

DANCING MINDFULNESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE EMERGING PRACTICE

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An extensive review of both quantitative and qualitative literature reveals numerous connections between mindfulness practice and psychological well-being. *Dancing Mindfulness*, as a holistic wellness practice, is a creative approach to mindfulness meditation that draws on dance as the vehicle for engaging in the ancient practice characterized by non-judgment, loving kindness, and present-centered awareness. Of the first participants who learned the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice in a community-based setting, 10 shared their lived experience with the practice, and these experiences were analyzed using A.P. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychological method. As a collective sample, the women described positive experiences with the *Dancing*

Mindfulness practice. Specific themes indicated improvements in emotional and spiritual well-being, increased acceptance, positive changes to the self, and increased application of mindfulness techniques and strategies to real-world living. Another thematic area suggested that dancing and music are the two major components of action within *Dancing Mindfulness* leading to these benefits.

Key words: Dance, mindfulness, body awareness, bodyfulness, phenomenology, wellness

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Mindfulness, considered the heart of Buddhist meditation, is practiced within numerous schools of Buddhist philosophy. There are various types of specific meditation approaches (e.g., Vipassana and Zen/Chan meditation) categorized under the larger label of mindfulness meditation. Since the late 1970s, interest in mindfulness as a clinical approach has escalated within health sciences, and various Westernized definitions emerged. A clinical task force proposed an operational definition of mindfulness as the self-regulation of attention to the conscious awareness of one's immediate experiences while adopting an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance.¹ In a traditional sense, mindfulness meditation implies sitting quietly, characterized by simply observing experiences without striving to judge or modify them.² The vast majority of research on clinical mindfulness programs conducted to date has investigated this traditional expression of mindfulness meditation; however, Kabat-Zinn,^{3,4} whose mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program draws from these classic, quiet forms of mindful meditation, acknowledges that any human activity can be engaged in mindfully and the creative applications of mindful practice are numerous.

Dancing Mindfulness is an approach that uses the human activity of spontaneous dance as a mechanism for teaching and practicing mindfulness meditation. The practice adapts the classic practices of mindfulness in Eastern philosophy for a more Westernized audience using the expressive art form. While various articles and writings within the field of dance therapy reference mindful movement, *Dancing Mindfulness* does not embrace the structured precepts of dance therapy. Although dance therapy approaches may draw upon mindfulness, *Dancing Mindfulness* is modern approach to mindfulness meditation that draws on dance as the vehicle for practicing the present-focused meditation. Meditation is any activity that helps us systematically regulate our attention and energy, thereby influencing and possibly transforming the quality of experience in service of realizing the full range of our humanity and of our relationship to others in the world.^{4,5} According to Ameli,⁶ the two major components of mindfulness are focused attention and a quality of openness and positivity in the heart. There are numerous ways to meditate, with different approaches having nuanced effects for individual practitioners.⁷ Interviews with Asian women (both nuns and laywomen) led Buddhist teacher Martine Batchelor⁸ to conclude that the specific techniques of meditation used do not seem to matter as much as one's sincerity in practicing the Dharma, or "the body of principles and practices that sustain human beings in their quest for happiness and spiritual freedom."^{9(p.20)}

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developed and coined the phrase *Dancing Mindfulness* as an approach to mindfulness meditation. The author/developer fully recognizes that there is nothing to be trademarked or patented with the term because cultures around the globe have collectively drawn on the power of dance and present-moment meditation since the dawn of time. The developer's idea is encompassed by Caldwell's¹⁰ newly coined term of *bodyfulness*, which is meant to include practices like yoga, somatic processes, Qi Gong, dance, and other practices that add another dimension to the practice of mindfulness by more fully encouraging awareness of the body. The purpose of this article is to introduce the practice of *Dancing Mindfulness* within the context of existing literature on mindfulness in modern wellness and treating emotional trauma; the corresponding research inquiry investigates the lived experiences of the first individuals to take part in the practice in its early phases of development.

DANCING MINDFULNESS

Dancing Mindfulness is a wellness practice that grew from the developer's clinical experiences working with trauma and addiction. *Dancing Mindfulness* can be learned in a group class and practiced in community, as well as individually; experience in yoga, meditation, or dance is not required to practice. Participants are simply asked to come as they are with attitudes of open-mindedness. Structured classes begin with a facilitator gently leading participants through a series of breathing and body awareness exercises. Following a mindful stretch series, the facilitator leads participants up to their feet for letting go and dancing with the freedom one might tap into by simply turning on some music and dancing around their houses. Many participants find this practice, especially when supported by the energy of other practitioners who are also taking risks, a cathartic experience. Although some find themselves overwhelmed and intimidated, they are encouraged to just acknowledge their experience, without judgment, and can choose to opt out of a certain dance or use their breath and movement as vehicles for moving through the discomfort. Safety is imperative to *Dancing Mindfulness* practice—facilitators emphasize that no one ought ever feel forced to participate in any component of the practice.

The primary attitudes cultivated by mindful practice, as identified by Kabat-Zinn⁴ in his synthesis of mindfulness study, are used as thematic guidelines in structuring classes: acceptance, beginner's mind, letting go, non-judging, non-striving, patience, and trust. Any of these attitudes may be used as a thematic guide in choosing music for the class, or the facilitator may call upon a series of these attitudes in dancing with an element. The elements of *Dancing Mindfulness*, identified by the developer, are networks through which mindfulness can be practiced: breath, body, mind, spirit, sound, story, and fusion of all the elements. A facilitator may elect to start the class working with breath in silence, advising participants that when they use their bodies to come up to their feet and dance, their breaths are with

them as a guiding force. Using breath to guide movement is a way, for example, to cultivate the attitude of trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dance therapy literature alludes to mindful movement and the impact of mind–body synergy as a major premise of dance therapy and its efficacy.^{11–14} Recent dance therapy articles more directly reference mindfulness.^{15,16} The pairing of the terms *dance/dancing* and *mindfulness* is limited and mostly metaphorical,¹⁷ with the specific term *Dancing Mindfulness* not previously published. Barton's¹⁸ research on a program called *Movement and Mindfulness* is a close match. *Movement and Mindfulness* was a body-based curriculum introduced into a group rehabilitation setting for severely mentally ill patients, using a combination of dance/movement therapy techniques, yoga skills, and traditional group therapy with a focus on mindfulness/Eastern meditation. Using qualitative methods of evaluation, results indicated numerous examples of physical and psychological shifts and experiences of pro-social behavior.

Crane-Okada et al.¹⁹ investigated the use of dance/movement therapy paradigms and mindfulness with female cancer survivors. In this randomized design of 49 female participants aged between 50 and 90 years, the program's major benefits included reducing fear and improving attitudes of mindfulness. Sze et al.²⁰ examined Vipassana meditation and dance as vehicles for promoting somatic and emotional coherence, concluding through empirical measures that the coherence between somatic and cardiac aspects of emotion was greater in those who had specialized training in meditation or dance, as compared with the control group.

A general review of the literature on mindfulness and health is too extensive for the scope of this article; in 2012 alone, over 500 studies were published. Existing literature reviews and meta-analyses on mindfulness offer general capsules on the state of the research²¹; a review of the literature on mindfulness concluded that mindfulness brings about various psychological effects, including increased subjective well-being, reduced psychological symptoms, and reduced emotional reactivity. Another meta-analysis including 209 studies on mindfulness-based interventions concluded that these interventions are effective treatments for a variety of psychological problems, especially in reducing anxiety, depression, and stress, at very least on par with cognitive and behavioral interventions.²²

According to Shonin et al.,²³ a definitive conclusion about all mindfulness research is somewhat impossible because of imprecise parameters with operational definitions (e.g., some programs have structured protocols like MBSR and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy [MBCT], whereas others like dialectical behavioral therapy [DBT], acceptance and commitment therapy [ACT], and mindfulness-based relapse prevention [MBRP] therapy make use of mindfulness strategies as part of their larger scope). These authors identified another problem, at least for the more empirically minded, in reconciling the precisions of scientific language with the spiritual concepts often used in mindfulness writing that

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