

The Body Speaks:

Redefining Self through Dance/movement Therapy with Survivors of Domestic Abuse

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Abstract

Many survivors of domestic abuse seek help for the first time, redefining and re-creating their lives after years of being caught in abuse cycle. Domestic Abuse trauma results in: inability to regulate emotions, dissociation from the body, self-abandonment, compromised self-image and breaks in the non-abusing parent/child bond. This didactic workshop will illustrate how implementing DMT in domestic abuse programs and with domestic abuse survivors provides direct access to body/mind connections, hope and healing from domestic abuse.

Description

The workshop presentation will explore the uniqueness, triumphs and challenges of leading Dance/movement therapy groups and sessions with survivors of domestic abuse in shelters and community based environments. Content will include discussion of the holistic model being implemented and developed since Fall of 2009 at Emerge! Center Against Domestic Abuse, a comprehensive domestic abuse program that serves over 2500 women and children each year in Southern Arizona. Participatory experiential activities will be shared, along with the implications of working with women and children from a variety of racial, ethnic, socio-economic backgrounds, as well as families with differing immigration issues.

Note: the terms Domestic Abuse and Domestic Violence are used interchangeably in this paper. Focus is on working with women survivors; thus the pronoun “she” will be used.

At the end of this seminar participants will be able to:

- (1) Identify and evaluate successes and challenges of working with survivors of domestic abuse/violence in shelter and community based settings.
- (2) Learn and practice how to apply experiential DMT activities in participants’ own work with trauma survivors, while understanding the unique implications for using dance/ movement therapy with survivors of domestic abuse in culturally diverse programs.

Dance/movement therapy has not typically been widely utilized or available in domestic abuse shelter settings due to the unpredictable, transient nature of this type of program. The emergency shelter system and short-term stays do not allow for long-term therapy. Most residents, therefore, are focused on fulfilling their basic needs and planning their exit from shelter. Issues around immigration status, lack of community resources and services also affect many of the women and children from all racial/cultural/socio-economic backgrounds at Emerge! Center Against Domestic Abuse. The stress of facing emotional isolation, in addition to homelessness, financial and employment barriers, can create significant risk for depression, anxiety, and substance use/abuse. Shelter residents tend to present with immediate crisis, high stress levels, issues around safety and basic needs, self-esteem/loss of self, shame and ambivalence about leaving the abusive situation and being in shelter on their own, many for the first time in their lives. The dynamics of domestic abuse can alter one’s ability to maintain any sense of control over one’s life and body, and the abused person becomes increasingly passive, compliant, helpless, powerless, ambivalent and fearful as the role of the victim is internalized (Chang & Leventhal, 2008). For many of our participants, the effects of domestic abuse trauma

manifests in minimization/denial, learned helplessness/immobilization/fear, inability to regulate emotions, confusion, poor sense of self and diminished ability to emotionally and physically connect with and support their children. Thus, breaks within the mother/child emotional bond can result from the trauma of domestic violence; the safety and protection of the attachment figure (parent) and the home are no longer secure, comforting or predictable (Deverereaux, 2008).

However, with unique implementation considerations, DMT offers shelter residents a significant opportunity to heal and reconnect with themselves and their children. Re-connecting participants to their authentic selves helps create new pathways in their lives, while supporting them in achieving those goals is central to the healing process. Empowering participants to heal and strengthen through a reciprocal relationship in which two people equal in value engage in a process of support, is essential for survivors of domestic abuse. Marcia Leventhal (2008) discusses the possibilities of transformation and healing through dance therapy as an act of communication and sharing; dance gives us “a basic tool for reaching individuals needing assistance in healing” (p.8). She further states that dance/movement therapy gives us direct access to our true essence, or “soul-self...allowing us to reach a state of heightened awareness, which is the first crucial step in any healing-awareness” (p.10). Awareness can then lead to acceptance, strengthening the core/self-image, physical control and balance that can directly empower one to make more conscious and healthy choices in one’s life. Meaning within the DMT experience becomes metaphors for daily living, facilitating the integration of body/mind/spirit, growth, discovery and personal development (Leventhal, 2008).

Implementing holistic modalities at Emerge! such as Dance/movement therapy creates opportunities for participants to experience trust and safety, greater body awareness, as well as

reduction in stress and anxiety. Building safety within the self and others is at the core of DMT groups with domestic abuse survivors: physical and psychological safety in the room, safety in their bodies, and safety in their lives. Chang and Leventhal (2008) write: “The basic premise is sound: dance/movement therapy is an efficacious and integrative therapy that provides a necessary body-mind intervention for those who have been subjected to physical and emotional abuse from an intimate partner” (p.158).

These groups focus on healing past and current trauma through the exploration of emotion regulation, healthy relationships, boundaries, coping skills, empowerment and body/mind connections. The group experience promotes social interaction, interpersonal learning, catharsis and feelings of universality, which are a few of the eleven therapeutic factors (Yalom, 1975) that can provide a forum for healing and a sense of connection, crucial to survivors of domestic abuse who typically experience isolation and shame. Additional DMT groups facilitated at community based (outreach) sites at Emerge! are similar in structure and themes, but tend to focus more on self-care, healing and support for one another, and re-building relationships with family. Participants at community based sites may also be facing decisions about leaving an abusive partner, but the danger and lethality of the situation may or may not be as immediate.

The field of research on trauma and PTSD has provided new ways of thinking and treating survivors of domestic abuse, whereas historically the focus on advocacy and safety was at the forefront of the movement. Thus, the need for holistic treatment models and body-based interventions is essential for healing. The families we serve at Emerge! Center are easily triggered from their experiences of trauma, emotional and psychological pain. Especially within the shelter experience, the complexity of domestic abuse and the mere stress of leaving one's

home, living with women and children who are all struggling with some level of unresolved trauma and co-morbid psychological distress or dis-ease, creates many risks to self-regulate or medicate in unhealthy ways. Survivors of domestic abuse are prone to carry extensive personal and collective trauma in their bodies, that often span from early childhood to current relationship and everywhere in between. As we know, symptomology ranges greatly, but the body inherently stores trauma and appears in many destructive ways. This also applies to most survivors of trauma who develop maladaptive ways of coping with daily living and triggers. “As with all victims of trauma, a basic level of trust in oneself, intimate relationships, and the environment has been lost” (Chang & Leventhal, 2008, p. 168). Highly acclaimed researcher on the psychobiology of trauma, Bessel van der Kolk, writes:

“Research has shown that, under ordinary conditions, many traumatized people, including rape victims, battered women and abused children have a fairly good psychosocial adjustment. However, they do not respond to stress the way other people do. Under pressure, they may feel, or act as if they were traumatized all over again. Thus, high states of arousal seem to selectively promote retrieval of traumatic memories, sensory information, or behaviors associated with prior traumatic experiences. The tendency of traumatized organisms to revert to irrelevant emergency behaviors in response to minor stress has been well documented in animals, as well” (van der Kolk, 1994).

The connection between trauma, addiction and the body are also being validated by seminal researchers, scholars and therapists in the field such as van der Kolk, Peter Levine and Bruce Perry, to name a few. By using substances and medications, trauma survivors attempt to control and quiet their internal struggles, emotional pain, states of hyperarousal and anger

(Dayton, 2000). The addictive cycle of attempting to manage moods are only temporary fixes to mask and numb out their ability to learn to self-regulate and heal from trauma, thus reinforcing the original pain from the trauma and abuse. Dayton (2000) writes: “The addictive process takes over and births a life of its own, rendering the trauma victim more and more helpless with each sinister turn of the wheel of addiction” (p.19).

Dance/movement therapy provides effective opportunities for healing, growth and empowerment to survivors of domestic abuse. The complexities and struggles of the women and children we serve at Emerge! can be transformed by participating in these groups. They can gain greater control of physical and emotional states, motivating them towards the ultimate goal of the discovery and redefining of the Self.

Dance, when you're broken open.
Dance, when you've torn the bandage off.
Dance, in middle of the fighting.
Dance, in your blood.
Dance, when you are perfectly free.
-Rumi

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