Introduction to Dance Therapy

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This article, a republication from CORD, 1970, describes the dance and psychological roots of dance therapy, followed by a discussion of the similarities and differences between dance therapy and standard dance forms. The goals and unique processes of dance therapy are discussed and illustrated. In conclusion, the article describes the attributes of a dance therapist.

Background

This article was written for a joint conference sponsored by the Research Department of the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health, Committee on Research and Dance, and the American Dance Therapy Association and held on November 10, 1968. The Committee on Research in Dance (CORD) published the proceedings, Workshop in Dance Therapy: Its Research Potentials, in 1970.

Over the years we have had many requests for this article. To make this article more readily available we submitted it to the editors of the American Journal of Dance Therapy to consider it for republication. We note that our basic philosophy about the dance in dance therapy remains the same. In fact, it has been confirmed by our years of training and clinical practice.


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Before we attempt to do research in dance therapy, we should know what dance therapy is. Since no paper was presented at the conference to define dance therapy, the authors were asked to cover the topic. This paper will neither present an overview of all dance therapy methodologies nor an abstraction of all dance therapy techniques. It will present the authors’ views on what dance therapy is.

Our experience as dance therapists has primarily been work with hospitalized mentally ill patients (all ages) in individual and group sessions. Other experiences have included work in residential treatment centers, mental health clinics, and rehabilitation centers for addicts. (We both have also worked extensively with normal children and adults.)

This attempt at defining what dance therapy is is rooted primarily in our work as dance therapists with the seriously ill, but we think that the basic concepts and methodology presented here are applicable to dance therapy use with diverse groups and individuals.

Origins of Dance Therapy

The three major sources from which dance therapy developed are: 1) the therapeutic aspects of dance as it has been used throughout the ages, 2) that part of modern dance which is creative or improvisational movement — the expressive and communicative part of dance, and 3) the growing emphasis on interpersonal interaction in group and individual psychotherapy. Our attention will focus primarily on the first two points.

Throughout history people have expressed themselves through moving together to a common rhythm. They danced before harvests, hunts, and wars. They danced in times of transitions: birth, puberty, adolescence, manhood, and death. They danced at the most important times in their lives. Feelings and emotions were shared through common participation in movement: this aspect of communal dance is one part of dance therapy.

Dance or movement used as a therapy has been a direct outgrowth of the modern dance tradition rather than other forms of dance, such as folk, ballet, or social. Modern dance has as its intention the desire to express the totality of the human experience through movement without limitations. Early modern dancers were both choreographers and performers. The dance was their personal statement. Because they wanted to express "gut-like" emotions, they had to strip away from the formalized structure of classical ballet. They would only point their toe or extend their leg if it were intrinsic to what they wanted to say.