

Dance movement therapy as a pathway to life Integration among older adults in Taiwan

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Corresponding Author Yii-nii Lin Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan. Email: ynlin@mx.nthu.edu.tw Article History Received: 28 / 07 / 2025 Accepted: 15 / 08 / 2025 Published: 20 / 08 / 2025	Abstract: This study explores the application of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) in supporting life integration among older adults in Taiwan. As the proportion of the elderly population continues to grow, healthcare and mental health professionals face increasing demands to address the physical, psychological, and social well-being of older individuals. DMT engages seniors in spontaneous and creative movement to express internal emotions, enhance bodily awareness, reconnect with familiar physical sensations, and explore psychological issues through imaginative and reflective processes. By fostering a "dialogue" between movement and inner experience, DMT facilitates mind-body integration. It further supports life review and acceptance of past experiences, enabling older adults to reconstruct a sense of personal value and meaning in later life. Keywords: dance movement therapy, older adult, life integration
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Introduction

Taiwan is undergoing a rapid demographic shift toward an aging society. Since becoming an aging society in 1993, Taiwan is projected to reach "super-aged" status by 2025, when individuals aged 65 and older comprise over 20% of the population (National Development Council, 2025). As this transformation unfolds, mental health professionals are increasingly tasked with supporting older adults in achieving active, healthy aging—particularly in the final stages of life, where processes such as life review and life integration become especially significant. Previous studies have shown that art-based therapies can promote emotional well-being and help elderly individuals reflect on their life experiences (Chen, 2017; Hsu et al., 2017). As a branch of expressive arts therapies, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) has demonstrated benefits for both the physical and psychological health of older adults (Hong et al., 2022; Rajagopalan, 2022). This paper examines the potential of DMT to promote life integration and support active aging in the Taiwanese elderly population.

Physical, Psychological, and Social Conditions of Older Adults

In accordance with Article 2 of Taiwan's Senior Citizens Welfare Act, individuals aged 65 and above are officially classified as older adults (Laws and Regulations of the R.O.C., 2025). This population often faces a range of challenges, including declining physical functioning and transitions into retirement or part-time employment. According to Chen (2017), physiological changes such as diminished vision, hearing, musculoskeletal strength, and disrupted sleep patterns are common. Additionally, older adults must adapt to significant life changes, including altered family dynamics, technological shifts, and societal transformations. These factors can contribute to increased loneliness, emotional dependence, grief following the loss of loved ones, and anxiety regarding one's mortality.

Li (2014) emphasizes that the deterioration of bodily function may lead older adults to avoid unfamiliar or uncomfortable experiences, sometimes exacerbated by unresolved

trauma or emotional distress. Common emotional responses include isolation, anxiety, and resistance to change. Older adults frequently confront issues related to memory, identity, time, and existential meaning—grappling with themes such as conflict and reconciliation, loss and resilience, and the inevitability of death. Coping with the aging process requires not only physical and emotional adjustment but also the reevaluation of one's social roles, personal identity, and sources of meaning.

Life Integration in Late Adulthood

Late adulthood is a pivotal stage for self-reflection, reconciliation, and psychological integration. As individuals confront physical decline, shifts in social roles, changing interpersonal relationships, and the proximity of death, they often experience profound emotions such as grief, loneliness, and despair. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory identifies the central developmental task in later life as "integrity versus despair," highlighting the importance of achieving life integration to resolve this conflict.

Life integration involves revisiting, accepting, and making sense of one's past, thereby fostering a sense of coherence and continuity. Through processes such as life review, older adults can reflect on key decisions, reconcile with regrets or unresolved events, and develop a renewed understanding of their life's purpose and value (Chen, 2011). When individuals are able to derive meaning from past experiences, they are better equipped to face the future with courage, hope, and emotional resilience (Hong & Shih, 2011). Life integration, therefore, encompasses the synthesis of past, present, and future, enabling individuals to reinterpret and reframe their life narratives and find enduring significance in their experiences.

Dance Movement Therapy

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), which emerged in the 1950s, emphasizes creativity, spontaneity, and self-expression



through bodily movement (Dosamantes, 1997). As a modality within expressive arts therapy, DMT seeks to release psychological tension through movement, promoting qualities such as flow, diversity, and liberation. These qualities counteract the rigidity, uniformity, and excessive self-control that can inhibit emotional well-being. Therapists employ creative and spontaneous movement to assist individuals in expressing internal emotions and addressing psychological concerns. By expanding bodily awareness, individuals reconnect with familiar body parts, engage in imaginative processes, and establish a "dialogue" between movement and internal sensations, facilitating integration of the body and mind.

DMT allows individuals to explore psychological processes through physical movement, using the body as a medium for emotional articulation and expression. This embodied approach integrates physiological, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, fostering connections not only within the self but also with others and the surrounding environment (Taiwan Dance Therapy Association, 2023). In this context, movement becomes a form of communication that transcends verbal language, offering therapeutic access to unconscious material.

Lee (2001) identified three core therapeutic elements in DMT: expression, communication, and self-construction. Through movement, dance therapy transforms psychological states, offering opportunities for self-discovery and emotional healing (Lee, 2011). One notable method is authentic movement, in which participants alternate between the roles of "mover" and "witness." This practice enhances bodily awareness and facilitates the emergence of unconscious impulses and emotions into consciousness, enabling individuals to process internal conflicts and move toward psychological integration (Lee, 2014). Over time, this embodied experience empowers individuals to renegotiate their inner struggles and gain insight into their emotional lives.

Dance Movement Therapy and Mental Health

DMT integrates both scientific and artistic perspectives by blending principles from psychology with the expressive nature of dance. Practitioners emphasize the body's innate capacity for healing and apply movement's dynamic qualities to support psychological growth and emotional resilience. In a comprehensive literature review, Koch et al. (2019) confirmed the efficacy of DMT and related interventions in improving mental health. The review indicated that DMT can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, enhance quality of life, improve interpersonal communication and cognitive function, and support psychomotor development.

Tsai (2023) noted that dancers often center their practice on emotional themes and subjective experience, merging personal narratives with bodily insight—a foundational principle of DMT. In this process, dance functions both as an artistic medium and a therapeutic outlet for emotional release and self-awareness. Through movement, individuals engage with and process emotional states, promoting psychological transformation (Zhong, 2024).

Among older adults, DMT has demonstrated positive effects on both physical and mental health. Rajagopalan (2022) found that dance therapy can reduce stress, increase physical activity, and foster a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing overall well-being in elderly populations. In a study by Hong et al. (2022), nine individuals with dementia (average age 71.8) participated in

20 DMT sessions over ten weeks. The use of simple and repetitive movements led to increased fluidity and reduced physical rigidity, underscoring DMT's value as a complementary therapeutic intervention. Similarly, Liang (2009) advocated for incorporating DMT into medical care as a holistic and supportive treatment modality.

Zhong (2024) explored DMT through the lens of life story choreography, in which movement and posture were used to reflect emotional and psychological shifts. This approach revealed dance's therapeutic and narrative potential. In another study, Hung and Liang (2022) combined mindfulness with creative dance, encouraging participants to express their inner selves through freeform movement. This approach enhanced bodily awareness, present-moment attention, and acceptance of bodily and emotional experiences. Participants reported improvements in depression, anxiety, interpersonal relationships, self-affirmation, and self-compassion.

Chen (2016) conducted a six-week mindfulness-based dance therapy program involving 15 participants, who subsequently reported increased mindfulness, optimism, and overall mental health, along with reductions in anxiety and social distress. Hong and Wang (2020) demonstrated that dance could activate bodily memory, allowing participants to revisit significant emotional events and personal challenges. Through embodied movement, individuals processed these experiences, overcame psychological difficulties, and gained deeper insight into their inner world.

Discussion

Older adults often carry a lifetime of diverse experiences—marked by achievements, hardships, regrets, and transformative turning points. Some emotional wounds from earlier stages of life may remain unresolved, continuing to influence their current psychological state. When older individuals are given the opportunity to revisit, reflect on, and reinterpret these experiences—particularly those involving significant relationships—they gain deeper insight into the meaning embedded in their personal narratives.

Dance is an accessible and engaging activity for older adults, offering benefits such as physical stimulation, social interaction, and emotional release. Through movement, seniors can reconnect with their psychological processes, enhance self-awareness, and reflect on their life trajectories. The embodied nature of dance facilitates the release of trauma stored in the body, reduces automatic negative responses, and restores the capacity for emotional regulation. In this context, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) supports older adults in re-experiencing and appreciating past decisions, helping them engage in life review and foster deeper integration. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Hong et al., 2022; Hong & Wang, 2020; Rajagopalan, 2022; Zhong, 2024), Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) has demonstrated significant benefits for both physical and psychological health.

Through the medium of movement, older adults explore key life transitions and derive meaning from them. DMT promotes emotional expression and encourages the emergence of unconscious material into conscious awareness. As outlined by Lee (2011, 2014), DMT facilitates the expression of previously unacknowledged or unspoken emotions and internal conflicts by guiding participants to stretch, sense, and move their bodies with awareness and intention.

Creative movement in DMT transforms the body into a vessel for storytelling, allowing participants to externalize and process internal experiences. This embodied narrative approach fosters healing, strengthens inner resilience, and supports the resolution of unresolved psychological tensions. Through the lens of life story choreography in DMT, Zhong (2024) emphasizes that individual movements and postures can reveal emotional and psychological transformations. DMT helps individuals recognize the impact of past events, re-evaluate life experiences, and cultivate acceptance—thereby preparing them to confront the realities of aging and the anxiety associated with mortality.

Furthermore, free and creative movement provides a gentle and non-threatening space for older adults to explore their inner worlds. Through the use of metaphor, abstraction, and bodily externalization, DMT facilitates self-reflection and emotional awareness. This therapeutic space allows participants to deconstruct and reframe their embodied life stories, enhance self-awareness, reduce shame, strengthen interpersonal bonds, and overcome psychological barriers.

Implications

Future research should focus on designing DMT programs tailored to the diverse needs of older adults, considering variables such as age cohort, living environment (e.g., community-based vs. institutional settings), and physical or cognitive health status. Dance movement therapists can incorporate DMT into hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and community wellness programs, integrating it into broader interventions that promote physical activity, emotional resilience, and psychosomatic well-being.

Given its suitability for group formats, DMT can foster interpersonal interaction and the development of social skills. Group-based DMT encourages participants to share life stories, reflect on past experiences, and engage in collective meaning-making—thereby supporting processes of life review and integration. Future studies may also explore interdisciplinary approaches by combining DMT with mindfulness practices, visual arts, music, or drama therapy to create richer, more holistic experiences for older adults.

Conclusion

DMT represents an effective and empathetic intervention for older adults. Its nonverbal, creative approach provides a gentle yet powerful medium for bodily and emotional expression, enabling participants to reflect on past experiences, construct personal narratives, and engage with existential themes. Through movement, older adults are encouraged to accept their past, embrace the present, and face the future with affirmation, resilience, and purpose.

When older individuals participate in movement with openness and receptivity—affirming their past choices, engaging in meaningful relationships, and discovering significance in their lived experiences—they enhance their sense of life satisfaction and overall well-being. DMT supports physical, emotional, and social health by promoting self-awareness, facilitating emotional expression, and helping individuals integrate inner conflicts.

Group-based DMT, in particular, nurtures social connection and interpersonal understanding, providing participants with opportunities to examine unresolved personal issues and derive new meaning from their lives. Ultimately, DMT offers older adults

a meaningful path toward life integration, supporting a more complete, dignified, and fulfilling experience in later life.

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