

The screen as a meeting point – reflections from Argentina on the practice of online dance movement therapy during the global COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

In this short report, an Argentinian dance movement therapist offers observations and reflections from practice as to the challenges and potential of online dance movement therapy (DMT), within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author provides online DMT sessions to diverse Argentinian populations, including the elderly. The consequences of pandemic-related restrictions of isolation and social distancing for global health, including social relationships, social interactions and the resilience of our bodies in relevant aspects, are described. The value of the screen as a meeting point that enables the relationship between the individual or group and the therapist is explored; a space that encourages exploration, turns limitations into possibilities, and provides care and support. The benefits of increased access are discussed along with creative modifications to tango-related therapeutic interventions in online settings. Online dance movement therapy (DMT) sessions are an evolving source of support and offer follow-up opportunities for both individual and group psychotherapy. Online DMT sessions are an effective alternative means to enhance and promote health in the context of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, dance movement therapy, online, access, tango

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Social isolation, social interaction and the body

The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest international biopsychosocial emergency the world has faced for a century [1]. In this pandemic the enemy is invisible, but its consequences for our general health are increasingly visible.

Aside from the impact of long COVID and the array of social, economic and health-related consequences that impact families and communities losing loved ones, the limitations upon social relationships and interactions occurring as a result of necessary restrictions reduce sensory stimulation and may have unique effects on the brain and behavior [1]. Social isolation has been linked to cognitive impairment, reduced immunity, increased risk of cardiovascular disease, and increased mortality [2].

An investigation into the impact of the pandemic upon the mental health of Argentinians undertaken by the INECO Foundation in Argentina found evidence of a severe emotional impact, presenting as increases in depression rates, mental fatigue, cognitive challenges, financial concerns and intolerance to uncertainty [3]. A US study found a three-fold increase in reported depression prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic [4].

While the complications associated with isolation and confinement depend upon a plethora of factors including individual issues such as personality, coping strategies and psycho-social support, these results suggest that we are ill-equipped to live with social distancing without dramatic impacts to our health. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle observed, the human is a “social animal” and we are, by nature, social beings [5]. We need others to survive; we reinforce our identity and our resilient capacity in and through interaction with others.

The role of dance and movement in global health

Moving the body is essential to facilitate feeling the body and connecting with the inner world of feelings, sensations and emotions. Throughout varied individual experiences of the pandemic, the body, as vehicle for embodiment and location of the “Body-Self”, is the common factor. It is the body that contains and outlines the boundaries of the inner and outer dimensions, enabling our interactions with the environment, and provides the location for states of satisfaction or frustration. The challenge is to find new ways of being to connect and respond in ways that maintain open connection to sensation and the senses and increase our overall well-being.

“Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost” [6] declared Pina Bausch. The benefits of dancing extend beyond entertainment.

Dance is a universal language that allows the manifestation of both culture and the unique individual self. It is a unique creative and expressive action in which the dancing body self is an instrument of both perception and action [7].

The human as a “dynamic expressive entity” [8] has a possibility to organize and reorganize knowing better self during the dance experience. The expanded perception facilitated by dance leads to a state of consciousness in which an expansion of the being is perceived. As a liberating experience, dance creates a feeling of freedom in our bodies. The source of dance is within each individual, and when the natural and spontaneous movement of their actions reflect their inner essence, we can say that they are free.

The healing essence of the dance is used in a structured way in the contribution of bio psycho-emotional well-being by dance movement therapy (DMT) – a modality of relational psychotherapy of the creative arts.

Everything is in continuous movement and in permanent transformation in life. According to Heraclitus, one of the early Pre-Socratic philosophers “life is flux” [9]. In these times of challenges, but also of opportunities, several dance movement therapists have begun to use new digital communication technologies to give continuity to therapeutic treatments, validating the online therapeutic framework for DMT sessions.

Online sessions do not prevent DMT from exploring “the communicative and creative aspects of improvised movement” [10] and keep focusing on the relationship between movement-emotion and in the experience of “felt movement and the senses of movement” [11] to support mind-body-emotion integration.

Online sessions are effective to work with emotional expression and regulation, body awareness, motor development with emotional expressiveness, interaction, non-verbal communication and socialization.

The screen becomes a meeting point that enables the relationship between the individual and the therapist. In my experience facilitating online DMT sessions, trust with patients / clients - an important aspect from therapeutic relationships, is not compromised by the integration of the screen and webcam into the “potential space” [12]. One of the basic premises of DMT – to start from where each individual is, do not cease in the virtual space when allowing the exploration and transformation of limitations into possibilities within a space of care and support.

There may even be unique advantages to the online format. At the end of individual sessions, some of my patients/clients express their perception of the screen as a space that even expands their feeling of freedom.

The intimacy of the physical space of each participant is part of the virtual space shared and integrated by all of the patients/clients. Communication expressed through look, rhythm and movement, reinforces the perception of the presence, contact and closeness of the other.

Bodies are no longer a limited two-dimensional image on the screen, but are seen and felt completely simultaneously.

Working with Conectango as DMT intervention

All aspects mentioned above make it possible for me to coordinate online therapeutic tango sessions. Conectango Desarrollo Personal® is a specific therapeutic tango program based on the DMT and the Argentine tango dance that facilitates the development of social skills.

Tango is a dance of connection and relationship that has the embrace as its main characteristic. Through the points of contact between the bodies, communication and the feeling of support occur. The participants of the online therapeutic tango sessions report achieve the same sense of connectedness with others even without body contact. In the Caravan of Memory – a program carried out in person in various nursing homes in France – tango is used as a complementary alternative therapy to treat Alzheimer's disease. Tango movements, similar to those required in daily life activities, are used as a form of stimulation, helping to prevent falls and reinforce the autonomy of dependent elderly people. During the pandemic, the team of professionals found the use of the online tango workshop and interactive tango workshop as excellent alternatives to maintain the benefits generated by the tango experience for elders, who are very isolated.

With online sessions, the perception of the physical space of the environment expands, as well as that of the body. Genuine movement, with no limitations, creates feelings that go beyond the individual's body boundaries, thus enabling presence and connection. Genuine movement also enables us to go beyond screen boundaries, thus awakening the kinesthetic resonance of the Dance movement therapist. In the group sessions that I facilitate, some participants highlight the feeling of being one, of being a part, and of being with others.

In the context of the pandemic, online DMT sessions and therapeutic tango sessions may be an alternative way to enhance and promote health. By increasing bio-psycho-emotional well-being through the space for personal exploration that the therapist holds, the individual is able to move freely, and thus to express their emotions and deeper feelings.

Finally, online DMT can increase participatory opportunities for many disadvantaged client groups, such as aging clients, for whom travel is exhausting, caregivers, persons living in the countryside or other remote or inaccessible areas or those whose socio-economic and other realities prevent them from accessing adequate treatment. Although access to digital technologies remains an issue, for such groups, online DMT may nonetheless present new and promising possibilities.

Notes

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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