

The Promoting Effect and Practical Path of Environmental Dance Therapy on Mental Health

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Abstract: The fast-paced modern society is accompanied by multiple pressures such as workplace competition and interpersonal alienation, and mental health issues have become increasingly prominent, becoming a social concern that cannot be ignored. And environmental dance therapy - this emerging intervention method that interweaves the agility of dance art, the profundity of psychology, and the warmth of environmental science - is quietly blooming with unique healing value. This article will start from its theoretical foundation and explore how it uses body rhythm as a pen, emotional expression as ink, and environmental interaction as paper, step by step outlining the internal logic of promoting mental health. It extracts practical paths such as integrating natural scenes and designing personalized plans, and combines relevant practices to verify its effectiveness in emotional counseling, self-awareness improvement, and social support enhancement. Research has shown that environmental dance therapy can improve psychological states through multidimensional interventions and provide innovative pathways for mental health services. In the future, it is necessary to strengthen interdisciplinary research and standardization construction, and promote its application in fields such as healthcare, education, and community.

Keywords: Environmental dance therapy, mental health, mechanism of action, practical path, and integration of body and mind.

1. Introduction

Under the pressure of fast-paced and digital life, global mental health issues are becoming increasingly prevalent. Chronic stress in the workplace and emotional distress among adolescents are becoming more common, and the scale of sub-health groups continues to expand. According to data from the World Health Organization, about 1/8 of the global population is affected by mental illness. The lifetime prevalence of depression and anxiety disorders among adults in China is 6.8% and 4.98%, respectively. The demand for mental health services continues to grow. Traditional psychotherapy relies heavily on language communication and has intervention limitations for special groups such as post-traumatic stress disorder and autism. There is an urgent need for new non-verbal and experiential intervention methods. Environmental dance therapy originated from dance therapy in the mid-20th century, integrating the interdisciplinary advantages of dance studies, psychology, and environmental science. With "mind body monism" as the core, it releases emotions and repairs psychology through the interaction between the body and the environment. Its concept is highly compatible with modern mental health needs and has become an internationally recognized healing paradigm [1]. This article focuses on the core logic of environmental dance therapy, revealing its scientific principles for promoting mental health, and constructing a complete analytical framework of "theoretical basis mechanism practice path application scenario". Different from traditional dance therapy, the research focuses on the healing function of "environmental" elements, including the regulatory effect of natural landscapes and cultural spaces on psychological states. Through relevant practical exploration, its operability and effectiveness are verified, providing an interdisciplinary perspective for mental health intervention and a reference for professionals to carry out practical activities in community health care, school psychological counseling, medical

institution assisted treatment, and other scenarios.

2. Theoretical Basis and Core Connotation of Environmental Dance Therapy

From the perspective of the logic of the relationship between body and mind, the Mind Body Unity Theory points out that physical movement and psychological state are dynamically linked through the neuroendocrine system and autonomic nervous system - the autonomic nervous system regulates heart rate and respiratory adaptation movements, and the neuroendocrine system transmits emotional regulation signals through hormones, providing underlying support for environmental dance therapy. In practice, regular body movements precisely stimulate the secretion of endorphins and serotonin in the brain by repeating soothing sequences (such as trunk swings imitating the flow of a stream or arm stretches imitating the swaying of leaves): the former relieves tension and brings pleasure, while the latter regulates emotional rhythms, with a dual effect of relieving negative emotions. Some domestic institutions have jointly intervened in practice, designing "natural imagery" dance movements for people under workplace stress and postpartum emotional fluctuations, guiding participants to practice in simulated spaces decorated with green plants and playing natural sound effects. After 8-12 weeks of intervention, physiological monitoring showed a significant decrease in cortisol levels among participants and improved sleep in some groups, confirming the regulatory effect of physical exercise on psychological stress and highlighting the value of mind body interaction.

From the perspective of cognitive reconstruction, Embodied Cognition emphasizes that physical experience is the core carrier of cognitive reconstruction, which is highly compatible with the concept of "using the body as a medium and the environment as a support" in environmental dance

therapy. Dance therapy in natural environments works through multi sensory stimulation: forest greenery reduces fatigue, bird songs distract negative attention, seaside sea breeze soothes sympathetic nerves, and tidal rhythms guide breathing and movement synchronization. These stimuli activate the brain's default mode network (active during self reflection and emotional integration), helping to efficiently complete self reference processing and emotional regulation. Related studies have found that the psychological resilience scale (CD-RISC) scores of the natural scene participation group are significantly improved compared to the indoor group, especially in terms of "stress adaptation ability" and "emotional recovery speed". This indicates that the natural environment amplifies the therapeutic effect of physical experience and improves cognitive restructuring efficiency.

From the perspective of social connectivity, the dual mechanisms of "instrumental support" and "emotional support" in social support theory are fully reflected in group practice. Group dance therapy utilizes structured interactive movements, such as synchronized collective steps, hand in hand circular dancing to establish connections, and grouping short dances to promote communication, guiding participants to break down social barriers. For the elderly population, staff have adapted traditional movements such as yangko steps and fan dance arm movements based on their physical and mental characteristics to reduce difficulty and preserve cultural elements. Most of the elderly participants are empty nesters or solitary individuals in the community. After 10-15 weeks of practice, their scores on the loneliness scale decreased, their social frequency increased, and some formed after-school groups to visually demonstrate the promoting effect of collective dancing on interpersonal trust and social belonging [2].

3. The Core Mechanism of Environmental Dance Therapy in Promoting Mental Health

3.1. Emotional Release: From Physical Release to Psychological Desensitization

Environmental dance therapy provides a non-verbal expression pathway for emotional release, with the core being the visualization of inner emotions through physical movements, following a three-stage model of "improvisational dancing emotional embodiment symbolic transformation". During the improvisational dance stage, individuals break free from the constraints of dance norms in natural or open environments, freely dance according to their inner feelings, and initially externalize suppressed emotions; The stage of emotional embodiment is crucial. In some intervention practices targeting adolescent anxiety groups, participants are guided to artistic spaces (such as in front of graffiti walls), and through movements such as stretching, contracting, and jumping, abstract anxiety is transformed into perceptible bodily expression. After a period of intervention, the participants' anxiety scale scores significantly decreased. At the neural level, physical movement stimulated neurotransmitter secretion, causing the prefrontal cortex to shift from a state of high alertness to a state of normal emotional regulation; In the stage of symbol transformation, individuals reflect on the movements and emotional expressions in dance, transforming them into understandable cognitive symbols, completing the process from physical

release to psychological desensitization, and achieving emotional counseling.

3.2. Social Connection: From Action Collaboration to Emotional Resonance

Dance therapy in group environments relies on the "synchronized movement effect" to promote social connections. When members participate in dance at a unified rhythm, their movements gradually synchronize, which can promote the secretion of oxytocin related to interpersonal trust and emotional connections in the brain. In group dance therapy practices targeting different groups, such as stress regulation activities for professionals, participants need to collaborate to complete themed choreography (such as simulating natural imagery movements), and establish emotional bonds through movement coordination. Practice has shown that after participation, the interpersonal intimacy among members has significantly increased, and conflicts within the team have also decreased [3]. This type of connection based on action collaboration has cross-cultural and cross group universality. Non linguistic dance movements bypass cultural differences and barriers in language communication, becoming a medium for emotional resonance between individuals from different backgrounds, and helping to build harmonious interpersonal relationships and social support networks.

4. The Practice Path and Operational Framework of Environmental Dance Therapy

4.1. Environmental Adaptation: Healing Development of Natural and Cultural Scenarios

Environmental adaptation is the foundation of environmental dance therapy, with the core of awakening the healing energy hidden in natural and cultural scenes, and building a nourishing space for the gentle recovery of the body and mind. In natural scenes, "Four Seasons Theme Dancing" is a warm practice: in spring, participants are guided to stretch their limbs with the "sprouting of spring", and through the movement of new leaves trembling and vines rising, they quietly awaken fresh emotions in their hearts; In autumn, with the gentle posture of "autumn precipitation", the shoulders and necks are relaxed like the gentle rotation of fallen leaves and the falling branches of fruits, allowing the accumulated pressure to be quietly released as the limbs stretch. The negative oxygen ions in forests are natural "mood sedatives" that can soothe nerve restlessness; The white noise on the seaside is like gentle whispers, harmonizing the disordered rhythm. Practice has shown that dance therapy in natural scenes is more likely to make the relaxed state last longer, and the healing power is far greater than indoors.

The reconstruction of humanistic space injects ingenuity into ordinary places, such as some hospitals transforming ward corridors into "dynamic art channels": pressure sensing devices are embedded in the ground, and when patients step over, fine light and shadow will spread and soft music will flow, instantly transforming the monotonous and cold corridors into interactive art spaces. This invisibly attracts patients to improvise and dance, melting the tension and pressure caused by pain without deliberate physical stretching. Pilot feedback shows that such modifications not only

increase patients' daily activity levels, but also significantly reduce the frequency of anxiety attacks caused by illness, adding a gentle helping hand to the path of rehabilitation.

4.2. Scheme Design: Personalized Evaluation and Layered Intervention

The design of the plan needs to be customized based on individual physical and mental conditions to achieve precise intervention. The three-dimensional assessment of biology, psychology, and society is the core premise: using the Dance Therapy Assessment Scale (DMTAS) to evaluate an individual's motor ability, emotional state, and degree of psychological trauma, combined with monitoring heart rate variability (HRV) to understand the function of the autonomic nervous system, and comprehensively judge the level of psychological stress [4]. For trauma patients, low stimulation "grounding action sequences" (such as center of gravity stabilization training) can be designed based on this to help them rebuild their sense of body control and avoid excessive activation of the sympathetic nervous system. Adaptation to developmental stages is equally crucial: designing "animal imitation dances" for children, using movements such as butterfly spreading wings and teddy bear walking to exercise coordination and guide emotional expression through fun interactions; Customize a 'nostalgic dance' for the elderly, adapting familiar dance steps from their youth to evoke positive memories, enhance self-efficacy, alleviate loneliness, and provide targeted healing support for different age groups in the adaptation program.

5. Cross Disciplinary Application: From Clinical Treatment to Social and Psychological Health Promotion

5.1. Clinical Psychotherapy: Precise Intervention for Special Groups

In the field of clinical psychotherapy, environmental dance therapy provides a nonverbal intervention pathway for special psychological disorders, especially for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) patients, which has unique value. Compared to traditional treatment methods that rely on language communication, environmental dance therapy combines "body movements+environmental interaction" to help patients bypass language barriers and safely process traumatic memories. In practice, the "progressive action exposure method" is often used: first, static breathing regulation is used to help patients establish a sense of physical safety, and then low-intensity simulated trauma scene related actions are gradually introduced (such as slow turning to replace avoidance reactions in trauma), accompanied by natural sound effects, gentle odors, and other environmental cues to guide patients to re-establish their perception of the "safety scene". Intervention practices in some medical institutions have shown that after a period of environmental dance therapy, the frequency of intrusive memory in PTSD patients is significantly reduced, and sleep disorders are improved - this effect is due to the regulatory effect of body movements on neurotransmitters and the mild activation of memory integration areas in the brain by environmental cues, helping patients gradually reduce their fear response to traumatic memory [5].

5.2. Psychological Health of the Elderly: Innovative Paths for Active Aging

With the acceleration of population aging, environmental dance therapy has become an important way to improve the mental health level of the elderly and promote positive aging, especially in alleviating loneliness and maintaining cognitive function among empty nest elderly. The common "community dance workshops" at the community level are designed with a core concept of "nostalgic elements+social interaction": by adapting classic melody related dances familiar to the elderly (such as duet dances that incorporate old song rhythms), the elderly can evoke positive memories through physical coordination and establish new social connections through interaction. Feedback from some communities shows that elderly people who participate in such dance therapy activities have significantly improved their sense of joy in life, increased their daily social frequency, and significantly reduced their sense of loneliness; At the same time, regular physical activity combined with memory awakening also plays an auxiliary role in maintaining cognitive function in the elderly, helping to slow down the rate of cognitive decline and enabling them to have a better quality of life experience in their later years through physical and mental interaction.

6. Challenges and Future Prospects

6.1. Practical Dilemma: Lagging Professional Talents and Standardization Construction

In the current practice of environmental dance therapy, it faces the dual challenges of insufficient professional talent reserves and lack of industry standardization. With the expansion of demand for mental health services, the social attention to dance therapy as a non pharmacological intervention has increased. However, there is a significant shortage of professional talents in this field, making it difficult to meet actual service needs. In terms of talent cultivation, although some art colleges in China offer dance therapy related majors, the proportion of environmental therapy modules in the curriculum system is relatively low, and the coverage of interdisciplinary knowledge such as environmental psychology and ecological aesthetics is insufficient. This leads to a lack of systematic theoretical support and practical ability for practitioners when designing "environment dance" integration schemes. The standardization construction of the industry is also lagging behind, and there is currently no unified dance therapy professional qualification certification system. The service processes and efficacy evaluation methods of different institutions vary greatly. This lack of standardization not only confuses service recipients when choosing, but also affects the professional credibility of environmental dance therapy and restricts its further promotion in the field of mental health.

6.2. Development Path: Policy Support and Social Synergy

To break through the current development bottleneck, it is necessary to rely on policy guidance and multi-party collaboration in society to build a sustainable development system. At the policy level, it is possible to promote the inclusion of environmental dance therapy in the "Healthy China 2030" related supporting plans, clarify its positioning in the mental health service system, provide policy basis and resource support for industry development, and help it move

from niche practice to standardized application. In the promotion of grassroots services, the focus can be on developing standardized environmental dance therapy courses in community health centers, school psychological rooms, and other settings. By unifying the curriculum framework and training professional teachers, different groups (such as elderly residents in the community and students in school) can access appropriate healing services, and achieve psychological health prevention and counseling in daily scenarios. At the same time, we can draw on the experience of mature international projects and establish a "fusion of art and medicine" referral mechanism - medical institutions refer suitable cases to professional dance therapy institutions based on patient needs, and the therapy institutions provide synchronous feedback on service effects, forming a synergistic complementarity between medical and art interventions, making environmental dance therapy an effective supplement to traditional psychological therapy, and better serving the mental health needs of the whole population [6].

7. Conclusion

Environmental dance therapy, as an emerging intervention in the field of mental health, provides innovative directions for traditional psychotherapy to break through language limitations through its unique interactive model of "body environment psychology". It helps individuals achieve emotional release, reconstruct self-awareness, strengthen social connections, and play a positive role in improving their mental health status through deep interaction between body movements and the environment. On a theoretical level, environmental dance therapy integrates multiple disciplines such as mind body integration, embodied cognition, and social support, building a solid theoretical framework and revealing the close relationship between the body, environment, and psychology, providing a new perspective for understanding the complexity of mental health. In practice, relying on environmental adaptation, personalized program design, and integration of diverse artistic elements, it can provide effective interventions for different populations' needs in clinical psychotherapy, elderly mental health promotion, and adolescent psychological literacy cultivation.

However, its development still faces practical challenges: insufficient reserve of professional talents, lagging industry standardization construction, and constraints on promotion and application; The subjectivity of efficacy evaluation and the ambiguity of the target of action also affect its scientificity and accuracy. In the future, it is necessary to provide policy support (such as incorporating it into the national health strategy), strengthen professional talent training, establish a unified standardization system, and promote interdisciplinary research to build a multimodal evaluation mechanism and clarify its target areas; In addition, it is necessary to promote social collaboration, integrate it with the traditional medical system, and form a joint force for mental health services. Looking ahead to the future, environmental dance therapy is expected to become an important component of the field of mental health. With the advancement of technology and deepening research, innovative service forms will be continuously developed to provide support for more people to achieve physical and mental harmony in a fast-paced society.

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