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Dance from Movement to Mindfulness: The Impact of Dance on Mental Health and Emotional Resilience

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Dance is a universal form of expression, found across cultures and periods. It provides individuals with a unique means to communicate emotions and connect with themselves and others. In modern society, dance has become a popular activity not only for its artistic and aesthetic qualities but also for its profound effects on mental health and emotional resilience. This paper explores the psychological benefits of dance, focusing on how it promotes emotional well-being, reduces stress, and enhances cognitive function. The exploration is based on a comprehensive review of studies that examine the physiological and psychological impacts of dance. Sources were selected from the Google Scholar research database, and data were drawn from these studies to analyze how dance stimulates the brain and facilitates emotional release. The findings suggest that dance has a significant role in enhancing mental health by activating brain mechanisms that regulate mood, boost self-awareness, and alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression. These studies emphasize that the combination of physical movement and emotional expression in dance offers a holistic approach to improving emotional resilience and overall well-being.

Keywords*:* *Dance Therapy, Emotional Resilience, Mental Health, Stress Reduction, Anxiety Reduction, Self-expression, Emotional Well-Being, Neurotransmitter Release, Mindfulness, Psychological Benefits, Movement Therapy, Cognitive Function*

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INTRODUCTION

Dance is a universal form of communication that transcends language barriers, offering individuals a unique means of emotional expression and connection. Across cultures and time periods, it has served as both an art form and a physical activity, allowing people to communicate through movement and express emotions that words often fail to capture. In modern society, dance is an aesthetic performance and an important aspect of physical fitness and mental health. It helps individuals connect with their inner selves and promotes emotional well-being (Tao et al., 2022). Numerous studies have explored the connection between dance and mental health, highlighting how it fosters emotional release, reduces stress, and enhances cognitive function (Esmail et al., 2019). Dance engages both the body and mind, offering a space for physical exercise while simultaneously promoting emotional regulation and resilience (Fong Yan et al., 2017; Braun & Kotera, 2021). In today's world, where mental health is a growing focus, understanding the psychological benefits of dance is increasingly relevant. It has shown promise in alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, while helping individuals build emotional resilience and promoting personal growth through creative expression (Sheng et al.,2024; Jeong et al.,2022). This paper investigates the psychological benefits of dance, particularly how it enhances mental well-being, reduces stress, and fosters emotional resilience. By exploring the physiological and psychological mechanisms behind these effects, how dance stimulates the brain, and its ability to encourage mindfulness, this paper aims to provide insight into how dance can be integrated into mental health treatments and wellness programs. Dance is not only an enjoyable and creative form of expression but also an effective, accessible, and holistic approach to improving emotional resilience and maintaining mental health (Menefee et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2022).

PHYSIOLOGICAL & PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Dance provides many physical benefits. Fong Yan et al.'s (2017) research indicated that dance improved cardiovascular health and endurance. This study emphasized that dance, a physical activity, improves cardiovascular health, which offers similar benefits to aerobic exercises. The study also highlighted dance's ability to combine endurance with coordination, which results in overall cardiovascular improvements. This was demonstrated by the fact that 28 trials, involving 1,276 participants, were selected from a total of 11,434 trials based on the inclusion criteria. A variety of dance genres and structured exercises were compared, and the meta-analyses showed that the dance interventions improved body composition (improved by 0.17 units of body fat percentage), blood biomarkers (improvement was measured by a 0.07 mmol/L reduction in triglycerides and improved HDL cholesterol), and musculoskeletal functions (improvement in physical performance measures by 0.34) all with a 95% confidence interval. Dance significantly enhances cardiovascular endurance, and as an aerobic exercise, it leads to improved heart rate and circulation, resulting in overall and long-term cardiovascular improvements. (Schmidt, 2024; Nystoriak, 2018)

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General findings in the fitness world demonstrate that aerobic exercises enhance heart health, but Pinckard et al.'s study (2019) showed that dance offers a unique blend of cardiovascular and coordination training. Esmail's study (2019) found a similar result where dance movement training led to improvements in both physical flexibility and coordination. It specifically mentioned the dance participants' ability to balance. The study compared dance training to other forms of exercise and highlights dance's unique ability to improve balance and spatial awareness through its diverse movements. It mentioned how dance training is more effective than traditional aerobic exercises in improving flexibility and coordination through movements like turns, stretches, and holds, which enhance balance and stability.

The researchers randomly placed participants (men and women) over the age of 60 into 3 different groups: Dance/Movement Training (DMT), Aerobic Exercise Training (AET), or a Control Group (CG). DMT and AET were enrolled in a 12-week program with 3 sessions per week lasting one hour. They then tested balance by asking the participants to perform quiet standing, Star Excursion Balance Test (SEBT), 30-Second Sit-to-Stand (30sts), and Calf-Raise Senior (CRS) test. These provided a comprehensible evaluation of balance and stability by examining both static and dynamic components, as well as related strength measures (Esmail, 2019). Finally, Esmail (2019) tested cognition of the 41 participants who completed the post test, through a tablet-based cognitive test battery, including dual-task performance, n-back task and Digit Stroop task. They found that DMT groups had positive effects on mobility (like walking speed, timed up and go), while AET groups had an increase in cardiovascular fitness. This study shows how DMT has positive impacts on cognition and physical functioning in older adults.

Another study, by Jaywant (2013), found similar results to Esmail (2019) by exploring the broad benefits of dance. The Jaywant (2013) study noted that dance improved both joint mobility and body awareness, contributing to improved flexibility and coordination. It discussed how certain forms of dance, like ballet or contemporary, increase the body's flexibility and stability over time. Ballet and contemporary dance improve flexibility and stability by incorporating controlled stretches and movements. Ballet focuses on poses and extensions that target muscle elongation, especially in the legs and hips. Contemporary dance combines floor-based movements and high-energy leaps, promoting joint mobility and strengthening the core, enhancing balance and body awareness.

The study by Jaywant (2013) tested 120 middle-aged women by compiling data from the Vo2max (Cardiovascular Endurance), the Queens Step Test and body fat percentage using skinfold callipers at multiple sites. For the statistical analysis, aerobic dancers had higher Vo2max values (which indicates better cardiovascular endurance) compared to non-dancers. They had an unpaired t-test, with a significance threshold of $p = 0.001$. Dance offers long-term improvements in flexibility, especially in the joints and muscles, as

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coordination is enhanced when dancers become more attuned to their body movements and spatial orientation (Jaywant, 2013).

Studies have also found that dance releases endorphins, which are stress-relieving hormones. Duberg et. al's (2020) study highlighted that dance, as an enjoyable physical activity, resulted in an increase in endorphins, which not only improve mood but also contribute to reduced feelings of tension and stress. The researchers reviewed dancers' feelings by testing a control and a non-control group, 112 girls aged 13 to 18 years, with 59 girls in the non-control group and 53 girls in the control group. The non-control group did dance interventions for 8 months. They found, with a 95% confidence level, that the dance interventions reduced stress in the non-control group by 0.04 to 0.58. These points lead to the next relevant topic, which is the mental health benefits of dance.

MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Many studies have shown that dance also improves mental health and has positive benefits. The study by Jeong et al. (2005), explored how dance leads to an increase in neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, which play a crucial role in regulating mood. The positive effects on mood are attributed to the rhythmic and creative nature of dance, which fosters a sense of joy and well-being. They found that dance promoted the release of serotonin, chemicals associated with happiness and relaxation. The study showed that the average plasma serotonin level in the dance group increased by approximately 10% by the end of 12 weeks, while the control group showed a slight decrease. This difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.005$). This study also found that the dance group showed a decrease in plasma dopamine levels by approximately 7%, while the control group had a 3% increase ($p < 0.001$ between groups) (Jeong et al., 2005).

The mental health benefits that dance provides include boosting mood, enhancing cognitive function, and helping to prevent anxiety and depression. Lopez-Nieves and Jakobsche's (2022) study highlighted how dance increased neurotransmitters like nitric oxide (NO), which increased by 19% (mean) and 7% (median), with a p-value of 0.03, while the control group showed no significant change. Nitric oxide is crucial for helping our brain to stay healthy (Bruckdorfer, 2005). These neurochemical changes lead to mood enhancement, reduced stress, and alleviation of anxiety, emphasizing that dance's rhythmic and creative nature fosters joy and well-being. This study (Lopez-Nieves & Jakobsche, 2022) supported existing research on the positive effects of exercise on neurotransmitter release, with dance offering additional mood-boosting benefits due to its social and creative elements (Fong Yan et al., 2017).

Lopez-Nieves & Jakobsche's study (2022) showed how global cognition and memory can significantly improve cognitive function in older adults who dance. Meta-analysis results indicated a large effect size for dance's impact on global cognition, with a Mean Difference (MD) of 1.57 (95% confidence levels: 0.53 to 2.61),

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which was statistically significant (p = 0.003). Additionally, dance showed a significant positive effect on memory function. Although the executive functioning domain showed no significant difference after excluding one low-quality study (Standardized Mean Difference = 0.13, 95% Confidence Levels: −0.02 to 0.27, p = 0.09), the overall findings (Lopez-Nieves & Jakobsche, 2022) suggested that dance is a safe and effective intervention to enhance cognitive health in older adults. This is in line with other research showing that physical activity, particularly dance, enhances cognitive skills and promotes memory retention, with dance being particularly effective due to its combination of physical movement and mental challenge.

In addition, research published by Coubard et al. (2011) found that dance has a significant impact on cognitive function in older adults. The study included 60 older adults (ages 63–82) who participated in contemporary dance, fall prevention, or Tai Chi Chuan interventions for about 5.7 months. The results showed that the contemporary dance group had significant improvements in cognitive flexibility, particularly in tasks requiring attention switching, highlighting the potential of dance as an effective intervention for enhancing cognitive health in aging populations. Meta-analysis results indicated a large effect size for dance's impact on global cognition, with a Mean Difference (MD) of 1.57 (95% confidence levels: 0.53 to 2.61), which was statistically significant (p = 0.003). This study also found that dance positively influenced memory function, further supporting the idea that dance can enhance cognitive health. These findings suggest that dance, due to its combination of physical movement and mental challenge, can be an effective intervention for cognitive health in aging populations.

Similarly, Zhang and He (2022) examined the effectiveness of dance movement therapy (DMT) in improving mood and reducing anxiety in individuals with anxiety disorders. The study involved 23 university students who reported anxiety and underwent dance movement therapy sessions. The participants were evaluated using the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAMA) before and after one week, one month, and three months of DMT. Results indicated that while there was no significant improvement in anxiety after one week (p = 0.567), significant improvements were observed after one month (p < 0.001) and three months (p < 0.001) of therapy. The study concluded that DMT is an effective intervention for reducing anxiety, particularly after sustained practice, highlighting the therapeutic role of movement and emotional expression in relieving anxiety symptoms. These findings suggest that DMT can be an effective and accessible treatment for managing anxiety in diverse populations.

In addition, Wang (2022) explored the effect of dance education on mood improvement in patients with anxiety disorder, highlighting the potential benefits of integrating psychological elements into dance education. The study involved 400 patients with varying degrees of anxiety, who were divided into control and dance groups (modern, folk, and classical dance). The dance groups, which combined psychological techniques with dance, demonstrated significant improvements in anxiety symptoms compared to the control group. Results showed that the anxiety symptoms in the modern dance, folk dance, and classical dance groups

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improved by 86%-93%, with notable improvements in areas such as depressive mood, cognitive function, and sleep disorders. The researchers concluded that dance education combined with psychological support is an effective intervention for improving emotional health, particularly for patients with anxiety disorders. This reinforces the idea that dance, through both its physical and psychological components, can play a significant role in alleviating symptoms of mental health conditions like anxiety. Overall, these studies illustrate how dance not only improves physical health but also contributes significantly to mental well-being.

DANCE AS A TOOL FOR STRESS REDUCTION AND MENTAL RESILIENCE

Dance serves as a powerful tool for stress reduction and the development of mental resilience. A study conducted by Dosumu-Lawal and Azeez (2024) found that dance therapy significantly reduced stress among academics, explaining approximately 18.3% of the variance in stress levels. This reduction was attributed to the physical engagement and emotional expression facilitated by dance, which allowed participants to process and release stress in a supportive environment.

The study highlighted dance therapy's role in enhancing emotional resilience, accounting for about 15.3% of the variance in participants' ability to adapt to stress. By providing a non-verbal outlet for emotional expression, dance therapy helped individuals confront and manage emotional challenges more effectively. Dance therapy contributed to improved mental well-being, explaining 16.9% of the variance in mental health outcomes (Dosumu-Lawal & Azeez, 2024). The communal aspect of group dance sessions fostered a sense of belonging and support, which are essential for psychological health. These findings emphasize the therapeutic potential of dance in academic environments, suggesting that integrating dance therapy programs could be a valuable strategy for enhancing stress management, emotional resilience, and overall mental well-being among academics.

A study conducted by Binxin (2023) explored the benefits of dance therapy in reducing stress and enhancing mental resilience, particularly among academics. The findings revealed that dance therapy explained 18.3% of the variance in stress levels, highlighting the physical and emotional benefits of dance in managing stress. The study also demonstrated that dance therapy plays a key role in improving emotional resilience, shown by the 15.3% of the variance in participants' ability to cope with stress. By offering a non-verbal outlet for emotional expression, dance therapy helped individuals confront and manage their emotional challenges more effectively.

Additionally, Binxin (2023) emphasized the positive impact of group dance sessions, which created a sense of belonging and support, and contributed to improved mental well-being. With 16.9% of the variance in mental health outcomes explained by dance therapy, these results suggest that integrating dance therapy

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programs into academic settings could be a valuable strategy for enhancing stress management, emotional resilience, and overall psychological health among students and faculty.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION IN DANCE AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Dance serves as a powerful tool for emotional release and self-expression. As Braun & Kotera's (2021) study explored, the embodied movement inherent in dance allowed individuals to process and express emotions that may be challenging to articulate and express with words. Dance provides a unique outlet for individuals to communicate internal emotional states and foster emotional well-being. The research highlighted the therapeutic benefits of dance as a means to connect with one's feelings, facilitating emotional healing. It supported the notion that dance is a crucial way for emotional expression, where the physical engagement through movement becomes a transformative experience for emotional release and self-awareness.

The connection between movement and emotions is intertwined with the practice of dance. Braun & Kotera (2021) emphasized how specific dance movements can directly affect emotional states. It enables individuals to express joy, sadness, anger, or frustration. Through movement, emotions are externalized, and mood shifts can occur almost immediately. This offers a natural method of emotional regulation. As the act of moving allows individuals to confront and express complex emotions, this process (rooted in movement therapy) contributes to overall well-being. This connection illustrates how dance functions as an effective emotional regulator and tool for personal healing. These results were shown by statements from the study, which stated that dance enabled participants to express themselves freely (Menefee et al. 2022).

Dance fosters self-confidence and self-awareness, both essential elements in emotional well-being. As discussed in Salo's (2019) study, the process of learning and performing dance routines helps individuals build self-esteem and self-perception. Through creative expression, dancers gain a sense of accomplishment and personal growth, which directly boosts self-confidence. The study demonstrated that physical engagement in dance enhanced body awareness. Physical engagement also contributed to improved self-acceptance. This emotional growth fosters a positive relationship with oneself and empowers individuals to gain greater self-awareness through their movements and creative expression.

In addition to personal growth, dance therapy has proven to be a beneficial mental health intervention. Salo's (2019) study highlighted dance therapy's role in treating psychological issues like anxiety, depression, and trauma. By combining movement with emotional expression and self-reflection, dance therapy provides a non-verbal outlet for individuals to navigate complex emotions. Research shows that dance therapy can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, offering individuals a sense of control and empowerment as they process their emotional experiences (Koch et al., 2019). The therapy's emphasis on

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movement as a form of emotional engagement supports the healing process, creating space for resilience and emotional growth (Zhang & Wei, 2024).

Salo's (2019) study found that 75.9% of participants reported feeling significantly more confident after the workshop. This aligns with her thesis's claim that dance fosters self-confidence and self-awareness. Additionally, exit interviews revealed that students had direct mentions of how dance helped boost their self-confidence and personal empowerment during interviews. Many of the testimonies shared by participants further supported these findings and illustrate the powerful emotional impact of dance on self-esteem.

In summary, the research shows that dance as a form of creative expression significantly enhances emotional well-being. Whether through personal emotional release, fostering self-awareness, or as a therapeutic tool in mental health treatment, dance has proven to be a powerful practice for enhancing emotional health. It encourages individuals to engage deeply with their emotions, expressing and processing them through movement while simultaneously boosting confidence and self-acceptance. The connection between dance, emotion, and mental health illustrates its profound role in emotional healing and personal growth (Menefee et al., 2022; Salo, 2019).

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

This review has examined the profound psychological and physical benefits of dance, focusing on its ability to enhance mental well-being, reduce stress, and foster emotional resilience. Throughout the studies reviewed, dance has emerged as a powerful tool not only for improving cardiovascular health and physical fitness but also for promoting emotional expression, alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression, and encouraging self-awareness and confidence. As explored in the studies by Esmail (2019), Yan et al. (2017), and others, dance engages both the mind and body, creating a holistic approach to well-being that addresses both physiological and psychological needs.

The physical benefits of dance, such as improved cardiovascular endurance and better coordination, are well-documented (Fong Yan et al., 2017; Esmail et al., 2019). Moreover, dance's ability to release endorphins and reduce stress through rhythmic movement further underscores its effectiveness as a stress-relieving practice (Duberg et al., 2020; Sheng et al., 2024). The emotional benefits are equally significant; dance facilitates emotional release, helps individuals process and express complex emotions, and builds resilience by encouraging personal growth and self-reflection. As Salo's (2019) study suggests, the combination of movement and self-expression in dance can significantly improve self-esteem, helping individuals develop a healthier relationship with their bodies and emotions.

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Dance also plays an essential role in the mental health landscape, offering therapeutic benefits in clinical settings. Research indicates that dance therapy is an effective intervention for managing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma (Koch et al., 2019; Salo, 2019). By integrating dance into mental health treatments, individuals can express emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally, facilitating emotional healing and increasing psychological flexibility. Additionally, dance offers a non-verbal outlet for coping with stress, making it particularly useful in therapeutic contexts where patients may struggle with traditional forms of communication (Menefee et al., 2022; Salo, 2019).

FURTHER DIRECTIONS

Despite the considerable evidence supporting the mental and physical benefits of dance, further research is needed to explore its long-term effects and to compare it to other therapeutic interventions for mental health. Future studies should focus on the specific mechanisms through which dance influences neurotransmitter release and emotional regulation. Additionally, research could investigate how various dance styles may have different effects on emotional health and whether certain populations (e.g., older adults, individuals with disabilities) experience different benefits from dance therapy.

Another direction for future research is the integration of dance into formal mental health programs. While dance is already being used in some therapeutic settings, there is a need for more widespread integration into community and clinical practices. Investigating how dance can be effectively incorporated into mental health initiatives, especially in underserved communities, could provide valuable insights into its role as a holistic approach to mental health.

Lastly, exploring the impact of group-based dance activities, which foster a sense of community and belonging, could provide additional evidence of how social interactions in dance contribute to improved mental health outcomes. Research could examine whether group dynamics in dance classes and workshops enhance the benefits of individual dance practice, particularly in terms of building social support networks and promoting shared emotional experiences.

In conclusion, dance serves as a versatile and holistic tool that not only improves physical health but also significantly contributes to emotional and mental well-being (Fong Yan et al., 2017; Sheng et al., 2024; Salo, 2019; Menefee et al., 2022). As we continue to prioritize mental health in society, integrating dance into both therapeutic and wellness programs can offer individuals an accessible and creative means of fostering emotional resilience, self-expression, and stress management. As the research in this review suggests, dance is more than just an art form or physical activity (Braun & Kotera, 2021; Esmail et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2024). It is a transformative practice that enriches the mind, body, and spirit, offering lasting benefits for mental health and overall well-being.

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