

# *The Role of Dance Movement Therapy in Mental Health*

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**Abstract:** As material life becomes better and the pace of life accelerates, mental health is becoming more and more of a concern. However, traditional verbal psychotherapies have failed to meet people's demands for pleasurable, safe, and universal psychological healing, and thus dance movement therapy has emerged and taken on an increasingly important role in the mental health field. There is a large gap in the comprehensive research on contemporary dance movement therapy related populations and few suggestions for its development in China. To bridge this gap, the author has collected a large amount of relevant literature and summarized the important role of dance therapy in mental health from three perspectives: its emergence and development as well as theoretical foundation; the second part is the current situation of related groups, including the qualifications, employment prospects of dance therapists and three major categories of groups that have been proven to benefit from dance therapy at present; the last part provides suggestions for four social roles concerning the development of dance therapy in China.

**Keywords:** dance movement therapy, art psychotherapy, mental health, dance therapist

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century is an era of rapid economic development, where globalization and trade internationalization have led to the accumulation of material wealth and a rapid improvement in human living standards. However, human society has not been able to enter the ideal realm of happiness and peace. All human beings are facing numerous crises and challenges, one of the most obvious problems being the increased psychological stress and decreased sense of well-being brought about by fast-paced life. As material desires are gradually being satisfied, a higher quality of life, integrated health including physical and mental have become the goals of many modern people. This is when psychotherapy emerged.

However, traditional psychotherapy techniques have many drawbacks. Medicine only focuses on the bio-neurological level of the body, which often cures the symptoms, not the disease, ignoring the emotional needs of human being as a life; while traditional psychotherapy mostly focuses on the mind, which is verbal and non-active [1], it is difficult to treat individuals with severe psychological defenses. In this regard, the emergence of dance movement therapy came in handy.

During a dance movement therapy, the therapist guides the participants to dance spontaneously to music, immersing patients in a joyful atmosphere, helping their bodies break through their self-imposed psychological defenses. People gradually open up to the therapy, ultimately achieving the effect of relaxing the body, relieving emotions and healing trauma.

At present, academic research on dance movement therapy is still in its infancy, focusing roughly on two areas: first, the origins and historical development of dance movement therapy in Western countries, famous dance movement healers in history and their pioneering therapeutic methods; and second, statistical experiments on the mental healing effects of dance movement therapy on a specific group of people. However, there has been less comprehensive research on those involved in contemporary dance movement therapy (both therapists and recipients); and the development of dance movement therapy in the Chinese mental health industry has rarely been mentioned. The study of these issues fills this gap.

Based on the role of dance movement therapy in mental health, this study will answer the following five questions. How was dance movement therapy born and developed? How is dance movement therapy supported by traditional psychological theory as an aid to healing the mind and body? What are the qualifications for contemporary dance movement therapy profession? Which groups have been scientifically proven to benefit from dance movement therapy? And how should China, which has just introduced dance movement therapy in the last two decades and has a high demand for it, develop this mental healing modality?

Two main research methods are used in this paper: literature and descriptive research methods. The author collected domestic and international literature to clarify the current research status of this issue, and then further explain, summarize and sublimate existing phenomena, laws and theories. The paper facilitates the popularity of dance movement therapy in contemporary times, thus opening a new path for mental health.

## **2. The Ultimate Principles of Dance Movement Therapy**

### **2.1. General Description**

Dance movement therapy is derived from dance performance but is different in that it does not focus on whether the dancer's moves are graceful or not, but on the dancer himself by encouraging each individual to listen to his inner impulses and express them through physical movements. No wonder the dance movement therapy class is described in the article "Dance Movement Therapy - a Massage for Soul" as follows: If a person suddenly steps into a dance movement therapy workshop halfway through, he must think that everyone in the classroom is crazy. It is only when he really gets involved in it that he will be able to empathize with what is meant by "arsenic for others, honey for me". The beauty of dance healing lies in turning your inexpressible emotions into primitive body languages [2].

However, dance movement therapy is not just about stretching the body and relaxing the mind, it is an efficient psychotherapy as each person's unique movements come from within and speak of his own background, upbringing, temperament, and even of some unknown complex psychological problems. The therapist simply asks the patient to make an authentic inner presentation through the body, to see their needs and problems, then to increase their awareness of themselves on a deeper level through specific techniques, and finally to repair some parts of their consciousness or body that are stuck due to trauma [3].

### **2.2. Emergence and Development**

The use of dance movement to express emotions, heal trauma and communicate with the community and nature dates back to primitive times. African natives, barefoot, sang and danced in a circle amidst the flying dust; peasants on the Loess Plateau played the Ansai drums in their spare time to get rid of their fatigue; the shamans of the old tribes chanted and exaggerated their movements while praying for rain [2]. In many primitive societies, dance was as essential as eating and sleeping [1]. In modern times, however, people seem to forgot their ancestral traditions and gradually lost touch with both themselves and nature.

It was not until the first half of the 20th century that new directions in the field of modern dance and psychotherapy laid the foundation for the emergence of dance movement therapy. In the field of modern dance, dancers were liberated from stereotypical, formulaic dance movements and encouraged to express their feelings in a more creative and artistic way. In the psychotherapy profession, psychologists paid more attention on non-verbal forms of therapy with the recognition of close interconnectedness of the human mind and body [1]. Throughout the 20th century, the social climate tended to be open, encouraging self-expression and self-exploration, and valuing the unique personality and feelings of each individual. It is in this context, dance, with its emphasis on the body, and psychotherapy, with its emphasis on the mind, were combined in the 1940's and 1950's to form a new therapy – dance movement therapy.

In 1966, the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) was founded to establish a code of ethics for the dance therapy profession, to regulate the qualifications, education and practicum requirements for becoming a dance therapist, to publish a professional journal, to organize international conferences on dance therapy, to promote international exchange among members of the association, to support the research and development of dance therapy, and to promote the widespread use of dance therapy [4].

The theory and methodology of dance psychotherapy was introduced to China in 1994 by Yulan Fucius, a senior dance therapist, through Shanghai Theatre Academy, Beijing Dance Academy, Beijing Normal University, and the Eastern Body Culture Research Centre [4]. Currently in China, art institutions such as Beijing Dance Academy and Shandong University of Arts Dance Academy are offering relevant training courses [5].

### 2.3. Theoretical Foundations

Dance Movement therapy has been influenced by many theories, including the mirror neuron theory in neuroscience, phenomenological theory, aut sensory development theory in developmental psychology, social embodiment theory in social psychology, trauma theory in clinical psychology, action metaphor theory in cognitive science and the art of dance, movement analysis and other theories [3]. Among them, psychological theories are the most influential theoretical basis for dance therapy.

Firstly, psychoanalytic theory suggests that human's behaviors are determined by the unconscious and instincts. In dance movement therapy, it is believed that individual's life experiences are stored in the body, and that body language is a reproduction of these memories and body movement is an expression of private personality. Thus, a person's psychological development can be seen in one's improvised dance movements. The pioneer of dance movement therapy, Lilian Espenak, developed the psychomotor school of dance therapy based on Alfred Adler's psychoanalytic theory and Lowen's mind-body theory [1].

Secondly, Carl Jung refined Freud's drive theory, emphasizing the unity and wholeness of the personality and dividing it into the consciousness, the individual subconscious and the collective subconscious. The main content of the collective subconscious is the 'archetype', which is deeply buried in the mind and cannot be expressed in the conscious mind, but only in symbolic form by other means. In 1916, Jung first proposed the idea that dance could be used as a psychotherapy. In the 1960s, American dance therapy pioneer Mary Whitehouse founded Jungian dance therapy, also known as deep movement therapy, based on Jung's psychoanalytic theories [1, 6].

In addition to this, the Gestalt school of psychology has developed the heterogeneous isomorphism theory. It means that there is a correspondence between external objects, visual art and human feelings, so that people can directly feel the emotional experience of vitality and balance in art.

Finally, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) psychology enriches the Eastern elements that form the theoretical basis of dance therapy. The idea of spirit body combination is the core of TCM theory, and is the one that has the most direct impact on dance therapy. TCM believes that human life can

only be sustained and developed through the interdependence and interaction of body and spirit [6]. One of the key principles of dance therapy is the interaction between mind and body. Patients are guided to use physical movements to release repressed emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness and depression.

### **3. Related Groups in Dance Movement Therapy**

#### **3.1. Dance Therapist**

##### **3.1.1. Qualifications**

In general, to become a dance therapist, one needs to master dance therapy skills as well as background knowledge in a variety of disciplines such as dance and psychology, and receive professional training in order to use dance therapy to effectively treat clients.

The American Dance Association has listed six requirements for dance therapists: integration of dance therapy skills and knowledge; the ability to observe, analyze and assess the patient's movements; the ability to establish appropriate treatment plans for different patients' needs; knowledge of psychology and understanding of individual and group psychodynamic processes; skills in helping people and diverse values; understanding personal professional roles and responsibilities [6].

Yulan Fucius, the dance therapist in Taiwan who introduced dance therapy in China, points out that dance psychotherapists must have extensive knowledge and experience in dance or movement (including various dance training, theory, choreography, improvisation and dance teaching skills), as well as master's level studies in developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, pathological psychology, psychotherapy, expressive arts therapy, dance psychotherapy, human structure, kinesiology, movement analysis, counselling theory and methods, research methods, non-verbal movement and behavioral observation and analysis, etc. In addition, dance therapists are required to practice specialized dance therapies of their own choice - for example, treatment of physical and psychological disorders, marriage and family therapy, treatment for children or the elderly, treatment of behavioral disorders, psychotherapy of addictions (violence, drugs, alcohol or substances), psychotherapy of neurological or psychiatric disorders and creative dance psychotherapy [4]. There are currently training institutions in China such as Inspirees Dance Therapy Training Program and the German Chinese Professional Education Program for Dance Therapists.

##### **3.1.2. Registration Levels**

Dance therapists are registered at two levels: Dance Therapist (DTR) and Advanced Dance Therapist (ADTR): Dance Therapist (DTR) and Advanced Dance Therapist (ADTR). Both levels of registration require a Master's degree or higher, a clinical practicum, supervision by an ADTR and validation by the American Dance Therapy Association before registration is granted. Dance Therapists (DTRs) may work clinically in hospitals, educational or rehabilitation facilities; Advanced Dance Therapists (ADTRs) could be in private practice, teaching dance therapy classes and supervising trainee dance therapists.

##### **3.1.3. Work Sites**

Contemporary dance therapists work in psychiatric hospitals, medical and rehabilitation facilities, consulting service center, educational institutions, reformatories, health promotion centers, community education centers, family health centers, childcare facilities, homes for the elderly, private clinics, preventive education facilities, and corporate effectiveness training programs. Some dance therapists also work as consultants, writers, and researchers.

## **3.2. Dance Movement Therapy Audiences**

Dance therapy is fun, artistic, gentle, low-risk, and highly effective in psychological healing, making it accessible to a wide audience. In existing studies, dance movement therapy has been used and proven to be effective in the following three main groups.

### **3.2.1. Secondary and Higher Education**

High school and college students are the most advanced group and new force in society. They are more receptive to new psychological therapies. On the other hand, they are at the intersection of adolescence and adulthood, facing more psychological conflicts and stress, so it is meaningful to assist their psychological maturity through dance movement therapy. Studies showed that students at a higher vocational school significantly improved their self-ratings and interpersonal relationships after dance group counseling [7]. Dance therapy has also been applied to relieve high school art students' stress caused by entrance exams, interpersonal relationships, and emotional management, and has yielded significant results [8]. In the paper "the Research of Music and Dancing Group Guidance of College Freshmen's Maladjustment Problems", it was mentioned that the music and dancing group therapy intervention improved college freshmen in interpersonal, learning, career, self-care adaptation [9]. Besides, the effectiveness of dance therapy was confirmed in a university where an 8-week dance therapy program was conducted with pre-school education students as a target group, mitigating their interpersonal barriers, anxiety, and aimlessness. Dance therapy has also been used as an effective stress reliever for performance associations. The paper "Intervention Study of Dance Therapy on Performance Anxiety among Arts Association Students" mentioned that compared to physical dance training, dance therapy was more effective in relieving the anxiety among arts association students [10].

### **3.2.2. Psychiatric Patients**

Dance Movement therapy has a unique medical value as a psychotherapeutic modality, especially for groups with verbal communication difficulties. A study has shown that 12-week dance therapy intervention can improve the gross motor, balance and coordination abilities, the socially responsive behaviors such as the number of eye gaze, body movement and oral communication of children with autism [11]. Another study of dance therapy for autistic children found that the number and duration of social interactions of these children saw a remarkable rise in the intervention period compared to the baseline period [12]. Dance therapy also has positive therapeutic effects on schizophrenia. After a structured dance movement intervention in 150 patients with schizophrenia at a hospital in Zhongshan City, researchers found that the patients' schizophrenia symptoms were relieved and their self-efficacy, resilience, family closeness and quality of life were improved [13].

### **3.2.3. Marginalized Groups**

Dance therapy can also improve the mental health and well-being of marginalized groups. After a 12-week dance therapy session among 48 urban left-behind children with low levels of self-efficacy and physical self-esteem, the study found that children in the experimental group showed significant improvements in motor skills, physical activity, physical self-worth, physical attractiveness, appearance, coordination, speed, flexibility and overall self-esteem, which resulted in their self-confidence, better moral character, and interpersonal skills [14]. For the elderly population, studies have shown that dance therapy can significantly decrease depression, improve mental health and well-being in old age, and is therefore recommended for use in pension institutions [15].

## **4. Suggestions for Dance Therapy Development in China**

Dance therapy originated in the West and has only been introduced to China in recent years. There is still tremendous room for development, but the demand for dance therapy among the Chinese public is growing day by day: the country has a large population with varying levels of education; people are increasingly concerned about their mental health as economic level rises rapidly. In light of these situations, the author makes recommendations to promote the development of dance therapy in China for the following four groups.

### **4.1. Suggestions for Chinese Dance Therapists**

First, undertake specialized studies in accordance with professional norms and receive regular supervision. Dance therapists are doctors who use dance art to treat patients psychologically. They have the same solemn mission as physicians, so they should be given the same strict professional training. Dance therapy is a form of psychotherapy, so dance therapists should receive regular supervision as psychological counselors, so the therapeutic effect can be guaranteed and optimized.

Second, learn new international technologies and keep up with the times. Chinese dance therapists should often visit abroad and attend international conferences to learn advanced dance therapy techniques. For example, The First International Summit of Creative Arts for Therapy and Education, which took place in Beijing from December 9 to 11, 2017, was a great start. Experts and scholars from Germany, the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Russia and therapists from all over China who are studying and applying dance therapy gathered together. During the forum, participants shared their lifelong experience and thesis of dance therapy as well as conducted on-site teaching [16]. This conference played a crucial role in promoting the application of dance therapy in China.

Third, properly understand the career risks of dance therapist and intervene in career depletion. Psychotherapists need to be consistently empathetic, remain interpersonally sensitive, and provide one-way caring to people suffering from conflict, loss, and trauma, making therapists at high risk for professional depletion [17]. Dance therapists face the same problem. Therefore, before stepping into the dance therapy industry, it is recommended to rationally understand the occupational risks; after entering the industry, prevent and intervene in occupational depletion through sports, self-focusing techniques, and more interaction with mental healthy people.

### **4.2. Suggestions for Chinese Dance Therapy Audiences**

The public should consider mental health as important as physical health, recognizing that the mind and body are integrated. Friends and families should be more open to talk about psychological problems and mental distress. Society could be more understanding and tolerant of people with mental illness. If needed, it is recommended for ordinary people to try dance therapy as a healing method.

### **4.3. Suggestions for Chinese Universities**

As mentioned in the paper “Dance Therapy’s Implications for Mental Health Education Work in Universities”, although psychological education is in full swing in various universities, psychological problems among college students remain severe [18]. Therefore, schools should develop more innovative psychological activities, such as dance therapy, and take this opportunity to popularize dance therapy among the new social forces.

### **4.4. Suggestions for the Chinese Communities**

The communities should actively carry out activities related to dance movement therapy, combining recreational activities with psychological healing to help community residents understand and

participate in dance therapy. A study has shown that there is not only an objective need for dance therapy among the elderly in the community, but also a subjective willingness to invest time and money in it [19]. When designing activities, organizers can add traditional Chinese dances, square dances, and other familiar art forms to make dance therapy more accessible to the public.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper finds that dance movement therapy plays an increasingly important role in the field of mental health. This new form of art psychotherapy combines mental healing with primitive body art expression, which is a good remedy for the shortcomings of traditional verbal psychotherapy. Dance therapy is supported by a solid theoretical foundation, so the scientific and reliability of its practice is guaranteed. Because of all its advantages, dance movement therapy can be beneficial to a wide range of groups, from ordinary high school and college students, to mental patients, to marginalized groups. Today, dance therapy profession has developed systematic training programs, which have contributed to a steady flow of talent into the field, allowing dance movement therapy to flourish.

The paper comprehensively investigates related groups involved in contemporary dance therapy, summarizing the qualifications and prospects of therapists and generalizing the groups of recipients. This facilitates a more macroscopic understanding of the input and output of dance movement therapy in mental health. Accordingly, the paper proposes unique methods for the development of dance therapy in today's China. Meanwhile, the paper mainly describes, summarizes, and analyzes existing literature and lacks in innovation and foresight. In the future, quantitative and qualitative research can be conducted on a specific aspect of dance movement therapy in China, which will be beneficial to the in-depth study of this topic.

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