

# FLOW AND DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY: THEORETICAL LINKS

**Aditi Mehta**

*PhD scholar and visiting faculty at School of Social Sciences,  
Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, India*

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to find theoretical links between the concept of flow and Dance and Movement Therapy. Little work has been done on DMT from a Positive Psychology framework. Flow or optimum experience is a state of complete absorption in the task at hand which leads to loss of self consciousness, distortion of temporal experience and is characterised by intrinsic motivation. DMT is the psychotherapeutic use of dance and movement to bring about emotional, cognitive and physical integration of the person. The links are explored under four themes, namely, the body as a source of flow, balance between challenge and abilities, clear goals and immediate feedback, and intrinsic motivation- relatedness, competence and autonomy. These theoretical links may offer new insight that may add to the therapeutic value of DMT.*

**Keywords:** *Dance/Movement Therapy, flow, Positive Psychology, psychotherapy*

## INTRODUCTION

Positive Psychology is fast gaining ground as an upcoming approach within the field of Psychology. Within positive psychology the concept of flow, first written about by Csikszentmihalyi, is central to the engaged life and subjective wellbeing or happiness. There has been a lot of research on the application of flow and how it can be used in a variety of settings to increase subjective wellbeing. Simultaneously, Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT) has become increasingly popular as a therapeutic intervention for varied population. Even within India there has been a surge in the number of DMT practitioners. In my encounter with positive psychology and the concept of flow I found that it explains the lived experience of DMT sessions rather accurately and that DMT sessions are planned in a manner that the experience of flow gets facilitated. This paper is an effort to locate flow in DMT through a juxtaposition of the concept with the theoretical framework of DMT. This may lead to new directions for facilitating healing through DMT.

## FLOW

Flow is characterised by complete absorption in what one does. It has been linked to intrinsic motivation or autotelic activity which refers to enjoyment in the activity itself rather than external

rewards being the main reason to pursue the activity. The following conditions for flow have been described by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002). Firstly the challenges being engaged in should meet the abilities of the individual or the difficulty level of the task should be appropriate to the skill set. Additionally activity should be characterised by clear proximal goals and immediate feedback for performance should be available.

The subjective state of flow has the following characteristics (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). There is intense and focused concentration on the activity that one is engaging in. This is accompanied by a merging of action and awareness. The person loses reflective self consciousness. There is however a sense of control over one's action and the feeling that one shall be able to deal with the situation. The subjective experience is characterised by distortion of temporal experience. The person experiences the activity as being intrinsically rewarding.

As has been mentioned, one of the conditions that can create optimum experience is that skill set of the individual must meet the challenge being presented in the activity. Capacity and opportunity are thus in a state of dynamic equilibrium which attaches complexity to the concept of flow. By engaging with the activity there is a growth in the abilities of the individual which calls for an increase in the difficulty level of the activity in order to maintain the balance. If the challenge is far greater than skills of the individual, there will be anxiety, whereas if the skills are greater than needed for the challenge there will be boredom (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Intrinsic motivation and the autotelic personality constitute an important part of theory related to flow. Carr (2011) states that activities driven by intrinsic motivation are most likely those that satisfy needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy and that as the child grows up opportunities for such activities keep decreasing. According to him when the agents of socialization, such as parents, teachers, and significant members of the society foster a sense of relatedness, competence and autonomy, the child is more likely to develop autonomy.

## **DANCE AND MOVEMENT THERAPY**

Dance and movement therapy (DMT) is often defined as the psychotherapeutic use of dance and movement to bring about emotional, cognitive and physical integration of the person.

DMT evolved primarily through the work of modern dancers and choreographers and the basic tenets on which it rests are as follow.

The mind and body are inseparably linked. The human being lives through mind and body, one can't rule over the other. In health both mind and body need to be in sync, a disconnect between them is indicative of ill-health. The mind and body affect each other, a depressed person's movements are very different from that of the manic and physical illness or pain can weigh us down mentally.

Many experiences and feelings can be difficult to express verbally. Everything that we experience and feel is not necessarily available to conscious and rational thought and there are many memories that are from the pre-verbal state and thus not available to verbal expression. Also some experiences may be bodily and may have a profound effect on us. To work with such feelings,

experiences and memories it may be helpful to go beyond only talking and to move towards the use of the body through movement and dance.

Historically dance has been a medium of expression as well as a way of relating to the community and a spiritual activity. If one were to look at India there are numerous occasions and ways in which dance is part of community life and marks major life events such as puberty, marriage or change of seasons, harvest etc. Dance has also been a way of connecting with god, as a form of devotion. Dance is often used to tell stories and is made part of festivals and dramatic performances. It is a means of communication wherein the body is used as a tool to express.

Dosamantes-Beaudry (1999) writes that as a therapeutic process DMT works by providing the client with an empathetic therapist who observes, contains and mirrors their experience and provides them with a safe space to act out and to explore the problems and issues they may be exploring in life. DMT helps the client in several ways. Dance and movement are creative. The act of creation is in itself healing. The client expresses, through movement, whatever he or she may be experiencing at that point in life which the therapist can recognize through empathy and observation and help the client to verbalize and bring into awareness what may have till now been unconscious. This kind of working through can be immensely healing (Dosamantes-Beaudry, 1999).

Movement can aid in the release of emotions and feelings that maybe be pent up in the client, providing a cathartic outlet. Movement can be a means of releasing anger, stress, and negativity.

DMT also provides a space for the client to develop awareness and accept their own bodies and develop a relationship with it. This can be both healing as well as empowering. The client may assimilate new movement patterns and explore new spaces as well as different kinds of bodily states that would create the body as an experiencing, expressive as well as an emotional agent.

## **LINKS BETWEEN FLOW AND DANCE AND MOVEMENT THERAPY**

Theoretical links between flow and DMT will be drawn under four themes that have been identified

### **1. Body as a source of flow**

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) writes that the body has immense potential to generate flow experience. Activities that use body movement can become a source of optimum experience under specific conditions when the movements are channelized to do so. This can be done by attaching context or by honing skill as the mind needs to be involved in order for the activity to become pleasurable.

In DMT, the therapist seeks to engage both the mind and body of the participant. One of the goals of therapy is to expand the movement vocabulary of the participant and to establish a connect between mind and body. The participant is encouraged to move in newer ways, both in time and space. DMT provides a space where participants move in ways that are entirely different from movements involved in everyday living. This allows the participant to experience the body in new ways and thus create a new and more connected relationship with the body. Along with new

movements participants also discuss and verbalise experiences at the end of every session which allows the mind and body to connect through new experiences and arrive at new insights. These principles are in sync with Csikszentmihalyi's writing on the body as a source for flow. Theoretically it thus follows that DMT would facilitate flow experience generated from the body.

## **2. Balance between challenge and abilities**

According to Csikszentmihalyi one of the conditions in which flow is generated is when the activity poses a challenge appropriate to the skills and abilities of the individual. If the level of difficulty is below the level of skills the individual is likely to get bored and if the task is too difficult it is likely to arouse anxiety. In a DMT session, the therapist plans activities according to the needs and skills of the population being worked with. The therapist will not plan the same session for diverse populations. For example if a facilitator works with senior citizens he or she will design the session to suit any physical limitations they may have, similarly if he or she is working with a group of children, the facilitator will try to design the session in a manner appropriate to their age. The same goes for psychological insight. If the group is of students learning dance movement therapy, and have a background in Psychology, the therapist can design a session with a process that may be emotionally very laden and can only be done with a group that can handle affectively charged states. Similarly if the group is that of dancers or athletes, the kind of movements involved in the session will be much more diverse and challenging as this kind of a group will already have a vast movement vocabulary and great control over their body. Thus when starting dance and movement therapy sessions with any group the therapist makes sure that the activities are suitable for the group, in all three respects – physical, cognitive and affective. This aspect of DMT also suggests that it is conducive to optimum experience of flow.

## **3. Clear goals and immediate feedback**

The second condition for generation of flow in an activity is considered to be clear goals and immediate feedback. A DMT session is planned in such a way that there are five parts: a ritual to mark the beginning of a session, a warm up activity, the process, a cool down activity, sharing, and the ritual to mark the end. This kind of a breakdown makes it possible for the therapist to set clear proximal goals for each part of the session and throughout the session the therapist provides feedback and engages with the participants. Towards the end of the session, during the time of sharing there is an exchange of feedback and thus both feedback and clear goals are a part of the planning of DMT sessions, another characteristic of DMT that seems to indicate optimum experience.

## **4. Intrinsic motivation- relatedness, competence and autonomy**

Flow has been linked to intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation means that the activity is pleasurable in itself and not done for external rewards. Further the activity is characterised by relatedness, competence, and autonomy. A DMT facilitator tries to engage in an egalitarian manner with the participants, not from a position of authority. Participation is completely

voluntary. During a session, participants are free to withdraw themselves from an activity at any time if they feel uncomfortable. These ensure autonomy on part of the participant. DMT is most often done in group where one of the goals is to facilitate social connectedness. Participants learn to share and trust co-participants and draw strength from each other. This implies that DMT enhances a feeling of relatedness. DMT sessions are designed to encourage the participants to feel confident and empowered. It is a nonjudgemental space where the only measure of success is the participant's subjective state and insight. Participants need to meet external criteria in order to feel accepted. They are accepted just as they are and encouraged to explore their own boundaries and limits. Thus the participant are inclined to experience relatedness, competence and autonomy within this space and lack of external rewards means that they can only be intrinsically motivated to take part in a DMT session.

## CONCLUSION

The four themes outlined in the paper – the body as a source of flow, balance between challenge and abilities, clear goals and immediate feedback, and intrinsic motivation- relatedness, competence and autonomy – seem to suggest that DMT does incorporate elements of flow or optimum experience in how it is practiced. The aim of exploring these links between flow and DMT is to further develop DMT practice using the knowledge base of positive psychology and specifically the concept of flow. There seems a natural affiliation between DMT and optimum experience and perhaps therapeutic practice can be streamlined with a more conscious incorporation of elements of flow.

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