



Dance Therapy

AMBER GRAY is a dance therapist with 10 years experience working with torture and trauma survivors in the US and Haiti, and 20 years working internationally. Amber practises somatic psychology, and balances theory with experiential learning, integrating somatic psychology and dance movement therapy into the restorative process. She visited Australia and gave this presentation to STARTTS staff at one of the clinical evenings.

Thank you for inviting me to STARTTS. I am glad to be in Australia. This is my first time here. Tonight I would like to speak to you about my experience as a somatic psychotherapist and dance movement therapist with survivors of torture and war.

During this incredible journey I have learnt that the body is the site of all our human experience and that dance is the essence of creative expression. Because the creative process is so rich and evocative, sometimes it can be difficult for survivors of extreme abuse to work with their body.

Many people say to me "there is no way I am going to see a dance therapist." "I don't want to have to dance! I need therapy. Why would I want to dance?"

Dance is the creative expression of movement and movement is a primary language. By primary language I refer to the way we first communicate when we are born. Our early communication begins with sensation and movement. We don't emerge from the womb able to construct analytical sentences or able to talk about what is it that we are thinking or needing or feeling; we first communicate



with movement and exploration.

Dance, as an ancient tradition, has been used for a long time as a healing modality and I want to emphasize that dance really has roots in all civilisations.

Dance movement therapy is in the field of psychology. As mental health professionals we work with the body. Freud once said, "The ego is first and foremost a body ego."

So basically, we look at the body as the root of human experience. Cognitive behaviour therapists are also working with the body, because cognition has its root in sensation and movement, so the body is a resource to integrate these various aspects of human experience.

If you stop for a minute and think about human development, you realise once again that both, sensation and movement are primary languages. Our perception, emotional, and cognitive processes, develop later on. But they all have roots in the body. The ways we feel, the way we think, our belief systems, are all rooted in some bodily experience. That is the fundamental premise of somatic psychology.

We have every kind of therapy you can imagine in the US. Dance therapy is both a creative-arts therapy and a somatic therapy. Dance therapy is the place where two types of psychology intersect.

As therapists we work with the body and with movement as a primary language. But we also work with creative expression or creative modality because, for example, the shape of how I express myself gives a sense of what is going on inside of me.

The ability to express, to organise and understand how we think or feel has a direct relationship to movement repertoire. What is movement repertoire? One way to demonstrate this is showing you what a kinesphere is. The term came out of the dance world. Kinesphere means that wherever I stand in my space, it is, in part, my ability to extend myself outwards. The issue is, how comfortable am I extending

my body into the world around me? We don't always feel comfortable doing so, and this can be especially true for those people whose bodies have been violated. The way we move and extend into space directly relates to how safe we feel, and also how safe we are.

Dance therapy arose from the modern dance movement, which was a response and a reaction to ballet. One of the early modern dancers, Isadora Duncan, was a revolutionary in the dance field. Marion Chace was another pioneer, who worked with psychotic patients in a psychiatric hospital during a time when patients were shifted to the back and often ignored or mistreated if they were extremely dysfunctional. She spent time there and observed the patients. She made contact with them through a process of attunement and mirroring, which is now a part of her work, called kinesthetic empathy. If someone was standing in a corner pulsing their head or hand on a wall and she went up and mirrored them, they often began to engage with her.

She obtained permission to bring patients together as groups, and worked with straight-forward movements through rhythm and music with these patients. She would have people marching their feet and clapping their hands, and she noticed that patients became more able to organise their experience and therefore more inclined to talk about it. It wasn't a magic cure but what she noticed is that patients started to organise. When the soldiers returned from WWII, many were not able to speak about their experiences - not unlike many survivors of trauma - she worked with them using dance and drama. She did a lot of non-verbal work with people nobody else could reach.

Dance therapy brings a developmental perspective to clinical work. Therapists spend three years learning assessment and diagnostic methods that are rooted in how a person moves. We look at things such as basic neurological actions, the

development of movement sequences and certain efforts and body tensions that take some time to notice - and a very trained eye to see. A reason we do this is because our bodies develop in an organised, sequential manner if we experience a reasonably normal developmental process. It is in our development process that our earliest experiences are stored in the body; these may, and often do, emerge later on in life.

For example, somebody who grows up having a tremendous amount of room to explore may have more potential to grow into an openly expressive body. But if someone has to hide a lot or is often scared, he or she may end up shaping his/her body with chronically hunched up shoulders, or a lot of muscle development (hypertonic) in the area of the body charged with protection or defence.

We need to take into consideration that in human development, our earliest relationships are based on non-verbal or pre-verbal communication with the significant other. Movement is the core of this early communication exchange. These forms of communication are based on tuning into basic rhythms, sound and movements, i.e. what we might call somatic attunement. A mother and a baby respond to one another's sound and movement. The body is a primary mode of communication, regardless of age and culture. Having said that, culture has a tremendous impact on how we live in our bodies, the shape our bodies take, and how we move our bodies through, and in, space. It is essential to acknowledge culture in the therapeutic - or any - relationship because we cannot assume that just because we understand movement, we understand what movement and gestures mean in another's culture.

When a body is directly violated, everything that culture has taught it about safety and movement, comfortable movement, and familiar movement can be disrupted, destroyed and/or deeply altered.

At times there are cases where people

coming to another country end up in a treatment centre or on a waiting list for clinical treatment. They may not come from countries where they would go to a clinic. Instead they may come from a place where socio-cultural processes such as collective ritual were a significant way to ameliorate suffering. Many rituals include dance and can take the place of, or be a part of, the psychological intervention, or what we would "normally" do in a clinical practice.

We need to take into consideration that in many non-Western countries there is a much deeper connection to the natural world, the ancestral world, and that the existence of both are also partially defined within the communal organization. So these are some of the things that are important in our training and they are inherent in the work of dance therapy.

I have just listed some of the different traditions that I know of that are utilised by different groups. These include the use of circles and spirals. There is a strong metaphorical meaning to the circle in many traditions. I spend a lot of time in Haiti and am familiar with the Vaudou, Santeria (Cuban) and Candomble (Brazilian) traditions where a lot of rituals are done in a circle for very specific reasons. If you draw a picture of a ceremony, you actually see the centre space.

Marion Chace believed the circle provided some sense of containment and safety. It can allow people to re-organise themselves and start to feel more at ease about talking and sharing. In somatic psychology we work a lot with the idea of the core, the centre, which is often what is destroyed in severe trauma like torture and political violence. Slaves in Haiti were allowed to play traditional instruments during the Carnival and move their bodies the way they have always been accustomed to, to celebrate the divine. It is a very powerful experience to see.

We also work with mirrors. In developmental psychology, kinesthetic empathy is the ability to be empathic through the

body. It is about letting somebody know that you are listening to him/her and that you see him/her with your movements, not just with your words or facial expression. The whole process of healing in some traditions has much to do with kinesthetic empathy.

The idea of having a witness is particularly relevant to this work. One of the schools of dance therapy, Authentic Movement, is partially defined by being seen by a witness. We observe somebody through movement without any judgement or criticism. Every event, every breath, every moment has the potential to be witnessed. The idea of having a witness is really important clinically with survivors of human-rights abuses.

Torture violates the body, it affects the body at all levels. This understanding is very important in the therapeutic process. A lot of the people say trauma happens to the body and the body has to be involved in the recovery, in the healing process. That is true, and when the body is so deeply violated, when the boundaries have erupted as intensely as they can with torture, the body can feel like a minefield to the person who lives in it. In other words, with torture the body can become that which betrays. The creative process requires a certain amount of safety and ability to feel comfortable about sharing and being expressive.

I believe that the inability to regulate emotions, to understand them and to control them is one of the most distressing things for survivors.

I once worked with an African woman who couldn't talk about her experiences. She couldn't manage her emotions, her response to events. I was working with her and her immigration lawyer came to see us because she wanted me to help her tell her story for her asylum application. Every time I tried to talk with her about her experiences she would dissociate, go "flat", and remain unresponsive.

One rainy day she came for her session and in our check-in, she made a comment

about water. One of her positive memories was going to fetch water, so I asked her to 'show me how to do that'. She showed me how she would go to the well, bend down until her pot was filled and put it on her head. As we explored this action together (I asked her to teach me) I invited her to 'show me how it really feels in your body'. We worked with this, then I asked her to teach me how to walk and carry water. We tried, started again moving backwards and forwards, side to side, up and down, teaching one another. I taught her how to take a shower and how to drive a car, some of my culturally relevant activities, and she taught me how to swaddle and carry a baby. Together we created a dance of our different cultural experiences with movement, like squatting on our knees, cleaning ourselves and gathering water. I invited her to show and tell me how it feels when the water is heavy, and to show me, with her movement and her body.

Because she loved that memory, she could tolerate the heaviness of water and the feeling of heaviness, which we later explored emotionally. This helped her discover her sadness. Then we started to talk about the things that had happened to her, and I reminded her that if she could tolerate the heaviness of the water, she could also tolerate the heaviness of the memory and the heaviness of her pain. We worked with this over a period of time. She started to get a clearer recollection of her memories and that is when she was able to begin to put her story back together. Then we worked with the heaviness, the lightness, the strength and all those qualities as metaphors and as real bodily experience. Because this work emerged from a very important tradition in her culture, I believe it helped her to tell her story. She did testify, and I was there, and she did get asylum. It was brutal because the judge was very hard on her, but she did it with her memory of water acting as a resource throughout, and it was a very powerful work. ■