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The Art of Embodiment: Trauma, Resilience, and Dance Movement Therapy

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Trauma approaches are needed that work with the body as well as the mind, shattered identity, belief systems, and existential and spiritual dimensions of human suffering. Dance/movement therapy provides a symbolic and nonverbal method uniquely suited to working with trauma. This workshop utilizes a holistic Posttraumatic Growth approach that develops resiliency and courage. Cross-cultural examples from Israel and the United States will show examples of a cultural basis for diagnoses and treatment of PTSD.

Curriculum Content

The rising tide of suffering, displacement and natural disasters calls for expanded available human services. Holistic and mind/body approaches to working with trauma and PTSD can complement available services with cost-effective and humane methods. This workshop will focus on understanding how the creative arts therapies can promote resilience and improve outcome, using examples from the United States and abroad.

During a traumatic event or subsequent development, the brain shuts down, creating dissociation between what the body is doing and the body is saying. The experience of trauma is contained in the body and has been described as speechless terror (Van der Kolk, 2014). Therefore, nonverbal and symbolic approaches are needed to address this speechless terror in the body. Trauma is also a crisis of mortality, meaning and identity; therefore there is a need for existential perspectives to work with these crises of meaning. Trauma is also about stuckness and numbness, an inability to play; therefore, there is a need for creative, imaginal, movement and emotional approaches to help stuck places begin to flow again. Trauma is also about fragmentation; therefore there is a need for approaches that build connection, integration, and transitions.

Dance Movement Therapy as a creative arts therapy is an example of Whole Person Psychology (Serlin, 2007a). It focuses on mind, body and spirit, integrated healthcare, meaning and purpose, and uses a wellness model that emphasizes individual and community strengths. It addresses what it means to be human, and uses existential and humanistic perspectives to work with issues of identity, and beliefs (Serlin & Cannon, 2004). Creative arts therapies such as imagery, art, dance, music, drama, poetry, journal-writing can release creativity (Haen, 2009), while somatic psychology, QiGong, Tai Chi, Aikido, Feldenkrais, movement, EMDR, EFT, yoga can address trauma in the body. Spiritual approaches such as meditation, mindfulness awareness, stress reduction, and prayer can mobilize optimism and hope. These Whole Person approaches help heal the mind/body split from dehumanizing terror, are a creative means for containing, discharging, and rechanneling aggression, strengthen individual and community resilience and connections, decrease compassion fatigue and burnout, increase resilience and compassion regeneration, increase family communication and support, bridge multicultural symbolic forms, symbolize traumatic losses and hopes for the future, and re-establish the connection between the body and the brain.

This workshop will introduce participants to the theory, application and practices of the Dance Movement Therapy as a Whole Person approach to promote resilience and work with trauma. Participants will learn techniques and contraindications for reducing anxiety, building strength, increasing bodily awareness and expressiveness, and building supportive relationships in the group. These approaches build on graduate studies in psychology by adding tools that bring the body and the creative process into healing trauma.

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