly make us feel better and ready to face the world and challenging tasks.

In Allison Pagano's view, one way to develop confidence and self-trust through movement is to pay attention to one's emotions and choose them as a starting point for

movement explorations. She said in an interview with the author, “Go directly into the feeling and honor it. Feel what that feeling is. Be with it fully. Give it a voice in whatever way you want to give it a voice. From there choose what’s next or choosing now what. The first piece is going in and feeling it. [...] Doing that builds self-trust. When you’re building self-trust you can take a different step. Without honoring what we’re truly feeling, these feelings start building under the carpet. Getting into the feeling, allowing it, and allowing it to teach you what it’s there for is what matters.” This comment encourages us to not disregard our emotions as unstable and unimportant but learn to build trust in them by listening to them and spending time with them and dancing them.<sup>10</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Self-confidence has to do with our ability to feel like we are being our true selves, equipped with our skills, resourcefulness, resilience, and creativity. Being self-confident means being in touch with and acting according to an inner voice that tells us how we really feel, what feels true and right for us, and what the next best step is. It is the voice of honesty inside of us.

Somatic dance and movement practices are particularly well-suited to help us be in touch with this inner voice because somatic techniques do not foreground competitive performance, showmanship, the outer gaze, and mastering other people’s choreographies and movement styles. Rather, through dancing freely and following our body’s needs in a non-judgmental setting, we learn to honor our inner world and unique voices as movers. Strengthening this connection to our unique voices and gifts develops self-confidence.

When we need a new or different vision of ourselves – for example, that of someone who decides firmly, speaks fearlessly, takes initiative, looks for opportunities, takes risks, starts a new business, ends an unsatisfying relationship, begins a new career, quits a bad habit, expresses one’s emotions, or believes in one’s body – we can explore this new self-confident vision through movement first. We will start noticing what courage or decisiveness feel like inside the body as we move. Moving in new ways that evoke new feelings and insights in us, we lay a new blueprint for ourselves. When we try these movements and emotions out physically, they become more true and real for us. We start to believe in a new vision of ourselves and our capacities. We convince ourselves of our confidence through the body and via movement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Saumaa, H. Dance therapeutics: Movement as a path toward healing. *Altern Complement Ther* 2019; 25: 238-240.

<sup>2</sup> Cuddy, A. *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*. Little, Brown and Company: New York, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pepin, C. *Self-Confidence: A Philosophy*. New York: Other Press, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Pagano, A. <https://www.embodied-dance.com/about> Online document. Accessed on October 11, 2022.

---

<sup>5</sup> Luna, T. and Renninger, L. Surprise: Embrace the Unpredictable and Engineer the Unexpected. New York: Penguin, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Cuddy, A. "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are."

[https://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_may\\_shape\\_who\\_you\\_are?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?language=en) Online document. Accessed on October 10, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Cuddy, A. Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges. Little, Brown and Company: New York, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Saumaa, H. Improving Posture and Alignment Through Somatics. Integrative and Complementary Therapies 2022, 28: 2, 88-92.

<sup>9</sup> Wise, T. The Art of Strength: Sculpt the Body – Train the Mind. Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Saumaa, H. Dance Emotions. Integrative and Complementary Therapies 2022, 28: 3, 134-137.

**Hiie Saumaa, PhD** (Columbia), is a dance writer and movement educator. She writes about dance, somatics, embodied knowledge, health, creativity, 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, The University of Tennessee, Paris College of Art, EFREI Pantheon-Assas, the



---

Catholic University of Paris, Emlyon Business School, and L'institut Mines-Télécom. Dr.

Saama is completing a book on the creative process of the choreographer Jerome Robbins.

Her publications have appeared 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, mindful strength training, and somatic awareness.