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Moving On: An Investigation of Dance Movement Therapy in PTSD Treatment

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Abstract

This literature review explores the ways dance movement therapy can treat post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. By analyzing and synthesizing the current literature on the relationship between the two, we can more clearly understand how dance movement therapy can treat PTSD, as well as where more research is needed. Looking closer at the ways dance movement therapy relieves symptoms of PTSD allows its effectiveness to be evaluated. Thus far we have seen many advantages to dance movement therapy, including its inherent connection to the body, how well it works with other therapies, its non-goal-oriented and accepting nature, and its capability for helping patients develop effective coping skills (Levine, 2016; Wiedenhofer, 2017; Dosamantes-Beaudry, 1997). The findings and observations from the studies included in this literature review support dance movement therapy as an effective form of treatment for PTSD when used alone or with other more widely available treatments.

Keywords: Dance movement therapy, DMT, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, PTSD treatment, dance therapy, movement therapy

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The room seems to breathe as the men and women around the large studio reach up with a collective inhale and then let their torsos collapse and stretch down with a large exhale. These breaths are directed by the therapist walking around the room. As she passes each man or woman, she might reach up and pull their fingers higher to encourage a fuller inhale or press lightly on their back to help them release their back muscles more completely through their exhale. Once warmed up and more aware of how their bodies are feeling that day, the group talks about what they would like to address in this session, such as boundaries or vulnerability. The therapist facilitates this discussion and works with the group to identify an appropriate theme for the session. She then guides the men and women into another physical exercise which she knows can benefit her clients in their recoveries. These men and women all suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are utilizing dance movement therapy sessions as part of their treatment. They are all here to dance, heal, and grow through this form of therapy.

Ruth St. Denis once said, "I see dance being used as communication between body and soul, to express what is too deep to find for words" (Sarkis, 2012). This description was intended for dance in general, but perfectly illustrates how dance movement therapy works; the body and the mind are used together to heal psychological wounds while helping the patient develop new coping skills. This is accomplished as patients participate in various exercises involving both movement and psychological processing, such as mirroring movement, creating choreography based on their experiences, and practicing mindfulness of their bodies during movement. Dance movement therapy is used to treat many different mental illnesses, but has been shown to possibly be especially helpful in treating post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, due to its often-somatic elements (Levine, 2016).

War, abuse, natural disasters, neglect, accidents, and many other traumas can cause PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It affects individuals of every race, gender, age, social-

economic position, and faith, although veterans are at higher risk for developing PTSD (McKinney, Hirsch, & Britton, 2017). Those affected by this disorder often seek out treatment for their illness, but might find some treatments to be personally ineffective. However, there are plenty of good, reliable, and tested treatments for PTSD, including dance movement therapy. To establish and better understand how dance movement therapy can be used in the PTSD treatment process, the existing literature on this topic has been gathered, analyzed, and interpreted in relevant terms. Dance movement therapy could be an effective form of treatment for PTSD when used on its own or in addition to other more common therapies because of its inherent connection to the body, how well it works with these other therapies, its inherent accepting nature, and its capability for helping patients develop effective coping skills (Levine, 2016; Wiedenhofer, 2017; Dosamantes-Beaudry, 1997).

Dance Movement Therapy and PTSD: A Brief Overview

Dance movement therapy is a recently developed treatment for diverse disorders. However, Ritter and Low (1996) remind us that the use of dance as a form of therapy existed thousands of years before becoming a formal treatment option. They also explain that the connection between kinesthetic action and the mind forms the basis on which dance movement therapy was originally created. Now, thanks to that approach, dance movement therapy offers customizable and patient-specific treatment to many, including those affected by eating disorders, depression, autism, and PTSD. One example of how dance movement therapy works in a biological sense is the mirror neuron theory. Berrol explores this theory, which describes mirror neurons' role in the development of empathy, as well as how they contribute to the therapeutic benefits of dance movement therapy. When performing kinesthetic exercises which mirror another's physical actions, these neurons activate, mimicking genuine empathy and increasing one's ability to experience that emotion (Berrol, 2006). In this study, the relationship between mirror neurons, empathy, and the therapeutic process is shown to be effective in treating a range of psychological disorders,

including PTSD. This finding suggests that empathy and emotional connection are essential to mental health. Dance movement therapy employs various other theories, and consequently, has become increasingly popular as a treatment for mental illness.

PTSD, as noted before, affects many populations. This disorder's symptoms can include—but are not limited to—distressing and intrusive memories of the trauma, upsetting dreams involving the trauma, flashbacks, and negative or dysfunctional reactions to triggering events (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) also states that PTSD can be caused by “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation.” The harm done by these traumatic experiences to the mental health of victims is severe, putting them at greater risk for depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, social and relational dysfunction, and suicide attempts (McKinney, Hirsch, & Britton, 2017). In order to treat the dysfunctional, distressing, and deviant symptoms of an individual with PTSD, professionals in the mental healthcare field must be educated regarding the effective options for treatment. Dance movement therapy is an effective treatment option, and as it continues to become more readily available to patients, more and more populations will be able to achieve healing and health after living in dysfunction and pain.

Non-Goal-Oriented Treatment

Dance movement therapy, when open to the development of adaptive and healthy behaviors in any way that could benefit patients, can help them grow and heal in ways other therapies might not. This is applicable to PTSD treatment in that this kind of therapy can be based in non-goal-oriented terms after other goal-oriented milestones have been achieved. First, as Westerman (2017) demonstrates in his study on retelling trauma, the actual relationship with the trauma must be addressed so that it no longer causes the crisis levels of distress characteristic of PTSD triggers. Westerman (2017) demonstrates in his study of verbal retelling that this can be done by repetitively expressing the traumatic

experience through the form of spoken words, although the same result could possibly be obtained through written words, drawings, or movement. There is a clear end goal for a patient retelling a traumatic event in order to decrease the negative feelings which can prevent that patient from making more therapeutic progress. Once the distress of that memory has faded through exposure and the immediate threat of crisis has been resolved, then more work can be done with underlying issues behind the PTSD. Wiedenhofer (2017) revealed that non-goal-oriented dance movement therapy is more effective in decreasing stress and improving body self-efficacy than goal oriented dance movement therapy. This could be because it allows for an accepting environment and open-minded approach to healing. Adding to this finding, Fischman (2016) claims that implicit experiences during dance movement therapy can have a significant impact on patients participating in the session. Fischman (2016) came to this conclusion after seeing patients express emotions they were not explicitly aware of, and healing through that experience. If these patients had participated in a strictly goal-oriented treatment process, they might have never been able to address these emotions. These conclusions show us that when the treatment process possesses an openness to human implicit experience, the patient can often achieve overall improvement in his or her symptoms. In addition to alleviating the immediate problem, this helps prevent future issues that might not otherwise have been addressed. Dance movement therapy, when accepting of diverse ways to achieve healing, gives patients a renewed sense of purpose, an environment they feel safe and accepted in, and a place to develop new abilities, all of which allow them to recover and ultimately stay in recovery.

Dance Movement Therapy and Psychotherapy: How They Work Together

Dance movement therapy can effectively supplement psychotherapy in traditional treatment settings. It aids in PTSD therapy by resolving the issues processed in psychotherapy in a different, kinesthetic way (Levine, 2016). Psychotherapy, in turn, can help process issues found in explorative dance movement

therapy sessions (Levine, 2016). Levine (2016) conducted a meta-synthesis of nine different studies about qualitative findings on dance movement therapy and PTSD. This meta-synthesis suggests that the reestablishment of connections between mind, body, and brain help to heal symptoms of PTSD. These findings seem to make sense, as dance movement therapy exercises and experiences are often built around a ground-up approach to treatment with integrative and connective practices (Pierce, 2014). This means that dance movement therapy treats the root of the problem first, identified by Pierce (2014) as disconnected kinesthetic, emotional, and cognitive experiences. In addition to the benefits of a ground-up approach, when psychotherapy and dance movement therapy are combined in trauma treatment, patients generally respond better and experience lesser symptoms than patients who receive only one kind of therapy (Colace, 2017). A combination of different therapies is often helpful, even if those therapies do not include dance movement therapy. Those who participate in dance movement therapy in addition to psychotherapy as treatment for trauma not only receive further specialized care, but also get a more well-rounded approach to healing through both the body and mind. Those who are able to treat their illness from multiple perspectives are able to treat its many different characteristics, which might not be so apparent from a single therapy's immediate approach.

The combination of dance movement therapy and psychotherapy is effective for the initial treatment of PTSD and for preventing relapse later on, as a more diverse treatment results in a more complete healing (Colace, 2017). When professionals work together in order to provide a more comprehensive treatment plan that includes different types of therapy, individuals suffering from PTSD can receive more effective and long-lasting results (Colace, 2017). In turn, these results give these individuals better quality of life, greater self-efficacy, and new skills to use in future crises.

A Forward-Thinking Approach

PTSD treatment requires a broader look at what the patient needs in the future rather than only the riddance of dysfunctional

symptoms in the present, just as it needs a multifaceted approach to healing to fully treat the disorder (Barlow, 2017). Dance movement therapy gives multiple applicable tools to patients looking for long-term recovery and renewed quality of life after trauma. Just a few of these tools include interpersonal skills, self-awareness, emotion regulation efficiency, and self-compassion (Dosamantes-Beaudry, 1997). Barlow (2017) demonstrates that a lack of these skills plays a vital role in the development and continuance of PTSD symptoms. Barlow's study focused on college students, but the findings are consistent throughout other populations as well. In the 466 students studied, self-awareness, emotion regulation efficiency, and self-compassion were strongly negatively correlated with PTSD symptoms. These results point to not only the characteristics of those affected by PTSD, but the factors which make healthy individuals more susceptible to developing the disorder. This means that possessing strong self-awareness, emotion regulation efficiency, and self-compassion generally makes one less likely to develop PTSD after experiencing a traumatic event. Because dance movement therapy specializes in ways different than other therapies in the development of these adaptive and healthy attributes, it is often a great addition to PTSD treatment. With strengthened interpersonal skills, increased self-awareness, better emotion regulation efficiency, and improved self-compassion, individuals who suffer from PTSD can find freedom from their disorder while possibly enjoying more out of life than they had before their mental illness began. Equipping patients with life skills can help ensure more complete wellness throughout and after treatment.

Discussion

Summary

Dance movement therapy has many strengths and dynamic qualities that have been analyzed and explained in their relation to recovery from PTSD. A few explorative studies have been conducted and research done on exactly how dance movement therapy benefits those suffering from PTSD. The current literature

previously presented supports the idea that dance movement therapy is effective in treating PTSD when combined with other therapies.

The studies highlighted in this literature review support many ideas about the relationship between dance movement therapy and PTSD. One relationship between dance movement therapy and PTSD treatment which was not explicitly explored by the current literature is the possibility that the kinesthetic qualities found in dance movement therapy are the reason it is so effective when included in PTSD treatment. Because trauma often involves a physical threat of danger or death, it can often be categorized as a kinesthetic experience in addition to a psychological one. When one has a physical ailment, one's body is physically treated with medicine. When one suffers from mental illness, he or she goes to counseling and works through issues psychologically. Perhaps when someone experiences a trauma in a kinesthetic way, or through the physical senses, he or she should be treated in a way parallel to that experience as well. Of course, psychological stress is a symptom of PTSD and should be treated through some kind of psychotherapy, which focuses on the mental aspects of the psychological disorder. These studies, however, have shown that the kinesthetic qualities found in dance movement therapy might be the key to its success when working with PTSD.

Gaps in the Literature

The current literature discussing dance movement therapy in the treatment of PTSD includes gaps where additional research can be done on the relationship between the two. A few of these gaps include the lack of empirical and controlled-study research on dance movement therapy; the absence of literature on the effectiveness of various dance movement therapy exercises and practices on different mental disorders; and the deficiency of information on types of populations participating in dance movement therapy and the effects that therapy might have on these populations. PTSD treatment could greatly benefit from knowing what kinds of victim populations respond best to dance movement

therapy. With this information, professionals could make a more informed opinion on whom to refer to dance movement therapy as opposed to other therapy types and what kind of dance movement therapy (for example, one-on-one, group, improvisational, abstract, or literal) might be most effective for that individual.

Limitations

A few limitations which currently exist in the literature presented include: the lack of information on diverse populations and the effectiveness of dance movement therapy for them; the absence of studies done on large groups of people involved in dance movement therapy; and the deficiency of in-depth explanations in studies of which dance movement therapy practices were used. Additionally, I used only two databases, which limits the scope of an already narrow search. A possible critique for this literature review might include the belief that only certain populations are able to benefit from dance movement therapy, namely, younger women and children. However, the only factor which affects one's ability to participate in dance movement therapy as a treatment option is the presence of willingness, openness, and vulnerability in his or her involvement. However, populations which are generally stereotyped as being "tough" or "emotionless" often need a place to learn how to express what they are going through in their own ways. In this sense, dance movement therapy could be *more* beneficial for these people because it could teach them skills they otherwise would not have known were healthy for them to possess. Having concrete research done on these kinds of populations would benefit everyone involved, from therapists to patients. With empirical evidence to back up my inferences from the research presented, harmful stereotypes and marginalization could be reduced and better understood by the public and professionals alike.

Implications

From the findings presented in this literature review, one can conclude that other therapies could be altered to become more fluid and accepting like dance movement therapy. Because

dance movement therapy's success in PTSD treatment can be largely attributed to its partially implicit nature, we can take that knowledge and apply it to other therapies, which might better serve different populations (Fischman, 2016). In fact, a few therapies have already been developed with this concept in mind, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) or even other recreation therapies such as art or music therapy. These types of treatment have enjoyed success because of their similarly open-minded and non-judgmental characteristics. This being said, therapies can also be successful when deliberately planned out, depending on the kind of patient being treated and their specific needs.

The findings presented here can help professionals treating patients with PTSD by giving them another treatment option when and if other methods might not be working as well as initially hoped. As explained here, dance movement therapy has been proven to be effective in numerous populations which suffer from PTSD, such as sexual trauma victims, natural disaster survivors, and veterans (Barlow, 2017; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; McKinney, Hirsch, & Britton, 2017). Because of this, professionals can more confidently prescribe dance movement therapy as a first option to specific patients beginning treatment. Once mental healthcare professionals work with dance movement therapists in greater frequency and better understand the effectiveness and methods of dance movement therapy, more individuals suffering from PTSD can receive comprehensive and individualized care for their mental illness. Doing so improves the chances of recovery for those suffering while increasing the options for professionals who feel their patients need something in addition to the treatment they can provide.

Conclusion

Dance movement therapy has been established as a viable treatment for individuals suffering from PTSD. This relatively new therapy type may seem "fluffy" or unsupported by current knowledge about therapy to the uneducated in the field. However,

this literature review demonstrates that there is established, trustworthy, peer-reviewed information which supports dance movement therapy as a PTSD treatment. In fact, the current literature on dance movement therapy's effectiveness in PTSD treatment points to its differences from more common treatments as its biggest strengths. Patients who have not found the kind of results they hope for in their current treatments have another option- dance movement therapy. Giving individuals who suffer from PTSD another viable option to utilize in their personal treatment gives them another chance at healing and hope. Professionals with the ability to provide this should be aware and educated on the many types of effective treatments available to their patients, including dance movement therapy.

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