

SPORT THERAPY: STIMULATE MIND AND BODY THROUGH THE MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between sport and therapy shows itself as a dynamic process that acts at psychological, cognitive and social-relational level, generating an open communication enhanced and supported by the creative, symbolic and metaphorical modalities suggested by sport activities. The use of sport activity as a therapy can explore the subject's feelings by reducing his emotional conflicts, stimulating greater awareness and enhancing a better management his of social behaviors. Dance therapy, for example, represents an alternative channel of expression, in which the subject's psychological and emotional aspects are involved. This type of therapy supports and strengthens the conscious use of one's own body, which takes on the role of main communication and expression channel of one's own emotions and sensations, managing to reach fragments hidden and preserved in every subject.

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Introduction

Sport therapy is part of the therapies described as expressive and/or creative, where techniques arising from artistic languages, like music and dance, are used for therapeutic purposes. These techniques are based on the concept that the individual can improve his life condition and experiences through the impact that sports exerts on our emotional and imaginative abilities, by means of a non-verbal message: through the mediation of a shape, a sound, a movement, a person is able to understand and express his own emotions, moods and feelings. The basic concept underlying all this is that a subject can grow, improve and increase his own experience, in all its aspects, through imagination and/or through the use of creativity, which is invoked and stimulated by this mechanism.

The role of sport-therapy

It is shown that the use of sport as a therapeutic tool can explore the subject's feelings, reducing his emotional conflicts and stimulating his awareness. It also allows for a better management of behaviors by developing socialization, and increasing, at the same time, a conscious view of the reality surrounding him⁽¹⁻⁵⁾. Sport therapy is implemented on three different directives: the creative, therapeutic and educational-didactic aspect; through them, it allows for the free expression of the individual by encouraging the perception of himself as an original entity, and at the same time, by opening up the individual to the outside world, to the community he belongs to, allowing him to have a contact with the reality and the social context surrounding him. In this respect, Dance therapy, an sport therapy, is

an important re-educational resource based on the mind/body interaction, an interaction that reproduces the conscious/unconscious link represented by the functional unity of every individual. The movement in dance, its sequences, postures and rhythms represent a non-verbal language with an intense symbolic value that exalts the subjective and intimate experience of feelings, of one's own being, of the complete individuality. Therefore, in dance therapy itself, there is a remarkable component of interiority that justifies and makes understandable the healing/educational effect achievable. It has been shown that dance therapy can favor socialization through a dynamic relational process mediated both by its symbolism, rhythms and movements, and by the aspect of collectivity implicit in the practice of dance in which every individual can freely take part and, in this way, generate an active effect on different functions of the emotional and relational sphere⁽⁵⁾.

In the United States, like in Australia, dance therapy has long been included in the family of psychotherapeutic resources as it can support intellectual, emotional, and relational aspects, and in this sense, various hypotheses have been developed about the mechanism through which to get these effects. Among them, for example, the related social component has been referred to, which, through the interaction between individuals, can generate benefits at psychological level; also the message conveyed by music used during dance sessions can reduce the anxiety component and bring mental relaxation. In all cases, it should not be overlooked the fact that dance also includes a training phase involving a learning period in which, on the one hand, a subject establishes a relationship with the therapist, and on the other, in parallel, there is the rediscovery of one's own body in an unprecedented perspective.

Last but not least, it should take into consideration the strictly physical component linked to motor activity, which, indirectly, can bring benefits also in the mental sphere⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾. Essentially, it is thanks to a series of correlated mechanisms activating particular motor, emotional, cognitive and social functions, that there are beneficial effects on the individual who rediscovers new and more effective ways of communicating, and that allow him to elaborate and express emotions, feelings and sensations that could not be possible to express otherwise.

Therapeutic use of the body through dance

Dance therapy is an alternative channel of expression, where different psychological and emotional aspects of every subject can converge. Through the practice of this discipline it is possible to promote a person's well-being, or help heal states of disease and/or illness. Through a more conscious search for one's own emotional experiences, it is possible to be more sensitive to different situations and contexts, aiming at a more relational functionality that allows for a better subject's adaptation within the society. The specificity of this discipline is inherent in the body language and in the creative process, which are key ways of evaluation and intervention within interpersonal processes, aimed at a positive and effective individual's evolution and development. Dance expresses itself through body language; it represents a non-verbal way of communicating allowing us to reveal our inner part, our thoughts and intuitions, more than we could do through words. Non-verbal communication, understood as gesture, posture and movement, is considered a relationship language, an analogical channel that defines and gives meaning to interpersonal relationships, supporting and completing verbal communication by acting as a free and authentic channel, since, being less easy to control than verbal communication, lets intimate and deep contents funnel through^(5, 9-11).

Through the dance and the movement we communicate with our body, which represents a fundamental expressive element, a chance to manifest our feelings and emotions. This implicit level of human communication, given by the body language, is made of all those non-verbal signals that go through the body and act by strengthening, replacing, and walking in parallel with verbal behavior. Man can use a series of attitudes and movements with considerable expressive power like verbal communication: we communicate with the body, with the gaze, with the posture, with the inflections and the pauses of the language. Thus it is a more truthful and spontaneous mode, which, in fact, is not subject to control as it occurs in the verbal channel, and plays a key role in interpersonal exchanges. The signals that come from one's own body can be divided into signals expressing emotions and interpersonal attitudes. As for the emotional signals, gestures indicating the emotional state highlight the interlocutor's emotions, which are mainly represented by anxiety and tension states.

Sensations and emotions are generally expressed by the way people stand on, sit down, stop, rest, or place their body in space, or better, by their posture. Interpersonal attitudes can be related to the physical contact: to the sensations it arouses, thus expressing the attitude that an individual has towards the others and the world, and also to the self-contact meant as a relationship that every subject has with himself and with his own body: a meeting with his own "being"⁽⁹⁻¹³⁾. All this fully justifies the inclusion of dance /movement in a communicative, symbolic and therapeutic context, since through our body and movements we express our emotional and interpersonal states, thus triggering an alternative expressive channel revealing an intimate part which could not be otherwise expressed and explained to the outside world. Dance therapy helps individuals get in touch with themselves and with others through their own body, representing every subject's home of uniqueness and intimacy, a community participation tool, a means for recognizing his personal aspects and a meeting point tool with others. Dance therapy aims to solve certain issues through the body, using it as a means of communication. We act on our body to break down certain mental barriers and unleash places hidden by the resistance through a metaphoric, non-verbal language of great emotional and relational impact^(2,3,12-14).

Application fields of dance therapy

In 1966 Marian Chace, dancer and therapist, founded the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA). The aim of this association was the search for methodologies to be used in the treatment of mental illnesses. The ADTA played a central role in the development, affirmation and spread of dance therapy. Subsequently, between the Seventies and the Eighties, the term dance-movement-therapy (DMT) was defined and recognized as a real psychotherapy procedure. Chace's intuition fostered not only the diffusion of dance therapy, but also its development at other levels mainly represented by: the Analytical Approach, the Expression Primitive, and Maria Fux's method. The analytical dancer Mary Whitehouse, inspired by Jung's theory, developed the concept of authentic movement that combined, in an original and unprecedented way, psychotherapy with the expressive aspect of dance.

This approach, born in the United States at the beginning of the 1960s, was aimed at increasing personal awareness and creativity in the sub-

ject, stimulating all the related perspectives: bodily, psychological and spiritual. The technique used included a mover, a subject that articulates a series of movements by letting himself be transported by the most intimate and deep sensations and emotions, and a witness, a subject that silently observes him in all his movements, and that will subsequently control the verbalization of this experience. In this sense, we can say that the two protagonists, mover and witness, represent the conscious and unconscious that are in all of us, and that show, in fact, how a good and effective exchange between these two worlds is possible, although seeming so distant^(5,9-13).

Another approach is HERNSDUPLAN's Expression Primitive; the dance teacher, through dance, links rituals of tribal societies and archetypes to psychological structures. Of particular importance is Maria Fux's approach to dance therapy, who saw dance as a form of expression that belongs to nature, and to the very nature of man. This experience led her to develop a personal form of application and techniques of dance therapy related to the spontaneous movement/dance; a form of creative dance, of free and spontaneous dance, which, through the releasing power generated by movement that recalled the ritual, generated spontaneously benefits both in terms of social inclusion and at psychophysical level. The techniques used could somehow invoke the analytical method but that in fact, unlike the latter, unconscious contents and psychotherapeutic component were not involved. Maria Fux could use her technique both with non-disabled subjects and with handicapped individuals, expanding her experience to people with Down syndrome, those suffering from mental retardation, autistic individuals, individuals with psychiatric illnesses, and to the outcasts. Her method has been employed by professionals trained at her school, and her technique has been used in the world of disability by psychotherapists, physiotherapists and doctors^(1-5,9-11,14).

Dance therapy, given its evolution and its history, represents a valid approach recognized worldwide. It promotes the activation and connection of different emotional states with different parts of one's own body by supporting a global mode of perceiving and recognizing oneself as part of a whole. There are several areas where this approach seems to be quite valid and functional, as it can be applied both in people who do not report specific diagnosis or medical condition, and it is suitable for individuals with mental and psychiatric retardation, those with Down syndrome and people with autism spectrum disorder.

der. Artistic activities and initiatives, aimed at people with cognitive, sensory, psychological and social difficulties, are increasingly found in the educational, diagnostic, rehabilitative and training areas, which use arts as a powerful tool amplifying communication and aimed at helping relationships and changes. We can say that, in these cases, dance therapy plays an especially important role as, thanks to its intervention, it is possible to promote and enhance everybody's abilities and potentialities^(1-4, 14, 15).

The use of this approach is focused on the enhancement of motor, communication and emotional dimensions allowing for a deeper understanding and greater recognition of one's own feelings, sensations and possibilities, through a reflective and creative learning in an environment of cooperation and fellowship. This is particularly important for those pathological conditions in which there is a difficulty in connecting and dealing with life contexts and there are inner, emotional problems hindering the inclusion of these subjects in situations where being and getting in touch with others represent an important resource. This approach is seen as way to perceive, feel and discover, allowing both to disabled and non-disabled people to understand more deeply their own peculiarities.

Conclusions

The main objective of sport therapy is to support people in facing emotional, cognitive and behavioral difficulties and problems, or situations lived along the path of their existence. The action that this therapy supports is the discovery and recognition of one's own resources and tools, which can be extremely useful to the subject in order to recognize himself as an individual able to deal with difficulties with confidence, walking towards objectives that aim at his own well-being. Through a therapy focused on movement, and through the movement itself, it is possible to externalize our inner world, our intimate world. In this sense, the therapy aims at the creation of a space, of a place that stands between the interior and the exterior world, between subjectivity and objectivity, and allowing every subject to express his conflicts, his difficulties, while searching for and discovering his own resources and recognizing himself as able to meet his obstacles. In this perspective, through dance therapy movements, actions, gestures, strongly symbolic are carried out, which allow re-experiencing the key moments of our existence, actions holding a universal meaning.

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