

Reconnecting to the Feminine: Transformative Effects of Sensual Movement and Dance

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Abstract

This study reports on the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual findings of an 8-week pilot research study on the therapeutic effects of Sensual Movement and Dance in restoring women to a state of wholeness, enhanced self-expression, and a general sense of ease. Informing the design of the pilot are reports over a ten-year period by women participants in a Sensual Movement and Dance program that indicate consistent growth in self-confidence, reduction in stress, marked decrease in levels of self-consciousness, and improvements in the women's senses of autonomy and overall quality of life. In the pilot study, most participants also reported improvements in emotional regulation and a decrease in anxiety and depression. According to study participants, women want to *feel* more sensuality both within themselves and throughout their daily lives.

Introduction

Sensual Movement and Dance is considered to be a conscious connection to and expression of the senses, including one's sexuality, accessible through the specific style and moves of this dance genre. This study demonstrates that Sensual Movement and Dance is both an inner and expressive art form which evokes, activates, and increases feelings of self-expression and pleasure and also decreases self-consciousness in women as they immerse themselves in this genre.

From both the self-reported comments of study participants, as well as facilitator observation, the study highlights the societal barriers that exist within American culture which discourage women from fully experiencing themselves as sensual beings. As participants expressed the essential quality of their own sensuality during the program, they reported significant shifts in their life experiences.



Method

The pilot study, using both quantitative and qualitative measures, was designed around an experimental Sensual Movement and Dance program developed for adult women over the past decade. The method utilizes a combination of Conceptual Learning (Mental/Emotional), Instruction in Movement (Physical/Self-Expression), and Group Discussion (Processing/Connection). The 8-week pilot study examined the physical, emotional and transformative effects of learning sensual movement and dance in subjects between the ages of 18-70 years. Eight women self-selected for this study from the following age groups: one was 18; two were in their 30's; three were in their 40's; one was in her 50's; and one was 69. All of the participants were upper middle class and college-educated. All the women were either students during the pilot study or worked professionally outside the home. Most of the women were mothers.

Participants were assessed using formal pre/post psychological questionnaires, pre/post verbal interviews, and participant self-assessments throughout the pilot.

Results

The written pre/post pilot surveys used standardized tools to measure sensuality, anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation. Even though the sample size was small, these quantitative tools showed statistically-significant increases in the psychological and emotional elements measured. However, what is most notable are the larger transformational gains expressed through the anecdotal data collected throughout the study. This anecdotal data -- results of the pre/post program verbal interviews, participant self-reporting in group discussions, and overall observation by study facilitators -- reflected significantly higher positive shifts in each woman's own sense of sensuality and her increased confidence, decreased self-consciousness, and increased overall sense of wellbeing than what was measured by the standardized measurement scales.

Discussion

The conventional psychological instruments used in the study were felt by participants to be inadequate in capturing their experiences. Movement and dance research has the potential to expand beyond the use of anxiety and depression scales, even beyond quality of life scales, to develop methods for establishing an evidence base for how sensual, ecstatic, and transcendent experiences are associated with deep brain and bodily changes and enhanced quality of life. Measuring how the bodily, brain and experiential effects of dance contribute to changes in lived experience, quality of life, enhanced mood and relationships, and overall generativity will require new assessment methods. Such methods point to future work in the context of transpersonal psychology applied to therapeutic dance. As the current study is only a small pilot, further research will attempt to incorporate new methods along with traditional ones.