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

Sometimes, all you need is a little song and dance.

Vogue

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WELLNESS

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Sometimes, all you need is a little song and dance

By Sneha Mankani

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The human body is more powerful than we think. We often ignore what it's saying to us and forget that it has the ability to heal itself. Then there's dance, whose curative effects on physical and emotional wellbeing have long been perceived, followed and felt for centuries. "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," says Devika Mehta, dance movement psychotherapist, clinical psychologist, and co-founder at Synchrony India, about her journey as a dance therapist. We chat with her about this technique.

What is dance therapy?

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.

Benefits of dance therapy

Chronic conditions

Dance therapy can be beneficial for any age group and kind of person. "Since it aims at both physical and emotional functioning, it can be helpful to people recovering from physical illnesses like strokes, 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," says Mehta.

Interpersonal relations and skills

The applications of this form of therapy reach far and wide. "It can be used to train teachers in classrooms to use embodied learning and build empathy with children. Parents can use it 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-centred approach for any kind of violence has been seen to be more long lasting," explains Mehta.

Connecting with your body

"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," explains Mehta.

Personal experiences with dance therapy

Here are some people who've experienced the benefits of dance therapy, and what they had to say in its support.

Name: Ranganathan A Narkar

Age: 77

"Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder, which leads to progressive deterioration of motor function due to loss of dopamine-producing brain cells. The Parkinson's Disease And Movement Disorder Society offers free groups to people with Parkinson's. These support groups follow a multi-disciplinary approach where dance therapy is one of the complementary treatments offered, since there is no cure for Parkinson's disease yet. Mr Narkar attended an intensive program in 2011, designed to assess the effectiveness of dance interventions on symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Based on the positive results of this program, it was further developed," says Mehta.

Ranganathan's experience: "I would like to thank my therapist for starting dancing classes for people with Parkinson's disease at the Portuguese Church. It has helped me with balancing; in the house and at narrow places. I can see a 50 per cent improvement in myself, and this had increased my confidence as well."

Diagnosis: TBI – Traumatic Brain Injury

Name: Sonal Sidhwani

Age: 4

"Motor coordination was asynchronous. Mood was low. Step length had decreased. She had already been undergoing neuro rehab with a multi-disciplinary team before she started to come to me, and she is continuing that program while in therapy too. She felt increasingly frustrated that she had forgotten her fun factor, and that her body would not dance to her inner soul song," says Mehta.

Sonal's experience: "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 and away from rigidity. 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—it's like Shavasana for the mind."

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.

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.”

How can you enrol?

To sign up, you can email devikamehta.synchrony@gmail.com or contact them through their website, Synchronyindia.com, and they will try to connect you with certified and trained people in different cities across the country, based on your needs.