

VOGUE INTERVIEW - SNEHA MANKANI
DANCE/ MOVEMENT THERAPY

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How dance therapy can ease chronic conditions like autism and Parkinson's

by SNEHA MANKANI

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Sometimes, all you need is a little song and dance



What is dance therapy?

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Dance movement therapy is the process of using ‘movement’ creatively for psychological, social and physical development and rehabilitation. The best part of this therapy is that it is open to all—you don’t need to be a dancer, or be of a certain age, to participate in dance therapy. “The body and the mind are interconnected. The body can be developed as a resource for healing and growth. I believe that when the mind and body work towards synchrony, this process can be used to reconstruct a more adaptive and healthy functioning individual. This is a creative and self-exploratory process that does not involve teaching dance forms,” explains Mehta.

Diagnosis: Autism

Name: Pranav Bakshi

Age: 17

“Pranav’s movement therapy work started at a community arts festival called Velvi For Autism. Even though he is a young adult, we were able to develop a program for him to use movement therapy for his personal and professional development. He attended two intensive programs through the art festival. He aims to become a model in the fashion world and play golf, and has a penchant for [photography](#) and music. We used movement therapy to help him work on his posture, his movement patterns, his confidence and communication,” says Mehta.

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Pranav’s parent: “I came across dance therapy when I met Devika Mehta, the dance therapist who worked with Pranav as part of a theatre workshop he attended. To say that the experience brought about a paradigm shift in the way I perceived his strengths and the way he blossomed—be it in the areas of body awareness, movement orientations, his response to the outside stimulus of music or the pleasure that it brought him—would be an understatement. I instinctively knew that this would not be a one-time experience. Pranav himself asked for more sessions; it’s like his body had found a voice. His silhouette is more aligned and he expresses himself through joyful dance experiences, which he looks forward to. The outlet that dance therapy has provided him is priceless, and has touched all aspects of his life, even his regular game of golf.”

Tell us a bit about dance therapy?

Dance/ Movement therapy (DMT) is using movement creatively for psychological, social and physical development and rehabilitation. The body and the mind are interconnected. The body can be developed as resource for healing and growth. I believe that when the mind and body work towards synchrony, this process can be used to reconstruct a more adaptive and healthy functioning individual. This is a creative and self-exploratory process that does not involve teaching dance forms.

One does not need any prior dance knowledge or experience to participate in DMT workshops and sessions. There is no limitation to the range of movement abilities to engage in therapeutic work (i.e. Fairly mobile to wheelchair bound or Palliative care). Since this is a form of psychotherapy, it is founded in the principles of confidentiality, non-judgement and unconditional acceptance, providing a safe environment for one to explore their experience in movement. It can be done in an Individual, couple as well as group sessions and has no age limit.

What kind of illnesses does dance therapy help in, and how?

Dance Therapy can be beneficial to any age group and any population. Since it is both aims at physical and emotional functioning, it can be helpful to people recovering from physical illness like stroke, traumatic brain injury, cancer recovery, movement and motor disorders as well as any mental health difficulty. It is beneficial for people with different abilities as well. The applications of dance therapy reach far and wide. It can also be used to train teachers in classrooms to use embodied learning and build empathy with children. Parents can use embodied parents to improve communication with children. It can be used with children to improve peer interaction and for conflict resolution. Working with trauma from a body-centered approach for any kind of violence has been seen to be more long lasting.

It is even for people who wish to explore their connection with their bodies . You don't need to have a mental health illness or a physical one to reap the benefits of connecting to your body meaningfully.

Dance Therapy can be used in corporate environments to release stress and get the body moving from a specific posture, leadership, communication and team building.

Tell us about your experience as a dance therapist.

My own personal journey with dance therapy has been quite unexpected and enlightening. I am more aware and attuned to what my body has to say to me at each moment and that helps me understand my decision making and coping mechanisms.

Working as a dance therapist in India, has been a struggle and joyful at the same time. Its about constantly creating awareness, clearing misconceptions about dance therapy, teaching and training on different certificate courses, designing programs for multiple organizations. It has been about putting the head down and working very hard with clinical populations to constantly develop programs based in the Indian context. Recently, my work with the elderly was appreciated by the American Dance Therapy Association at their 52nd Annual Conference. I was invited to share my work on the International Panel, with pioneers and seniors in the field of Dance therapy.

It is in a niche field and there are not many intensively trained, master's level DMTs in this country at the moment. We are working hard to change that and to create a working community which upholds the highest ethical practices.

Describe a typical dance therapy session – how long is it, what are the steps involved, the interactions – the whole process.

For younger children with difficulties individual sessions can be upto 30 minutes while with adult and group sessions can last from 45 minutes to 60 minutes.

Different concerns require different approaches based in the client centered way of working. The session structure loosely starts with warmup and identifying the theme to be worked on, followed by the process work towards a therapeutic goal or working on the theme and ends with a cool down.

There is an active contract between the client and the therapist or every often known as a working alliance which involves the collaboration on both parts. Confidentiality and sessional boundaries are maintained by both during the sessions. It involves music, art and elements of drama as tools apart from movement and body based work.

What is the ideal duration of dance therapy to notice a difference?

This depends on the severity of the difficulty psychological and/or physical. Since it is a creative therapeutic process, it can take anywhere from minimum 10 sessions to about a year or more (once a week or twice a week) or so in therapeutic work.

Any stories you can share of how dance therapy has helped your patients?

Since I have been doing this for the last 7 years, I have had many beautiful experiences with client. Some of my work has been with at-risk adolescents in sectors of low socioeconomic status and I have seen how they have used movement therapy sessions as a means of communicating their background stories, their visions and resolving their conflicts. Working with survivors of abuse, children who are differently abled and people with neurological difficulty is an absolute area of interest. I have also worked with people having Somatic disorders, PTSD, anxiety and depression and one of the stories i absolutely am still stunned by, is when a person with PTSD came in saying she did not want to take medications for the pain she was facing and wanted to do more body based psychotherapeutic work. She was willing to really work on what mattered to her, where she wanted to go, and her safe space. We discontinued therapy when she very casually mentioned that she took a medicine for pain the night before and it didn't scare her anymore. My supervisor who has seen her come in and out of the system for about 10 years, was surprised when she mentioned the medication.

Since we spoke about uncertified people providing clinical solutions – can you tell me what it takes to be a certified dance therapist?

It is important here to make the distinction between dancing, therapeutic dance and dance therapy. Teaching dance to differently abled or anyone, does not come under dance therapy. Dance therapy involves no teaching. Therapeutic Dance allows for movement to be used in a way to heal and help but it does not require training since helping people move with physical illness on music often comes under therapeutic dance. Free unstructured moving to different themes, contact improvisations, 5 rhythms all require different training than that of Dance Therapy.

Dance Therapy requires training in physiology, anatomy, psychology, dance therapy techniques, sociology and needs supervision for this form of therapy. Therapeutic Dancing and Teaching dance often gets interpreted as dance movement therapy by media and by individuals who wish to sometimes use a more attractive term for movement. It is important to understand, that any creative arts is therapeutic in nature and hence we enjoy it as much. But that to use Movement and Dance as therapy requires training.

Intensive training and the therapist himself being under supervision is a must for a certified dance therapist. There is a master's program available in the USA, UK and across some other cities in Europe and North America that make this intensive training possible.

A Master's in Dance Movement Therapy is preferable. There are some trained dance movement therapists in the country, who also have an additional masters in clinical psychology or counseling psychology.

Our country does not have a master's level program in dance therapy yet. We do have a few certificate courses which teaches you the basics of using Creative movement therapy, but these are not intensive courses and are open to all (even those without a background in psychology). These are called Therapeutic Movement Facilitators or Practitioners. There are some Diploma courses which have started recently.

When availing dance therapy is it important to ask for training, checking credentials and questioning which association of dance therapy are they affiliated with. Do the research as a service consumer like you would for a medical practitioner. One wouldn't go to doctor who has done 60 hours of training, then why do so for one's own mental and physical health.

Who needs dance therapy? And how can they sign up for it?

This is a trick question. I believe everyone needs more movement in life, literally and metaphorically. Anyone who wishes to explore the mind and body connection in a therapeutic setting can avail of it.

To sign up, if they email us or contact us through our website, we will try our best to connect them with certified and trained people in different cities across the country . We are a small community and we are happy to refer people who need therapy to other trained professionals in our field. Since it is an upcoming field, the number of dance movement therapists and facilitators are few in this country especially those that have trained intensively in USA and UK. It is important to go with referrals since there are untrained professionals who are delving into psychological areas without any training in therapy or psychologists, physiotherapists and other professionals who are delving into it without training in the techniques of using dance therapy intensively for long term treatment. This can be harmful for any individual physically and psychologically.

What should one know before starting dance therapy?

One should be willing to connect with their bodies and this is often at times the most difficult since we have stopped listening to what our bodies have to say to us. Like any therapy, dance therapy does not give instant results. It is a process. Shedding inhibitions about using movement as therapy can only be done once you start moving.

Who is it not for?

I believe it can be for anyone, but since it is a creative art form, some may prefer a different creative art modality to use for therapy. The beauty of movement therapy is that movement is a part of you and

present with you in every moment. The only way to know if it is for you or not is by trying it out. Sometimes, it may be something that you try and do not wish to pursue since the body and mind work can be quite intensive and unstructured at times. One can always come back to it later, when they feel that is what they need to heal and recover.

EXPERIENCES:

Diagnosis: TBI: Traumatic Brain Injury.

Name: Sonal Sidhwani

Age: 42

Can you tell me a little bit about this patient – what her condition was before she started dance therapy and why it was important for her to start it?

Motor co-ordination was asynchronous. Mood was low. Step length had decreased. She has already been undergoing Neuro Rehab with a multi disciplinary team before and she started to come to me and even while she is in therapy she is continuing that program. She felt increasingly frustrated that she had forgotten her 'fun' factor and that her body would not dance to her inner soul song.

How has dance therapy helped you?

Dance therapy has helped me immensely. I was first introduced to dance therapy in the US where I had lived since the age of 24.

Following my TBI in December 2016, I initially started intensive neuro rehabilitation. I slowly got better and was able to walk independently and my neurologist decreased my medications.

In January 2018 after asking for a referral from my physical therapist and psychologist I was introduced to a Mumbai based dance and movement therapist who had been trained internationally.

Physically dance therapy has helped my motor movements be finer, tuned, inching towards grace away from rigidity.

Emotionally I have been able to dance with my feelings and through my feelings: emerging from a dark abyss, seeking the light. I have enjoyed listening to and writing poetry: a strong catharsis for me. This was possible under the guidance of my therapist.

Psychologically: Dance therapy helped me create my own secret forest where I am always welcome as I am and loved with all my imperfections. I can retreat to this place whenever I feel overwhelming emotion and can soon find my calm. Shavasana of the mind.

Socially: Dance therapy has piqued the interest of friends and family. I have been dancing with my nieces and smiling more often. I listen to music with them and dance away my body to it's own groove.

Overall I find myself walking better, feeling better and in general re-learning that essential quality that can bring happiness to anyone: the ability to have be light and have 'Fun'.

Diagnosis: Autism

Name: Pranav Bakhshi

Age: 17

Can you tell me a little bit about this client– what his condition was before he started dance therapy and why it was important for him to start it?

Pranav's movement therapy work started at a community arts festival called VELVI FOR AUTISM.

Even though he is a young adults, we were able to develop a program for him to use Movement Therapy in his personal and professional development. He attended two intensive Programs through the art festival format. He aims to become a Model in the Fashion world and play golf, along with his penchant for photography and music. We used movement therapy to help him work on his posture, his movement patterns, his confidence and communication.

Can you also share some patient benefits from your Parkinsons sessions?

The main benefits that patients and caregivers are increase in self confidence, supports their recovery from depression, reduction in falls, improved fine motor movements, better social support, reduction in stigma, reengaging with movement and increased rhythmic movements.