



## Effects of dance as a tool for therapy

Farah Fadzali, September 2021

Dance has always been a natural form of expression and many institutions, behavioural health facilities, dance companies and studios are recognising the inherent healing power that can come from dancing. As dance continues to gain popularity in the media, growing number of people are embracing dance as a way to meet physical and emotional needs<sup>2,5,6,7</sup>. Therapy generally is used to describe wellness or a sense of feeling better. In dance, there is a therapy called *dance/movement therapy*. It is important to point out that dance/movement therapy is not a phrase, but an actual profession. In this article, we will discuss what dance/movement therapy is and its benefits.

### What is Dance/Movement Therapy?

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) is defined by the American Dance Therapy Association<sup>2,5</sup> as the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being. It can also offer important mental health benefits including stress reduction and even symptom relief from conditions such as anxiety and depression. DMT uses movement and nonverbal

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communication in addition to talk therapy to manage psychological and behavioural concerns that words alone do not address.

In a dance/movement therapy session<sup>11,12</sup>, a therapist may:

- Help an individual to explore and make meaning on the connection between movement and your emotions
- Encourage tracking of bodily sensations and breath
- Guide through self-expressive and improvisational movements
- Offer specific movement therapeutic interventions to promote healing
- Help to process the feelings evoked by the movement

Dance therapists may utilise a technique known as mirroring<sup>9</sup>, which involves copying another person's movements. It can be a way to help people feel more connected to others and to build feelings of empathy.

## Benefits of Dance/Movement Therapy

Dance therapy has a number of benefits that can make it a helpful addition to other treatment approaches. Where many treatment modalities, such as cognitive\* behavioural therapy (CBT), focus on cognitions or behaviours, dance/movement therapy incorporates body-based strategies. DMT promotes<sup>4,8</sup>:



Kow Xiao Jun, performing arts practitioner  
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- **Calmness:** By using DMT, a dance therapist can provide body-based strategies to support regulating the system, which allows for an increased sense of calmness
- **Self-awareness:** Building self-awareness can help an individual feel more connected to their body's physical signals
- **Coping skills:** DMT can also serve as a way to build coping skills by using movement and understanding of your movement preferences to explore strengths and signals of stress, distress, and triggers

*\*Cognitive is defined as the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and senses.*

## Benefits of DMT on Mental Health

Dance has been said to help improve mood, reduce stress and anxiety<sup>7</sup>. Within the scientific community, a growing number of researchers have proven that, while dancing, an abundance of mood-improving chemicals (Dopamine, Serotonin, Endorphins, Oxytocin) are released within the body of the dancer. According to a research published in *The Arts in Psychotherapy*<sup>2</sup> journal, when unleashed, these chemicals help to improve one's mental state; even one session of dance can reduce depression<sup>1,11</sup>.



Kow Xiao Jun, performing arts practitioner  
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Moreover, a growing number of experts have found that, when establishing human-to-human physical contact through touch (like in partnering dance sessions), there are notable reductions in levels of stress and anxiety, consequently bettering one's overall mental wellbeing. Dancing with others helps you feel a sense of connectedness and often leads to an increase in social activity. In addition, dance classes also lend themselves to an increase in social bonds and friendships amongst dancers.

While dancing itself cannot replace help from a mental health professional, it is one of the many ways to practice healthy mental health and wellbeing.

Here is a list of some dance/movement therapy organisations and therapist in Singapore:

- Academy of Human Development (AHD) - Dance Movement Therapy (working with children): <https://www.ahd.com.sg/index.php/dance-movement-therapy>
- Crestar School of Dance – Dance Movement Therapy: <https://crestardance.com.sg/dance-movement-therapy/>
- Danspire- Group Wellness: <https://www.danspire.com/schedule/>

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An MSc in Dance Science graduate from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Farah has multiple experience in teaching movement therapy in various organisations in Singapore.

Farah is now a dance science researcher studying injury prevention and performer's health and safety practices. Together with her achievements and qualifications, Farah hopes to work towards the development of dance science research in Singapore.

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