Dance Therapy for Dementia Residents
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Helen Keller wrote:

They took away what should have been my eyes (but I remembered Milton’s Paradise)
They took away what should have been my ears (Beethoven came and wiped away my tears)
They took away what should have been my tongue (But I had talked with God when I was young)
He would not let them take away my soul – possessing that, I still possess the whole.

Dementia is a collection of symptoms including memory loss, personality change, and impaired intellectual functions resulting from disease or trauma to the brain. There are many different kinds of dementia the most common being Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia. The mainstream traditional view of dementia is that it is a loss of self. RL Symonds in Gidley and Shears says “it is not merely a diminution of intellect but a dissolution of the self. Dementia is a dismantling of the human being”. The deterioration of brain function produces severe loss of memory, impaired judgement, loss of communication skills, confusion, disorientation to time and place and in advanced stages of the disease loss of basic motor skills. Behavioral symptoms are often extreme agitation and anxiety, sometimes aggression. Conversation is often extremely confused and doesn’t make sense. A person with dementia appears to be in a world of their own, disconnected from the present reality. Certainly there is a loss of aspects of the person that was there before the onset of dementia. To relatives and friends, it seems that all that is left is the shell of the person.

But a person with advanced dementia is able to connect and communicate in their own way and usually responds to very basic universal human needs. They may respond to love and comfort, touch, the hold of a hand, a hug, a smile, or being soothed. They may respond to one on one person to person interaction and eye contact. There is very often still the human need and desire to communicate with words and be heard by another even
if what they maybe saying don’t make any sense. A human being is so much more that just their personality. As the layers of personality dissolve, a person with dementia often becomes more childlike. Their egoic structure erodes and the normal barriers of social conditioning dissolve. Perhaps it is different aspects of the self that come to the forefront at this time.

Lynn Casteel Harper is a Baptist Minister whose grandfather has dementia. She says, “Offering one’s presence to a person with dementia means letting go of our need for rational interchanges, direct social cues, logical conclusions. It often means letting go of words altogether and entering entirely into the realm of affect and intuition. My grandfather may not recognize me when I visit, but he can intuit care and love. He can feel my hand holding his and know, in a place beyond words, what this touch means. In the struggle to understand what it means to be human with dementia, we need the contributions of those who regularly traffic in the spheres of the intuitive and ineffable, who understand the value of someone as transcending linear, hyper-rational formulations of identity.

Sonia Bos a writer whose father had Alzheimers Disease wrote “ When the personality structure has been released, and therefore the personality is no longer approachable, you can, during the lucid moments, look straight into the soul of the person with dementia. The soul, his eternal core, which so much more gentle and lovable than his personality. At this stage, someone with dementia seems much happier and gentler than you could ever imagine. His better side is being revealed and he loses his sharp edges. In this phase you can meet the jewel inside the person.”

Psychotherapist Sharon Snir wrote a book “ Losing Lionel” about her mother who has dementia “Dementia peeled away layers of how things should and should not be. It peeled away the surface that was concerned only with appearance. Over time it revealed someone I had never really met. Someone pure and sweet and filled with innocent gratitude. In the end, all that was left of Lily was Love. How ironic that dementia gave me the mother I always wanted”

Paul Raia and Joanne Koenig-Coste, of the Massachusetts Alzheimer's Association, write "The collective experience of caregivers tells us that the capacity to feel and exhibit emotion persists among people with Alzheimer's far into the disease process. The ability to feel emotion, then, may be our best inroad to the Alzheimer mind."
Dance and music are a universal language of human communication that has been with us since the beginning of time. Traditional cultures have always used dance and music for celebration of many of life’s rituals, for healing, social occasions and group cohesion. Dance was part of everyday life. Since the beginning of time dance and music have always been tools to engage the spirit and soul. “When the soul of a person is engaged there is aliveness, energy and presence” Gabrielle Roth

Dance and music have the capacity to bypass the mental structures of a person and to stimulate and reach into the inner essence of a person.

Heather Hill is a Melbourne based dance therapist who works with people with dementia. She says “Dance has the capacity to take us beyond ourselves, to engage us in an alive and enlivening process”

Dance Therapy is a holistic model that gives expression to the whole person working with the mind, body and spirit. The philosophy of Dance therapy is aligned with eastern philosophy and all spiritual traditions where there is a relationship between mind body and spirit that informs our health and wellbeing. This philosophy describes an energetic model of the universe where there is relationship and connection between everything in the universe. This view is slowly starting to be more accepted by some areas of western science and medicine, which in the past has been very focused purely on the physical body and the spirit soul has been completely ignored. In traditional cultures connection with the spirit and soul is the most vital part of identity. In fact the soul is considered to be the essence of the person.

Rumi, the famous Turkish Sufi mystical poet says “When you do things from the soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy”

When our soul and spirit is engaged and awakened we move into a larger dimension of ourselves, there is a sense of wholeness, fullness and expansion. A premise of Dance therapy is that when we move into this expanded self, into a place where mind, body and spirit are unified, healing can take place.

Working with an advanced dementia population at the Montefiore Residential Facility in Sydney one of the aims of the Dance Therapy program is to engage and awaken the soul and spirit of the person. When the soul is engaged this helps to bring the person with dementia into the present moment and experience moments of real connection and aliveness. I am part of a creative arts therapy team consisting of an art
therapist and 2 music therapists. The creative arts therapy program at Montefiore Residential Facility is a unique innovative program focused on person centered care that seeks to provide residents with high quality programs that enhance their daily life.

Other goals of the dance therapy program are to stimulate mobility and physical functioning, awaken energy and vitality, provide an environment for safe expression of feelings and emotions, reduce anxiety and confusion, and inspire a sense of relaxation and feelings of peace.

Heather Hill has this view of dance therapy

“The ability of people with dementia to express themselves or communicate through verbal/cognitive means is of course impaired, but there remains a whole area of affective being and experience – the person - which the dance therapist can connect to. Dance therapy in the context of dementia lies very much within a person-centered value system which is about acknowledging and supporting the personhood of the person with dementia. It is not about teaching dance or a pre-determined set of exercises, but about engaging with the person with dementia where he/she is at and facilitating a “conversation” in whatever way is possible for the person – through creative movement and dance, voice, music and music-making, props (e.g. scarves), and at times social dance (such as old-time, Australian bush dance – and even rock ‘n roll!) – whatever works, whatever allows connection.”

A comment from a relative whose mother is in one of my groups “My mother when she was a child was very connected to music and dance. It was part of our family. She lost touch with this sense of joy in her adult life. Since she has had dementia and the social pressures and rigid structures of life and social conditioning have slipped away, she has rediscovered her love and connection to music and movement, and I see her experiencing that joy she used to have.

Awakening the soul in dementia residents is done primarily through music, dance, rhythm and song. Music is the main catalyst and inspiration. Often a person with dementia may be completely disconnected and in their own world, but when they hear a familiar song or tune from their past they begin to sing the words. This remembering of a song or a familiar tune can bring them great joy and pleasure, and connection to the present moment. It can help them reconnect with memories, and stories from their past. Once the soul is engaged, it is as though we tap into a river of aliveness within the person and that river begins to flow. The physical movement may be very small, it may be the
tapping of a finger or the tapping of a foot to the beat of the music, or the swaying of the head back and forth, but this tiny movement reflects the movement of the soul, the awakening of a pulse from within, from stillness and immobility to movement, from vacant distant eyes to an aliveness in the eyes. When there is a moment of connection with soul, the person with dementia visibly becomes alive. It’s as though they return from their other dimension, into the here and now, and they are often smiling, there is direct eye engagement with the therapist and there is a visible sign of enjoyment, well-being and contentment. My job as the dance therapist is to keep the river of connection flowing and moving. Of course this aliveness ebbs and flows and may only be there for moments or it may be there for the whole session if things are going really well.

A Dance Therapy session is guided by the residents and follows their impulses, suggestions and ideas at all times. While I do initiate movements for the resident to follow, I then follow their flow with it and see how it develops. In this way we are tapping into their creativity.

Rhythm is a primary tool to awaken the soul. Rhythm is very basic, to human experience. Basic rhythms such as the beat of a drum, clapping of hands, tapping or stamping the feet, are instinctual responses that reflect the beating of our heart. These simple basic rhythms are grounding for people with dementia and create unity within the group.

Creating the right environment is important. It is preferable to be in a quiet place where there are no distractions and an uplifting space with windows. The residents sit in a circle. The circle unifies and provides a container for the group. This is essential as the hardest thing is to hold their attention. In the circle everyone can see each other or rather I hold the possibility of connection if it can arise. Using props such as a large balloon being thrown around the circle opens up and stimulates the energy. The residents reach and stretch to interact with the balloon stimulating their physical mobility. The movement of the balloon within the circle also creates moving patterns of energy within the circle connecting the residents to each other unifying the group. This may not be obvious but it is happening on an energetic level in a subtle way. In the energetic model if one person begins to clap their hands or tap their feet, another may join in and another so they influence each other and the energy and aliveness within the group can expand. When a group is going really well by the end of the session most of the group is involved in the flow in some way. There is a sense of a group field, of the group moving together. This of course is very ambitious and rarely happens.
The dynamic relationship between the therapist and person with dementia is naturally a key element in the therapeutic process. One on one direct engagement is important to invite connection. This human engagement is often a trigger or starting point for response. The quality of the attention is essential to really connect with the person soul to soul. I call this loving attention. The loving attention connects with the soul or essence of the person through their eyes and with attunement and empathic engagement. The eyes are the mirrors of the soul.

Like most creative arts therapists, dance therapists attune to the client and empathize with them. We drop out of a cognitive thinking space and drop into a more feeling, intuitive, state. It’s like a tuning in to the residents. It’s a state of being completely present fully to the clients. It can be likened to a state of meditation where one is not in a cognitive thinking mind state but in a larger expanded state of consciousness. It is this quality of presence and attention that invites the residents to relax and respond.

Touch is also a basic human experience that is comforting, soothing, connecting, and grounding. I use a lot of touch, working with hands on movement, holding hands, and using props such as shakers and scarves and massage. Once there is a response from the resident, mirroring the movement and continuing the loving attention helps the resident to stay connected with their flow. Witnessing or holding the space for them creates a safe container for them to relax and respond. In fact usually if I am engaged with a resident, when I leave them to work with someone else, their movement often stops. So this mirroring, witnessing and direct engagement with the resident is essential. It’s as though witnessing and mirroring them anchors them in this reality for a moment. It is similar to mothers mirroring and witnessing their baby, which helps the baby feel safe to emerge. All human beings of all ages long to be seen, acknowledged and heard. People with dementia have these same human needs.

Love and connection are the most important human experiences at any stage of life. It’s what all human beings long for. As Irish mystic and writer John O Donohue writes, “The soul needs love as urgently as the body needs air. In the warmth of love the soul can be itself.” Dance and music in a therapeutic environment can assist the person with dementia to reconnect with their soul inviting moments of connection, aliveness, peace and joy.
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