
Dance to make you 'feel good'

Independent artist **Gerry Turvey** describes her work with dance and mental health

As dancers and dance practitioners we are all aware of the personal, mental and physical benefits of being in touch with our bodies. We have our bodies as our artistic tool, as well as our creative and expressive outlet. The daily connection of mind and body is part of our fundamental way of being and well-being. We know we 'feel better' for dancing, breathing, stretching, and sharing our movement with others...to us its obvious isn't it? How then, can we think about using dance as a pivotal tool towards improving mental health for those of us who struggle at times in our life with some form of mental ill health?

For the past 18 months I have been involved as a dance worker with LocoMotion dance group in Huddersfield. This is a unique and diverse group of people who come together once a week to share movement and dance improvisation within their differing body histories. Billed as 'dance to make you feel good' the group are part of an umbrella organisation HOOT Music and Dance. The class is aimed at users of the mental health system, anyone challenged by mental ill health, or anyone at any stage of the recovery process, though anyone is also welcome to take part.

The dance group has its own momentum. It is a place to 'be' and a place to 'be part' of something. There is a sense of safety and belonging for participants, and yet it is not closed. It

embraces new members and passing visitors with a real sense of welcome, sharing, and inclusion that is valuable and encouraging for new dancers to return.

The class has a very simple structure with no pressure to be or do anything, rather I aim to construct open tasks that can allow for personal interpretation, and there is a sense of value to everything that is offered and achieved. We focus on getting in touch with our breath, and through that the physical body, so perhaps that leaves space for the mind to follow rather than dictate.

Most of the sessions use the development of a structured improvisation; this allows individuals to have a safe place for creativity and finding different ways of expression with the body, and to create relationships with partners or others in the group. Nothing is perceived as 'wrong'. All suggestions from participants are valid and used as part of the dance, and therefore create a contribution to the group. Touch (which could potentially be an issue) seems to integrate itself seamlessly and everyone has a sensitivity to each other, this helps to make the physical contact integral to the work.

We also play a great deal, and I aim to encourage this and then layer it with the use of structures such as repetition, ritual, harmony, physical conversations, meetings, following/copying. Also, perhaps

without the group being aware of it, I use some risk-taking, both physically and mentally. For example working with the eyes closed, or falling and being supported by partners. This can be challenging and sometimes daunting, but ultimately empowering and life-affirming. For some people the very fact of coming each week, being there, dancing and interacting, allowing physical contact is in itself a risk, and the great thing is that they continue to take it!

I am constantly amazed and impressed with the level of commitment, the ability to be open and share, and the enormous amount of creativity generated each session. Each week I leave with a sense that huge achievements have been accomplished. Participants offer so much that is real; they dance with a sense that their contributions are from the heart, with a sense of generosity and of honesty. For me as a facilitator this is humbling, and ultimately deeply fulfilling.

Dance uses the co-ordination of mind and body, and creative activity uses the left side of brain for concentration. Dance creates social interaction with others, a unique form of literal self-expression, by engaging with the physical self. Independent and creative actions encourage self-esteem and empowerment; this is enhanced by the interaction with music, and safe structured physical contact with others. It gives people choices, allows >

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Above: Participants in LocoMotion.
Photo: Workshop Brian Cross.

them to engage at their own level, and eventually to improve in all of the above things, and to share this with others within a safe environment.

Other spin-offs are reduced blood pressure, relaxation and stress reduction, and those who have trouble sleeping have said that dance is helpful in promoting deeper and more satisfying sleep. Previous groups I have worked with also stated that they felt able to reduce or think about reducing their drug intake.

My interest in creating positive roles for dance in community settings has always been vital in the work I do. Working with LocoMotion over a period of time has encouraged me develop some of the ways I work within my other projects, and with other groups who use the mental health services, for instance, groups such as MIND or self-help gatherings. So far the dance work has always proved to be wanted, enjoyed, creative and has left people asking for ‘more please!’ Little has been researched or proved that dance

is effective for well being in mental health. This is not what psychiatrists would usually think to recommend, but it’s something I know in my bones, heart and mind to be of huge value.

How then do we go on from here? Could there be some links forged with the NHS? Maybe some further practical research, some communication between dance workers and mental health workers in order to measure what is happening, and in order to increase the availability for others?

As someone who has also experienced mental ill health, I know that dance has worked for me, has helped me through my life, and helped me deal with change, difference and challenge. Not as an official therapy, but it has made such a huge difference to how I perceive myself, how I feel about myself, and how I value myself and my connection to the world and others. I am privileged to be able in some small way to pass on the pleasure and empowerment that the

dancing self can be. Dance and the Arts can potentially offer support and empowerment to vulnerable individuals in the difficult process of moving steadily towards greater independence, higher levels of achievement and improved social and economic integration. It makes me ‘feel good’!

Since writing this article the LoComotion group has infact folded, and I am now involved with HOOT and its new ‘Creative Cohort’. This will be a deeper investigation into Arts for mental health and will to develop creative practice with groups using collaboration with both music and visual art.

The groups will work towards a specific goal or ‘product’, which could potentially be a public performance, showing, exhibition, or film. At the end of 2009, it is envisaged to have an appropriate showcase to profile and celebrate the achievements of the project and its participants.

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