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Effects of dance movement therapy on Chinese cancer patients: A pilot study in Hong Kong

Rainbow T. H. Ho Ph.D. *

*Centre on Behavioral Health, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong,
G/F, Pauline Chan Building, 10 Sassoon Road, Pokfulam, Hong Kong*

Introduction

Dance movement therapy (DMT) is predicated on the belief that body movement reflects and affects psychological states. DMT has been widely used to treat people with mental and psychological problems (Goodill, 1987; Milliken, 2002; Romero, Hurwitz, & Carranza, 1983; Stanton Jones, 1992), and has also been used during the past decade to reduce the special stress and anxiety associated with chronic diseases (Goodill, 2005; Stewart, McMullen, & Rubin, 1994) and cancer (Brandberg, Manssonbrahme, Ringborg, & Sjoden, 1995; Cohen & Walco, 1999; Dibbell-Hope, 2000).

For most cancer patients, the treatment procedures are traumatic. The surgical removal of body parts, nausea, loss of hair, and fatigue from radiotherapy and chemotherapy internally assault the physical body, causing suffering and pain. Psychological and physical problems often appear after the medical treatment. Dance movement therapy, which acts directly on the body, may then have a profound effect on the healing process in cancer patients. Previous studies have indicated that physical exercises and dance movement could enhance the range of movement and freedom of total body movement, create a positive mood, and facilitate the psychological adjustment to a diagnosis of cancer, thereby improving quality of life in breast cancer patients (Courneya, Keats, & Turner, 2000; Mock et al., 1997; Molinaro, Kleinfeld, & Lebed, 1984, 1986; Rowden, 1984; Sandel & Judge, 2004).

* Tel.: +852 2589 0506; fax: +852 2816 6710.

E-mail address: tinho@hkucc.hku.hk.

Where a more in-depth approach such as authentic movement has been used, dance movement therapy has helped significantly to increase participants' energy and reduce fatigue. Objective and self-perceived subjective improvements have also been found to patients' mood, body image, and self-esteem (Dibbell-Hope, 2000). Participants indicated that they have increased sense of hope, ease, strength and social support, while negative mood and worry about future was decreased. Serlin, Classen, Frances, and Angell (2000) also revealed that breast cancer patients who took part in a dance movement therapy group became less depressed and anxious, and significant improvements were observed in their fatigue, anxiety, and tension scales.

Evidence also indicates that taking part in dance movement therapy groups has helped to reduce stress in both young and adult cancer patients (Bojner-Horwitz, Theorell, & Maria Anderberg, 2003; Cohen & Walco, 1999). Since stress plays an important role in cancer development and prognosis (Abercrombie et al., 2004; Lillberg et al., 2003; Luecken & Compas, 2002; Lundstrom & Furst, 2003; Ramirez et al., 1989; Sephton & Spiegel, 2003), the effect of DMT on stress and stress-related physiology has attracted considerable attention recently. Although little research has yet been conducted into the effect of DMT on stress physiology, one study has indicated that DMT has a beneficial effect on stress-related hormones (Bojner-Horwitz et al., 2003).

However, knowing that Chinese people are not used to moving in front of others due to strong impulse control and self-discipline (Ho, 1986; Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004), techniques used in traditional DMT approaches which emphasize spontaneous movement and improvisation may not be appropriate for Chinese people, at least not at the beginning of the program. On the other hand, Chinese people usually have greater respect for authority, and stronger preference for practical and immediate solutions to problems than people in the West (Leung & Lee, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1990). Hence, an educational approach may be more appropriate. Treatment may start with teaching dances and steps, and slowly transit to self-initiated movement. Since a similar approach had been used in teaching creative dance classes by the author and was successful, it may be interesting to know if this approach can also be applied to Chinese cancer patients in a DMT group.

In view of the holistic healing effect of DMT, its unique advantage in addressing psychological problems at the bodily level, and its applicability to people who have been diagnosed with cancer, a pilot DMT group was organized for Chinese cancer patients in Hong Kong. This was the first formal DMT program run in Hong Kong for cancer patients. Its primary aim was to help cancer patients regain a sense of comfort and take pleasure from their bodies through dancing and relaxation exercises. Its secondary aim was to help them to use their own bodies to express their feelings more openly. The suitability of the treatment approach that is different from traditional DMT approaches was also evaluated. Since relaxation, dancing and exercise may help to reduce stress, a Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, 1988) was used to measure the change in stress level before and after the DMT sessions. Furthermore, since an overall improvement in levels of distress, vigor and self-expression may also lead to an improvement in patients' self-image and self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to understand these changes. It was hypothesized that both stress and self-esteem would be improved after the DMT program.

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