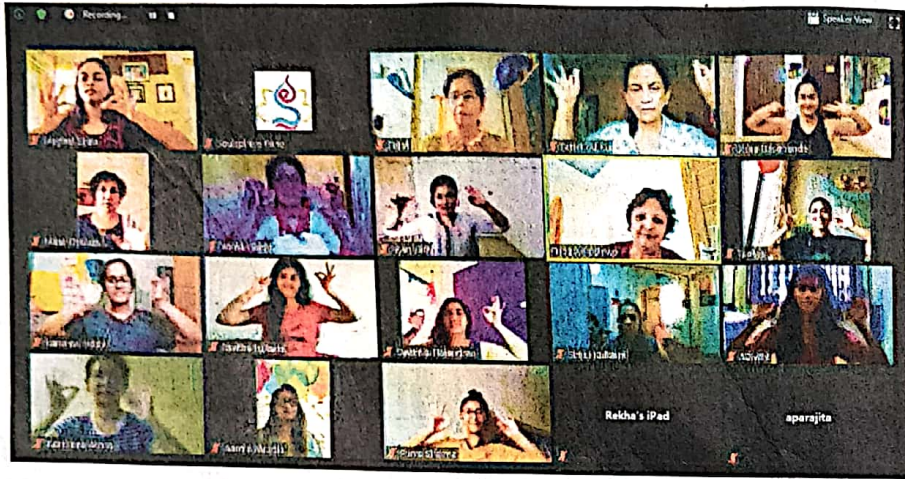


MOVE YOUR BODY, MASTER YOUR MIND



Caregivers, People With Special Needs Turn To Dance Movement Therapy To Cope With Pandemic Stress

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Does dance always have to be a way of rejoicing? This is a question Mahima (name changed) has asked herself many times in the past — at a gathering, at home with her favourite song playing, or on her bathroom floor, fighting a panic attack.

The 21-year-old has lived with anxiety disorder for about four years, but equally powerful has been her longing to move her body — “Exercise, stretch, run, do anything that could shake up the inertia, helplessness and fear, gripping me all the time,” she says.

Graduating at the time of a pandemic, as the Chennai student prepared herself for a

year of extreme mental turmoil, she came across a link that took her to dance movement therapy (DMT) — which has changed the course of her life.

DMT, a form of psychotherapy that uses physical movement along with verbal therapy to bring about emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration, has become popular among diverse sections of the population post the pandemic, including children with special needs, caregivers, students and young professionals. It trains you to identify stress, anxiety or emotional pain in the body and release it through improvised movement and dance, and has become liberating at a time when there is pressure to stay indoors, coupled with lack of social interaction and the overarching uncertainty.

“DMT believes in the idea that your mental and physical health are complementary,” says

Devika Mehta co-founder, treasurer and PR member of Indian Association of Dance Movement Therapy (IADMT). “Most times,

emotional conflict has a physical symptom, like a pain in the back or chest, or shorter breaths when you are faced with an anxiety trigger. What we work with is psychosomatic pain — one that doesn’t

have a medical reason. We go from the body to the mind — start with the physical symptoms, identify the emotions in the body that cause it and then reflect on them.”

Over the past few months, Mahima has gone from staying up for seven hours straight at night to calmly journaling her career options and decided to pursue an MBA. “Moving your body isn’t about joy or sorrow, it’s a right,” she says.

This is an idea that dance educator and co-founder of Creative Movement Therapy Association of India (CMTAI), Tripura Kashyap, has been advocating since she pioneered work in the field in the 1990s. “Movement for movement’s sake,” is something that forms the base of her self-care programmes.

“In our virtual programmes with children and adolescents with special needs, we had 15 of them registering with their parents. Over the course of 12 sessions, these routines transformed the interpersonal relationship between parents and their children, as they involved a lot of mirroring, shadowing, moving with props and having fun,” says Tripura. “It also increased aspects such as eye contact, body coordination and self-awareness among the children.”

Practitioners observe that children with special needs have taken to it strongly, also because the lockdown has cut out their chance to engage in speech and everyday skills that they used to

do in school, and as a result, end up with pent up energy at home.

The lockdown had pushed Simran K, a Delhi-based research fellow into 17-hour days, working from home, caring for elderly in-laws and a young child. But over the past five weeks, her morning DMT sessions have become the routine around which the rest of her day is built. “I never understood caregivers’ trauma until the pandemic hit. My therapy sessions have allowed me to become self-reliant, identifying that the throbbing headache and neck pain have emotional triggers, that I can release through a high energy physical routine and talk about it with my therapist after cooling down,” she says.

Preetha Ramasubramanian, founding member and president of IADMT, says the feeling of helplessness is the biggest challenge faced by people during these months. “DMT helps you cope with everyday stressors. It is about tapping into the body’s wisdom, understanding what it is saying, and building the resources from within to cope with and overcome the challenge,” she says.

THE FOUR STAGES OF DMT

Movement seeding | Where therapists ask clients to imagine they are painting the space around them with the body

Movement exploration | Where clients have fun with movement, imagining, for instance, that they are bouncing a ball in the air

Movement expression | Using movement to express thoughts, feelings and anxieties with props at times

Integration | In this stage, movement is integrated into real-life problems by using imagery and metaphors to resolve the challenges



FINDING THE SYNC: (Clockwise from left) Participants at an earlier CMTAI session; an online dance and movement therapy session by CMTAI; IADMT trains people to identify emotional conflicts behind physical symptoms and address them

