

What is dance in Dance Movement Therapy?

Introduction from the article: "Dance, a psychotherapeutic practice?"

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Dance as an art form and cultural practice has existed since the beginning of human history. Dance as an art is (unlike literature, poetry or theater) non-written at its core: It is a human form of expression that accompanied all cultures before they entered historicity, since it does not require writing or notation. Dance has a special relation to the self, the psychological center of a person, which is not generated by thought alone, but is linked to bodily events (Storch & Kuhl, 2013). Body movement and body awareness are fundamental to the self, especially as we define ourselves through our body boundaries. The psychological self is perceived not least as that which is bounded by the skin, and it is represented, especially in individualistic societies, by the body: outside this boundary is no longer "self," there are the "others." The determination of the self through the body has its roots in infantile development: Sigmund Freud (1923) accordingly thought that "the ego is above all a bodily one," and placed the origins of the ego and its separation from the id in bodily perception. In fact, it is primarily through sensorimotor coupling that we learn to experience ourselves as an independently acting entity, as an "individual" that cannot be further divided. Proprioception, i.e., the perception of body parts, their relative position in space, and muscle tension, forms the sensorimotor basis of our identity and individuality (Tschacher & Munt, 2013). Neurological case studies accordingly show that identity disorders can occur when the ability to propriocept is lost (Sacks, 1985). Psychopathological states and ego disorders in schizophrenia are also frequently associated with proprioceptive dysfunction. In dance, proprioception is explicitly central; dancing is therefore very "close to the self." Dance is even more than just proprioceptive awareness. In dance, emotions, cognitions and body interact, and almost all human faculties are challenged. Different emotions are invoked and expressed; body movement requires different muscle groups to function either holistically or in isolation, self-directed or other-directed, with different muscle tensions and speeds. Cognitively, musical, mathematical, visual, motor networks are activated to provide the necessary perception and structuring of space and time, requiring complex executive functions. Finally, there are the social aspects of dance. There is hardly any other activity which, like dance, challenges the self in such an all-encompassing way and at the same time unites different aspects of the person in a coordinated way: here is a point of contact with goals which psychotherapy also has.