



## Mini Review

### Dance Movement Therapy with Chinese Counselors

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Dance movement therapy is a relatively new form of therapy that relies on the body as a form of communication and source of wisdom [1]. I have been teaching a form of it called KinAesthetic Imagining it at the China Institute of Psychology in Beijing since 2010 [2]. The recently scheduled session coincided with strict lockdown measures and subsequent demonstrations. How can dance therapy help therapists deal with their trauma while still functioning and providing care for their families and students?

Below are two vignettes illustrating ways in which the dance therapy seemed to be of help.

#### Group 1

This group is for my advanced students to give them support and a place to deal with their emotions. Some of the members of this group have been working with me since 2010, others less time. They are all teachers or professors of psychology or practicing therapists who bring movement into their work with clients.

The challenge for us at this time was that we had to use Zoom to awaken and express bodily-felt emotions. Although we used to have in-person sessions, we have been using Zoom since before Covid and the group was already used to it. A great deal of trust and group process had already been established.

The more serious challenge, however, came from the stricter restrictions of lockdown. Members were not allowed to leave their homes, had to sleep on their college campus, or were stuck staying with family away from their own homes. Most had young children or parents they were worried about.

After the verbal check-in with a translator, we listen for the dominant themes and explore them in movement. The themes had to do with feelings of constriction, not being able to move, being confined to small spaces, irritability, fear and depression.

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**Citation:** Serlin IA (2023) Dance Movement Therapy with Chinese Counselors. J Altern Complement Integr Med 9: 327.

**Received:** February 08, 2023; **Accepted:** February 16, 2023; **Published:** February 23, 2023

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We start with a warm-up. I put on Bach, measured and calm music that provides a stable holding environment, and ask them to explore the parts of their bodies that needed to move and needed attention. As the warm-up concludes, I suggest making the movements smaller... and quieter...until they are internal. Learn to listen to them, to what their bodies are telling them.

When I ask them: "Did you get what your body needed?" one of the members burst into tears. She told us how suppressed she felt, and always had to be "looking out for others."

Another member who was in a psychoanalytic training program said how much more powerful the movement was than words, that the emotions just came out through movement. She thought many of the words in her psychoanalytic group were fake. Another member shared how she had been looking at old photos and noticed how fake her smile was...and how much she wants to be authentic.

A third member came back on the screen, looking disheveled and anxious. She said that she had been banned, her screen had been blocked and become dark. We all wondered if we had already said too much but affirmed how important the group was as a safe place. In this place they could be relatively honest, even more honest than they could be in their families. It seemed that this member had been in the demonstrations, but I dared not ask. I knew that protestors in Shanghai had been challenging the government after being quarantined in their homes for up to four months. This was their third year of strict lockdowns and of having their movements tracked. In March residents were confined to their homes for two months and found it difficult to get medical help or food. People were dying. Students were confined to their dormitories and professors had to sleep in their offices. Demonstrations were set off after a fire in Urumqi, the capital of northwestern Xinjiang, that killed ten people.

They all needed to talk with each other, so we arranged to meet the following week instead of our usual biweekly schedule. When one of the members asked me how we, as Jewish people, had survived thousands of years of persecution, I said three things: 1) Crying—was important. To grieve. To be able to feel oneself again. To then gather the strength for the second thing, 2) Find strength. Feel the anger under the sadness. Not to fold. 3) To laugh.

I asked them if they would like to look to see if there was anger under the sadness and they agreed. I put on Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" and they explored movements of hitting, slashing, flinging. I suggested that their anger was like a flame inside them that was still burning, even if they had to turn down the flame. They could remember that there was always a flame burning and all they had to do was to feel it again.

We ended with tears of gratitude and smiles. We said we would meet again soon.

During the next session, everyone was in better spirits, although one of the members had a bad cold and was waiting to see if it was COVID. I asked how they felt after the last session.

One said she felt clearer and stronger, another reported better breathing while learning to “co-exist” with her aching body. She “got inspiration and motivation” to lead a support group for people with COVID. The fourth wants to lead a group of people with COVID.

For the warm-up this time, I ask them to move in a way that feels good to them. As they cool down and reflect, I ask them if they gave themselves what their bodies were telling them they needed.

One member said she will sing a comforting song to her child. Another sang a song that she found comforting. The words were translated as:

In the middle of the night, I look forward to the dawn

In the cold of winter, I hope for the spring breeze

If I want to see the Red Army come

The mountains are red

If I want to see the Red Army come

The mountains are red

The mountains are red

The mountains are red

The mountains are red, the mountains are red

Heroic sons and daughters are dyed with blood

The fire reflects the red star, the star is brighter

The red flag is more red

The fire reflects the red star, the star is brighter

The red flag is even redder

Raise the red flag high and march forward

Revolutionary flowers are red from generation to generation

Revolutionary flowers are red from generation to generation

The meeting the following week began with the check-in. Everyone was “in recovery” from Covid. One member looked especially bad, pale and grey, said she “couldn’t speak.”

I proposed a warm-up in which they could stay in their chairs. The warm-up would have two parts: 1) Getting rid of the bad energy, and 2) Bringing in good and strong energy. For the first part, I put on ocean music, began with stroking movements, moving energy through throat, breathing, face, arms, then throwing it away. I knew that many women in China don’t give themselves permission for self-touch or self-massage, and this self-touch was welcome.

One member cried and said she didn’t know why. She then said she was tired of caring for everyone else in the family, doing all the work in the home. Her husband, even though he had Covid, had to go to work. She said that today she finally felt she had some time for herself. Being for herself gave her energy to be for others, it was reciprocal.

Another member came to the group because even though she was sick, the group and my support was very important to her. She trusted us.

From the group experience she learned to say to her daughter: “You are the most important person in my life, I’ll be there no matter what.”

I assured her I’d be there for the group no matter what.

I showed them my sprained ankle, and said we are all wounded. I told them the story of the Wounded Healer and suggested that we are all healing by being with each other. That being together is the most important thing we do. What we say or how we move less important than being together.

We did some movements about bringing in light from above and strengthening “good energy” and the immune system. One member was using large, energetic movements. Then she shared her dream. In the dream she wanted to do ballet, but some man appeared and told her she was too old. I suggested an interpretation that ballet was a metaphor for a system that was too rigid and structured for her, and she was ready for more freedom and creativity. This theme had shown up for her before. She was a psychology professor, shy and careful, showing signs in the group of wanting to break free. She liked this interpretation very much. She said she really likes modern dance. I knew she was too tired to lead us in a group movement so I suggested that the youngest and most energetic member of the group could “lend” her energy and start some movement. The dreamer was very happy. The young member, who missed her son, put on some music he loved. This was Chinese teen-age music, fast—and she began dancing. The professor joined her, dancing with increasing wildness. The group ended with faces glowing with energy and eyes sparkling.

I offered the professor an image I had of her as a secret “Wild Woman” and she was delighted to hear it. She shared the image she had of being on horseback riding over the Mongolian steppes with the wind blowing her hair. We all loved that image. I joked that she was like Lady Godiva, bareback on horseback, free. She loved that name. As she was one of the only ones in the group with no English name, and in honor on Chinese New Year, we named her “Lady Godiva.” I assured her that Lady Godiva was even better than Lady Gaga. New Year brought New Liberation.

One member shared that her department, when she didn’t show up, thought she was dead and had some sort of memorial for her. Another member said that the previous week she was depressed, and sang a song: “Who will come looking for us when we are gone?” She felt that neither her husband nor son would. The group ended by assuring this member that they liked her better after her honest sharing, and that we all felt like that at times. Confronting mortality was real. We were there for each other.

The following week everyone present had or were recovering from Covid. They were coughing, wiping their noses, but feeling on the way to mending.

One theme that arose from the check-in was a desire to “get back to normal.” One member said that she and others were almost “manic” in trying to “make up for lost time.” I shared that in the United States we were all hoping for the same thing, but then discovered that there was no going back. Everything was different and we had to find a “new normal.” I described it as how to find our own way forward out of darkness into a new reality. How to find the balance between energizing and resting.

The warm-up started with each person taking a turn leading, connecting us around the imaginary circle and feeling its support. We then worked with the theme of coming out of a dark place and finding where/how to discover places of “next step.”

One member said she feels like she is going through a dark hole like depression. The country is in crisis, shops are closed, and she “can’t move like some people.” She said the “hallucination” was coming to an end. When asked what the hallucination was, she said it was that the country and parents were an ideal. She has realized that there is cruelty in the world, and she cannot hide from reality.

She was crying, grieving not just for herself and her country, but for broken ideals. She understood why some people left the country in which there was “no third party.” “Something is being collapsed inside,” she said, with “deep emotion” for the country. She used to put her love in the country but now understood that her behavior had been “withdrawal” and “compliance.” She observed that this was the way that politicians used the people.

A different group member described feeling as if she were wrapped in ropes and could not move. She did manage to wriggle free and discover, even in small movements, that she could feel some freedom. Reconnecting back to her experience of freedom became a source of ongoing resilience for her.

One said that after she saw the reality, she realized that there were no others to rely on, and she had to rely on herself. In the dance improvisation, she made her customary fighting punching movements, and realized that she deals with fear by using her body to expand the space. In this way, she feels more space to breathe and a place where she can be calm. She felt sorry for her poor body that had to “consume” a lot of emotions and work hard. She realized a contradiction between the part of herself that wants to rely on others and a fear of doing so.

The next person described being in a dark hole where she had to use all her energy to “seize air and light.” The trauma caused a “big wall around her heart.” She now understands that she cannot trust someone completely and that trust leads to getting hurt. She spends less time in anticipation and the imagination since they lead to being disappointed by other people.

I ended by telling them how touched I was by their honesty, trust, and willingness to face reality. I reminded them of their many sides—they had depth and faced the existential issues of freedom and death, but they also had other qualities. One was known for her humor and young mischievous spirit. A second was known for her light, delicate and feminine movements. A third was known for her fighting, energizing movements. These were still present, although hard to connect with at this moment, but nevertheless important resources that they can always re-discover.

## Group 2

Tonight I had a supervision session with three senior psychologists who all worked at university counseling centers, taught and were involved in university administration. This group had been meeting with me for about ten years in China and through Zoom and were closely bonded as a support group. One said she had been sleeping at her university for a month at this point with no showers. Her daughter was with her parents and her husband away working. The other group members also had to sleep at their universities, while caring for the students. One looked very tired, her hair unwashed. They had prepared a case for discussion but when I asked what they needed they agreed that self-care was most important. I described the earlier session with movement and they agreed. I played Pachelbel’s Canon, and we began with slow stretching and breathing. Soon they were doing cradling movements and self-massage. After finishing that part, one group member told me that it reminded her of cradling her daughter when she was young. This let her feel tenderness again. Another said it gave him inner peace, and he understood that no one could take that from him. We ended with energizing music and they said they had energy to continue.

We will continue meet weekly or bimonthly as we support each other through these very difficult times.

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