



## Grounding: Theoretical application and practice in dance movement therapy



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### ABSTRACT

In dance movement therapy practice, it is customary and widespread that therapists use and apply concepts of grounding in their sessions and for assessing their clients' movement profiles. Literature exists in Bioenergetics' body oriented psychotherapy; however, theoretical foundation of grounding in dance movement therapy is sparse. This theoretical article revises key concepts of grounding and integrates them in the theory and practice of DMT. The clinical vignettes provide examples of grounding exercises applied to two specific populations, namely older people with dementia and adults with intellectual disability. Grounding exercises provide a therapeutic and creative tool that aims to strengthen the connection to one's body and to one's personal reality. Exercises regarding physical, emotional, sensory and social levels of grounding are applicable to practitioners of DMT and related fields. The theoretical foundation and application of grounding in DMT suggests that its use is especially beneficial, for example, in cases of depression, anxiety, stress, and trauma.

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### Introduction

The term grounding is derived from the word "Ground: The solid surface on the earth" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Planet earth supports us and all humans, animals and plants alike depend on that support. Like a tree that has planted its roots deeply, all organisms, an especially plants try to grow and extend toward the sun in any way possible (Lowen, 2006). Gravity is always present throughout our lifetime. The law of gravity is a tremendous force that rules the universe and pulls us toward the center of the earth, but also acts in the opposite direction (Scaravelli, 1991). Starting from their second week of life, babies are already trying to lift their heads against gravity, and between 6 weeks or 2 months of age, they push their heads more actively against gravity as well as through their forearms (Doralp & Bartlett, 2014). As people get older and weaker, they give in to gravity. Being bipeds, we are constantly trying to maintain a state of balance. However, when that state of balance is altered for external and/or internal reasons our body

reacts correspondingly. When a person is physically, mentally and emotionally well-centered and well-balanced, he/she is considered "to be grounded" (Merriam-Webster, 2013; Oxford Dictionaries, 2014).

#### Origin of the concept of grounding

The concept of grounding was developed by the body psychotherapist Alexander Lowen (1910–2008) (1993, 2006), and is based on the interaction of body and mind. According to Lowen, human beings are physically, emotionally and energetically grounded to the earth: "we move by the discharge of energy into the ground. (...) All energy finds its way into the earth; this is the principal known as grounding" (Lowen, 2006, p. 71). A person with body awareness who is well-grounded or who "has his feet on the ground" is a balanced, psychologically mature person "who is in touch with reality" (Lowen, 1993, p. 50). The practice of grounding for Lowen starts with the work of feet and legs that foster support, balance and rooting to the earth. The feet and legs lay "the foundation and support of the ego structure" (Lowen, 2006, p. 87). This physical stability allows clients to achieve emotional stability. The practice of grounding is based on the energetic alignment with the earth between feet, pelvis and head (Helfaer, 2011).

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Current Bioenergetics, which is still defined as a “specific form of body-psychotherapy, based on the continuity between body and mind, and founded by Alexander Lowen” (IIBA, 2013), combines body, analysis and relational therapeutic work which is based on the assumption that the ‘body is the person’ (Lowen, 2011, p. 35). Its concept of grounding is still crucial in dealing with aspects of the person’s loss of physical and psychological reality in cases of patients with trauma issues, borderline disorders, eating disorders, etc. The concept of grounding as it is now seen includes six important aspects or levels: verticality (contact with the ground), contact with one’s own physicality, the capacity for emotional holding, and discharge of energy into the ground. It also includes other equally important aspects, such as being able to understand ourselves and to connect and relate to others, including the therapist (Clauer, 2011). In addition, it refers to the “energetic and psychic processes by which a person perceives and comprehends reality” (Baum, 2011 p. 265).

#### *Dance movement therapy (DMT) and grounding: a brief literature review*

Dance movement therapy (DMT) uses movement as a therapeutic tool in order “to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual” (ADTA, 2013). DMT and Body Psychotherapy share the view on the wholeness of the body, mind and spirit in the sense that the body affects the mind and vice versa. The use of movement observation and movement analysis based on Rudolf von Laban’s (1879–1958) Effort-Shape System (Laban, 2011) allows dance movement therapists to describe grounding principles in movement analysis terms. Nevertheless, the DMT field still lacks a definition of grounding (Pierce, 2014). Laban-based movement analysis is a complex system of notating movement observation. Movement analysis captures an individual’s body language and transcribes it into verbal language (Levy, 2005). Efforts reflect movement qualities and how these movements are done (Laban, 2011). Each of the four effort factors – space, weight, time, and flow – correlates with an inner intention (Laban, 2011; Stanton-Jones, 1992). Physical gravity affects our movements and especially the connection to our center of gravity, which is located in the pelvic area. The question remains, what exactly does it mean when we talk about grounding applied to DMT? “Grounding is one of those words that probably means different things to different people” (Meekums, 2002, p. 64). Thus it remains a confusing concept.

Grounding can be described as one’s ability to perceive and to live in ‘the here and now’, and as one’s contact with the ground (Meekums, 2002). To focus on the present means to pay attention to our body through the senses and through our breathing. Psychologically, grounding can be understood as “a person who is present with him/herself, *at home* in his/her own body/mind” (Hackney, 2002, p. 236), and who has an active relationship with the earth. It describes the relationship that an individual has with the ground as a foundation or support to become rooted and balanced (Panhofer, 2006). In order to be centered and grounded while moving, a person must pay attention to his/her center of gravity in relation to the earth. When the position is unstable and the person tries to avoid falling, he/she must activate antigravity forces and undertake a suitable counteraction (Laban, 2011), or shift the weight effectively from the center of weight (Bartenieff, 2002; Hackney, 2002).

#### *Grounding and the effort factor of weight*

The effort factor of weight, which “is not to be confused with body weight per se” (Bartenieff, 2002, p. 56) relates to the body’s grounding and to the assertion of a person in the sense of “What is my intention or impact?” (Stanton-Jones, 1992, p. 70). A person

who moves with strong weight shows more intention, whereas a person who uses light weight shows less intention. Regarding body weight, Bartenieff distinguishes between passive weight (giving in to gravity), active weight (the opposite) and neutral weight, “in which body weight is muscularly supported” (Bartenieff, 2002, p. 56). Working with Effort elements aims to expand clients’ movement repertoire and expressiveness (Hackney, 2002). Focusing on the Effort element of weight (jumping, bending the legs, transferring weight from one leg to the other, etc.) and time, can both activate participants and get them grounded into the self. Results from an international Internet-based survey with 113 DMT practitioners revealed that nearly half of the therapists use grounding exercises to foster psychological health and stability, and work with the Effort weight to increase impulse control (Bräuninger, 2014a). Thus, grounding may relate to the body self or, in other words, may come with deeper body awareness.

#### *Grounding techniques in DMT*

*Body exercises.* Basic movement exercises can help to integrate bodily experiences and to create well-being, stability, integration and connection with reality at physical, sensory, emotional and social level. This can be achieved by walking over different surfaces in various ways (Bräuninger, 2014a; Meekums, 2002): self-massaging of feet, performing ballet plies, making contact with another person through the palms of the hands or the feet, leaning on a physiotherapy ball, jumping and skipping, and becoming “grounded in stillness (p. 67):” paying attention to our feet, legs and weight as well as breathing through “guided visualization” (Meekums, 2002, p. 68).

*The force of rhythm and percussion.* Rhythm grounds or anchors us because “experiencing rhythm builds up orientation in the here and now” (Bräuninger, 2014a, p. 143). In particular, traditional African rhythms and/or Primitive Expression (PE) use simple and repetitive movements as a form of dance therapy. Voice, drums, and barefoot dancing are used to achieve a sense of support (Margariti et al., 2012) thereby fostering rhythmic grounding. Drums and percussion remind us of a heartbeat and have either a calming or an exciting effect (Schott-Billmann, 2000). African rhythms support grounding on a physical and social level. For example, traditional dances from West Africa such as, Mali, Cameroon, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Benin, etc. frequently use the lower part of the body (pelvis and legs) by bending the legs while both feet press parallel against the ground according to the rhythm of the drums, and by moving the hips with flexibility to achieve greater mobility. Samba, mambo, rumba, and salsa also require a high mobility of the pelvis (Lowen, 2006; Schott-Billmann, 2000). Thus, the upper part of the body is free to move while the lower part is rooted on the ground: “The upper part of the body carries the melody; the lower half carries the rhythm” (Lowen, 2006, p. 70). African traditional dances are usually danced in a circle or in a group to reflect shared activities and reinforce the community and group identity as a whole (Schott-Billmann, 2000). Rhythm creates synchrony, harmony and cohesion (Stanton-Jones, 1992) and reinforces preventive and reparative capacities and traditional coping mechanisms (Harris, 2007a). Synchrony in rhythm appears in the combination of the Effort factors of weight and time, which corresponds to the inner attitude “Near or Rhythm state” (Laban Analysis, 2014). This can be found in the combination of the Effort elements strong weight with suddenness. Rhythm fosters psychosocial aspects, builds up empathy and activates memories and emotions (Bräuninger, 2014a; Sandel, Chaiklin, & Lohn, 1993). Rhythmic synchrony was found in the communication of dementia patients (Nyström & Lauritzen, 2005). Moreover, depressed or anxious people seem to respond well to movement in rhythm (Sandel et al., 1993). Since African dance provides an open structure, it

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