Dancing Mindfulness: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Emerging Practice

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An extensive review of both quantitative and qualitative literature reveals numerous connections between mindfulness practice and psychological well-being. *Dancing Mindfulness*, as a holistic wellness practice, is a creative approach to mindfulness meditation that draws on dance as the vehicle for engaging in the ancient practice characterized by non-judgment, loving kindness, and present-centered awareness. Of the first participants who learned the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice in a community-based setting, 10 shared their lived experience with the practice, and these experiences were analyzed using A.P. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychological method. As a collective sample, the women described positive experiences with the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice. Specific themes indicated improvements in emotional and spiritual well-being, increased acceptance, positive changes to the self, and increased application of mindfulness techniques and strategies to real-world living. Another thematic area suggested that dancing and music are the two major components of action within *Dancing Mindfulness* leading to these benefits.

Key words: Dance, mindfulness, body awareness, bodyfulness, phenomenology, wellness

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Mindfulness, considered the heart of Buddhist meditation, is practiced within numerous schools of Buddhist philosophy. There are various types of specific meditation approaches (e.g., Vipassana and Zen/Chan meditation) categorized under the larger label of mindfulness meditation. Since the late 1970s, interest in mindfulness as a clinical approach has escalated within health sciences, and various Westernized definitions emerged. A clinical task force proposed an operational definition of mindfulness as the self-regulation of attention to the conscious awareness of one's immediate experiences while adopting an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance.[1] In a traditional sense, mindfulness meditation implies sitting quietly, characterized by simply observing experiences without striving to judge or modify them.[2] The vast majority of research on clinical mindfulness programs conducted to date has investigated this traditional expression of mindfulness meditation; however, Kabat-Zinn,[3,4] whose mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program draws from these classic, quiet forms of mindful meditation, acknowledges that any human activity can be engaged in mindfully and the creative applications of mindful practice are numerous.

Dancing Mindfulness is an approach that uses the human activity of spontaneous dance as a mechanism for teaching and practicing mindfulness meditation. The practice adapts the classic practices of mindfulness in Eastern philosophy for a more Westernized audience using the expressive art form. While various articles and writings within the field of dance therapy reference mindful movement, *Dancing Mindfulness* does not embrace the structured precepts of dance therapy. Although dance therapy approaches may draw upon mindfulness, *Dancing Mindfulness* is modern approach to mindfulness meditation that draws on dance as the vehicle for practicing the present-focused meditation. Meditation is any activity that helps us systematically regulate our attention and energy, thereby influencing and possibly transforming the quality of experience in service of realizing the full range of our humanity and of our relationship to others in the world.[4,5] According to Ameli,[6] the two major components of mindfulness are focused attention and a quality of openness and positivity in the heart. There are numerous ways to meditate, with different approaches having nuanced effects for individual practitioners[7] Interviews with Asian women (both nuns and laywomen) led Buddhist teacher Martine Batchelor[8] to conclude that the specific techniques of meditation used do not seem to matter as much as one's sincerity in practicing the Dharma, or "the body of principles and practices that sustain human beings in their quest for happiness and spiritual freedom."[9(p.20)]

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developed and coined the phrase *Dancing Mindfulness* as an approach to mindfulness meditation. The author/developer fully recognizes that there is nothing to be trademarked or patented with the term because cultures around the globe have collectively drawn on the power of dance and present-moment meditation since the dawn of time. The developer's idea is encompassed by Caldwell's[10] newly coined term of *bodyfulness*, which is meant to include practices like yoga, somatic processes, Qi Gong, dance, and other practices that add another dimension to the practice of mindfulness by more fully encouraging awareness of the body. The purpose of this article is to introduce the practice of *Dancing Mindfulness* within the context of existing literature on mindfulness in modern wellness and treating emotional trauma; the corresponding research inquiry investigates the lived experiences of the first individuals to take part in the practice in its early phases of development.

DANCING MINDFULNESS

Dancing Mindfulness is a wellness practice that grew from the developer's clinical experiences working with trauma and addiction. *Dancing Mindfulness* can be learned in a group class and practiced in community, as well as individually; experience in yoga, meditation, or dance is not required to practice. Participants are simply asked to come as they are with attitudes of open-mindedness. Structured classes begin with a facilitator gently leading participants through a series of breathing and body awareness exercises. Following a mindful stretch series, the facilitator leads participants up to their feet for letting go and dancing with the freedom one might tap into by simply turning on some music and dancing around their houses. Many participants find this practice, especially when supported by the energy of other practitioners who are also taking risks, a cathartic experience. Although some find themselves overwhelmed and intimidated, they are encouraged to just acknowledge their experience, without judgment, and can choose to opt out of a certain dance or use their breath and movement as vehicles for moving through the discomfort. Safety is imperative to *Dancing Mindfulness* practice—facilitators emphasize that no one ought ever feel forced to participate in any component of the practice.

The primary attitudes cultivated by mindful practice, as identified by Kabat-Zinn[4] in his synthesis of mindfulness study, are used as thematic guidelines in structuring classes: acceptance, beginner's mind, letting go, non-judging, non-striving, patience, and trust. Any of these attitudes may be used as a thematic guide in choosing music for the class, or the facilitator may call upon a series of these attitudes in dancing with an element. The elements of *Dancing Mindfulness*, identified by the developer, are networks through which mindfulness can be practiced: breath, body, mind, spirit, sound, story, and fusion of all the elements. A facilitator may elect to start the class working with breath in silence, advising participants that when they use their bodies to come up to their feet and dance, their breaths are with them as a guiding force. Using breath to guide movement is a way, for example, to cultivate the attitude of trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dance therapy literature alludes to mindful movement and the impact of mind–body synergy as a major premise of dance therapy and its efficacy.[11–14] Recent dance therapy articles more directly reference mindfulness.[15,16] The pairing of the terms *dance/dancing* and *mindfulness* is limited and mostly metaphorical,[17] with the specific term *Dancing Mindfulness* not previously published. Barton's[18] research on a program called *Movement and Mindfulness* is a close match. *Movement and Mindfulness* was a body-based curriculum introduced into a group rehabilitation setting for severely mentally ill patients, using a combination of dance/movement therapy techniques, yoga skills, and traditional group therapy with a focus on mindfulness/Eastern meditation. Using qualitative methods of evaluation, results indicated numerous examples of physical and psychological shifts and experiences of pro-social behavior.

Crane-Okada et al.[19] investigated the use of dance/movement therapy paradigms and mindfulness with female cancer survivors. In this randomized design of 49 female participants aged between 50 and 90 years, the program's major benefits included reducing fear and improving attitudes of mindfulness. Sze et al.[20] examined Vipassana meditation and dance as vehicles for promoting somatic and emotional coherence, concluding through empirical measures that the coherence between somatic and cardiac aspects of emotion was greater in those who had specialized training in meditation or dance, as compared with the control group.

A general review of the literature on mindfulness and health is too extensive for the scope of this article; in 2012 alone, over 500 studies were published. Existing literature reviews and meta-analyses on mindfulness offer general capsules on the state of the research[21]; a review of the literature on mindfulness concluded that mindfulness brings about various psychological effects, including increased subjective well-being, reduced psychological symptoms, and reduced emotional reactivity. Another meta-analysis including 209 studies on mindfulness-based interventions concluded that these interventions are effective treatments for a variety of psychological problems, especially in reducing anxiety, depression, and stress, at very least on par with cognitive and behavioral interventions.[22]

According to Shonin et al.,[23] a definitive conclusion about all mindfulness research is somewhat impossible because of imprecise parameters with operational definitions (e.g., some programs have structured protocols like MBSR and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy [MBCT], whereas others like dialectical behavioral therapy [DBT], acceptance and commitment therapy [ACT], and mindfulness-based relapse prevention [MBRP] therapy make use of mindfulness strategies as part of their larger scope). These authors identified another problem, at least for the more empirically minded, in reconciling the precisions of scientific language with the spiritual concepts often used in mindfulness writing that may not lend themselves to a specific empirical measure. The criticism of Westernized approaches to mindfulness by more Eastern-minded traditionalists as being too watered down and/or deviant in their definitions of mindfulness is another issue of debate. Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths nonetheless concluded that "Interest and supporting evidence for the clinical application of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) has increased substantially in the last decade. MBIs appear to represent cost-effective, acceptable, and non-invasive means for treating a broad spectrum of psychological and somatic illnesses" (p.194). A mindfulness-based intervention is any therapeutic intervention that makes primary use of mindfulness approaches and principles in its delivery, the most popular examples being MBSR, MBCT, DBT, ACT, and MBRP. By definition, the practice of *Dancing Mindfulness* qualifies as an MBI and not a purist mindfulness meditation practice.

In the last decade, the field of traumatic stress studies has taken special notice of mindfulness and other Eastern healing practices like yoga and the martial arts as healing channels. A major reason for this interest relates to neurobiology. Mindfulness practices play a key role in activating the pre-frontal cortex and promoting a greater sense of concentration[24]; concentration problems are common among trauma survivors, with the DSM-5® identifying them as a heightened arousal symptom.[25] Mindfulness can calm a client's inner experience and promote greater introspection,[26] an important feature considering that disorganized memory structure may be one process that impedes access to, and modification of, trauma-related cognitive schema.[27] Structured mindfulness practice can cause positive structural changes in the brain related to learning and memory (hippocampus) and can cause a thinning in the amygdala, lessening the charge of fear-based responses.[4,28] There is also evidence to show that mindfulness meditation practices lead to decreases in ruminative thinking,[29] alter the neural expression of sadness,[30] positively influence change in neural activity,[31] and positively impact working memory capacity and affective experience.[32]

In 2012, a task force assembled by the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) published an article on best practices in the treatment of trauma-related disorders. One of the team's conclusions, supported by literature reviews, was that "optimization of outcomes also includes exploration of novel treatment approaches such as complementary medicine strategies that focus on somatosensory experience and the mind–body relationship, for which there is emerging evidence regarding efficacy."[33(p.13)] *Dancing Mindfulness* is a practice that meets this definition established by the ISTSS.

Overall scholarship and clinical practice knowledge in the field of traumatic stress studies were pivotal to Marich's development of *Dancing Mindfulness*.[34] The depth of such a review expands beyond the scope of this article, although the state of the literature is effectively summarized and practice recommendations are presented in the same ISTSS expert panel's article. The position article on best practices for treating trauma endorses a three-phase model, originally proposed by Pierre Janet in the late 19th century, as the optimal standard for care. In a literature review of Janet's writing on trauma, van der Hart et al.[35] describe the following stages:

(1) Stabilization, symptom-oriented treatment, and preparation for liquidation of traumatic memories.
(2) Identification, exploration, and modification of traumatic memories.
(3) Relapse prevention, relief of residual symptomatology, personality reintegration, and rehabilitation.

This beginning, middle, and end structure is honored in the composition of a formal *Dancing Mindfulness* practice. Although certain audiences, especially of the non-clinical variety, may not be ready for the stage 2 work as described by Janet, there is typically some element of exploration that occurs during the middle of *Dancing Mindfulness* practices. The question of how deeply a facilitator can guide practitioners in a formal practice is a matter of judgment that the facilitator must make based on his or her experience in working with people (judgment call issues such as these are covered in *Dancing Mindfulness* facilitator trainings conducted by the founder).

Trauma is a subjective human experience that can best be studied through qualitative approaches like case study, phenomenology, and other qualitative forms of inquiry. In examining qualitative literature on mindfulness, several compelling themes emerge. One of the most prevalent themes is that using mindfulness techniques, regardless of the program, helps individuals to become more aware of, or better able to describe, their own emotions/situations.[18,36–47] Increased awareness can assist individuals in recognizing not only their own emotional state but also that of others, which allows them to be less judgmental of self and others.[41,48]

Other major themes in this body of research include increased acceptance of self and others,[18,36,37,39,41,46,49–51] and relaxation and an increased feeling of calm.[18,38,40,52] The increase in relaxation and calmness among participants of mindfulness activities is significant and likely one of the reasons individuals choose to continue with these activities after the treatment or group may have ended[37,42,49,53,54]. Other major themes identified in the body of qualitative literature are enhanced emotional regulation,[37,38,41,44,47,49,51,55,56] enhanced spiritual connection,[40,41] and an increase in the overall well-being of participants.[41,44,47,52,56]

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND FOUNDATION

Investigating a practice like *Dancing Mindfulness*, a creative, trauma-informed way to practice mindfulness meditation for healing is a new territory in the literature. Because of the practice's newness and the individualized experiences the practice promotes, a phenomenological research study is the optimal design to investigate themes of participant experience in a community/non-clinical setting (i.e., the first setting where founder developed and taught *Dancing Mindfulness* classes). Phenomenology, a philosophical approach attributed to Edmund Husserl[57] that became phenomenological research methodology, rejects the Galilean idea of seeing the world through mathematical principles.[58] Exploring the subjective, human experience is at the heart of phenomenological inquiry.

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore (a) the lived experiences of the first participants who took part in *Dancing Mindfulness* practice in a community setting and (b) the impact that participating in *Dancing Mindfulness* practice, especially in a group/community setting, had on their overall wellness. The operational definition of wellness accepted for this research is "a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which the body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community."[59]

METHOD

A qualitative, phenomenological design was used using semi-standardized, open-ended survey completion as the primary modality of data collection. The first author developed an original, semi-standardized survey instrument to elicit experiential data that would best address the purposes of the research. McCracken's[60] *The Long Interview* guided the structuring of the questions. The primary researcher, committed to the phenomenological paradigm of gathering data, has used similar instruments informed by *The Long Interview* in other published research in the field of traumatic stress studies (not cited here due to blind review). The complete semi-standardized interview used for this research is given in Table 2. A purposive sampling design was implemented for this study. Purposive sampling is used largely in exploratory research or field research, and unique cases are selected based on judgment for the unique qualities that these cases offer in addressing a research problem.[61] Based on Neuman's description, purposive sampling was quite useful in achieving the aims of this research, and a sampling design is characteristic of phenomenological research.[62]

Individuals who practiced *Dancing Mindfulness* at a yoga studio in northeast Ohio in the first year following its creation were invited to participate. After the researcher obtained permission from the yoga studio owner, whose team conducted an ethical review of the proposed research, the developer/first author sent e-mail invitations to approximately 20 women who attended two or more *Dancing Mindfulness* classes at the yoga studio in the first year of the practice's inception. To be eligible, participants needed to be over the age of 18 years and they must have attended at least two *Dancing Mindfulness* classes at the yoga studio (at the time, the developer facilitated all classes).

To allow for the possibility of negative case analysis, the primary researcher stipulated that all eligible participants be invited to participate, and not just those participants who had good experiences with *Dancing Mindfulness*. Interested participants had the option of submitting their surveys to the yoga studio owner if they did not want Marich to know the origin of the survey; however, no participants took advantage of this arrangement. Additionally, for participants who did not feel comfortable writing or typing the answers to the survey and submitting them electronically or through mail, an option was given for them to be interviewed in person or over the phone. No participants took advantage of this alternative arrangement either, although Marich and her team instituted both arrangements to remove any barriers to participation that may have existed.

The researcher set out to obtain at least seven eligible participants to survey. Seven is a manageable number for phenomenological inquiry, yet is it large enough for qualitative researchers to make thematic comparisons among the interviews. The researcher established a maximum of 10 participants; this number sounds small from a quantitative perspective, but in qualitative, phenomenological research, 10 in-depth interviews carry more value than a vast sample of general data measures (e.g., pre- and post-tests or Likert scales). The sheer volume and immensity of qualitative interview data is often a challenge for a researcher, and for many scholars, this volume presents one of the greatest setbacks of qualitative research.[60]

A properly selected, systemized data analysis procedure is important to establish credibility in a qualitative study. Data analysis procedures for qualitative data offer researchers a step-by-step method to follow for reading, coding, and interpreting the data. Otherwise, a qualitative researcher can be easily accused of reading the data simply to find the passages he or she is looking for to support his or her own pre-conceived notions. A.P. Giorgi's Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method was ultimately selected as the primary analytical system for this study because of his work's phenomenological grounding. Giorgi's approach emphasizes the importance of what he calls the scientific phenomenological reduction.[63] This attitude references Husserl's original desire to investigate an organism's motivation. According to Husserl, the father of phenomenology, investigating motivation goes deeper than simply identifying what *exists* in the world, an attitude concomitant with natural sciences and more quantitative forms of inquiry.[64] Rather, investigating the experience is critical to understand the motivation.

The steps of Giorgi's Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method are as follows ([65][p.254]), and they were used by the research team to analyze the data collected in this inquiry:

(1) Within the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction, a researcher reads the transcription or description to grasp the basic sense of the whole situation. Nothing more is done at this stage.
(2) The researcher, remaining within the scientific phenomenological reduction, then creates parts by delineating psychological meaning units. A meaning unit is determined whenever the researcher, in a psychological perspective and mindful of the phenomenon being researched, experiences a transition in meaning when he or she rereads the description from the beginning. Slashes are placed in the description in appropriate places.
(3) The researcher, still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, then transforms participant's everyday expressions into expressions that highlight the psychological meanings lived by a participant. This requires the use of free imaginative variation as well as rendering implicit factors explicit.

(4) Based on the transformed meaning units and still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, the researcher uses the transformed meaning unit expressions as the basis for describing the psychological structure of the experience.

To allow for greater objectivity in analyzing the data, the first author recruited a doctoral research intern (the second author of this study) to code and analyze the data through the Giorgi system. The second author is a 29-year-old Caucasian female and licensed professional clinical counselor currently working in the field. The intern discloses publically that her main motivation for entering the counseling field, after a background in criminal justice, was to make a difference after the tragic death of her best friend. She is a self-identified introvert with previous experience in analyzing qualitative research data. The intern has not taken a *Dancing Mindfulness* class, although she does believe in the importance of holistic treatment and working with the body and mind in synchrony and that working with a person's thoughts is not sufficient in the pursuit of wellness.

THICK DEMOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

In qualitative research, transferability suggests that the results of a particular research study are relevant not only to the community in which the research was conducted but also to other communities with similar characteristics and population.[66] The sample studied for inquiry consisted of 10 Caucasian females ranging in age from 18 to 61 years (average age = 45.4 years, median age = 44.5 years). This range and demographic is representative of the community members attracted to *Dancing Mindfulness* in northeastern Ohio city (population of 41,557 as of the 2010 census) where the developer first introduced the practice at a community level.

Table 1 provides a condensed overview of the sample, including numbers assigned to each participant (in lieu of a name) to protect their identity. A variety of professions are represented in this sample core of participants (chiropractor, real estate agent, yoga teacher/studio owner, administrative assistant, banking specialist, inventory control specialist, and health care professional). The youngest participant was identified as a college student. One participant identified as having a disability, and another participant identified herself as a retired teacher.

Five participants in the sample disclosed issues with mental illness, naming anxiety, depression, post-partum depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) specifically. One participant disclosed a family history of mental illness (schizophrenia, paranoia, and obsessive–compulsive disorder). Five of the 10 participants disclosed being in recovery from one or more addictions (e.g., alcohol, drugs, food/sugar, and compulsive spending). Only one participant disclosed formal dance training and yoga practice and another participant had past extensive experience with yoga (the studio owner). In general, *Dancing Mindfulness* and the various activities it utilizes, like yoga, movement work, breath, and meditation, was a new experience for the women participating in this study.

One participant with anxiety and PTSD identified having counseling in the past. A second participant with depression and anxiety was on a low dose of an anti-depressant and was attending regular therapy at the time of her participation in the research, having been diagnosed six months earlier. One of the participants who identified with food/sugar addiction issues had a year of counseling. A second participant in recovery, who disclosed 13 years of sobriety at the time of the study, reported a history with intensive outpatient treatment, medication, and four series of electroconvulsive therapy treatments in the past to address suicidal attempts. A third participant in recovery disclosed three years of recovery with a history of using anti-depressant medication as a teen. The participant with a history of post-partum depression identified as using “sleep, food, and exercise” to help deal with her problem. Two participants reported that they never received professional treatment of any kind and two of the other participants who identified as being in recovery chose not to disclose details about the nature of their treatment or how they addressed their addiction. Consult Table 1 to see this thick description presented in a more visual plane. This table may help the reader as he/she reads through the Results section.

RESULTS

The fourth and final level of Giorgi's Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method calls for the researcher to take the transformed meaning units from the data and, with the purpose of conveying participant experience, to describe the psychological structure of the data.[64,65] The experience of the sample can be described through three major psychological themes: overall improvement and growth in emotional and spiritual domains, experiences of the various components within *Dancing Mindfulness* (e.g., dance, movement, yoga, music, facilitation, and venue), and mindfulness experiences. In this section, each theme is more fully described.

Theme 1: Overall Improvement in Emotional and Spiritual Domains

Five of the 10 participants described emotional improvement as a result of their participation in *Dancing Mindfulness*. Participant #5, a 60-year-old woman with disability, who identified as being in recovery from addiction and mental illness, said, “I know it enhances my emotional and mental well-being because I feel uplifted during the class and when I leave.” Such a comment is representative of what the others who identified a similar experience also shared.

Mindfulness, as a meditation practice, does not have to take on a spiritual or religious slant; however, many practitioners of general mindfulness meditation and *Dancing Mindfulness* take the practice to a spiritual place, and connection with a Higher Power or another metaphysical entity is invited but not forced. In *Dancing Mindfulness* practice, all spiritual paths are honored, as is the choice not to engage in the practice in any spiritual way. Eight of the 10 participants identified spiritual growth as a result of their participation. Participant #1, a 38-year-old female with a history of anxiety and PTSD who never received any formal counseling, called

Table 1. Demographic Information for Study Participants

Participant	Age	Disclosed Addictioedn Recovery	Disclosed Mental Illness Recovery	Description (Disclosed)
1	38	No	Yes	History of anxiety, PTSD, and seasonal depression No formal treatment reported Realtor (occupation) Master's degree 4 Children Divorced
2	18	No	Yes	Disclosed depression and anxiety In therapy, on a low dose of anti-depressant College student (occupation) Single
3	60	Yes	No	Sober 5 years through 12-step programs Inventory control (occupation) Identifies having a heart condition 2 Adult children Relationship status not disclosed
4	49	Yes	Yes	Disclosed depression and PTSD One year spent in counseling In recovery from sugar addiction and compulsive spending issues Administrative assistant (occupation) Bachelor's degree; working on Master's 1 Adult child Married
5	60	Yes	Yes	History of severe depression and anxiety/suicidal ideation Past hospitalizations, pharmacotherapy, and ECT treatment Sober 13 years through 12-step programs On disability, previously worked in banking 2 Adult children Married (previously divorced twice)
6	61	Yes	No	Health care professional Identifies as recovering alcoholic Divorced
7	37	No	No	Family history of mental illness reported Yoga teacher/studio owner Bachelor's degree/former Civil Engineer Married
8	60	No	No	Retired school teacher Formal dance training disclosed
9	31	Yes	Yes	Sober for 3 years in 12-step program History of anti-depressant treatment as a teenager Works in insurance (sales/service) Engaged (previously widowed at age 23)
10	40	No	Yes	History of post-partum depression No formal treatment reported, use of exercise, sleep and diet to treat History of psychotropic medications for weight loss as a child Chiropractor (occupation) Doctorate degree 3 children Married

Table 2. Semi-Standardized Interview Questions

(1) Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you are comfortable sharing about your life status (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, occupation, and family composition).
(2) Tell us a little bit about your history and/or present concerns with mental/emotional or physical illness. Have you ever or are you currently receiving treatment for these issues? This can include, but not be limited to, mental health concerns, addiction/alcoholism, and physical diseases (e.g., heart conditions and orthopedic injuries).
(3) Approximately how many classes in *Dancing* Mindfulness have you taken with Dr. Jamie Marich?
(4) Tell us about your experiences with dancing, either formally or informally, prior to taking classes in *Dancing Mindfulness*.
(5) Tell us about your experiences with other movement work (e.g., yoga and exercise) prior to taking classes in *Dancing Mindfulness*.
(6) Tell us about your experiences with meditation or other spiritual practices prior to taking classes in *Dancing Mindfulness*.
(7) Tell us a little bit about your overall experience taking *Dancing Mindfulness* classes. Both positive and negative experiences are relevant to share.
(8) What, if anything, have you learned about yourself taking *Dancing Mindfulness* classes? Emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical insights all apply.
(9) Tell us about what impact, if any, taking classes in *Dancing Mindfulness* classes has had on your life outside of the classes.
(10) There are seven major principles of mindfulness that Jon Kabat-Zinn writes about as being core to the practice of mindfulness: **non-judging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance,** and **letting go**. Please comment on how your participation in *Dancing Mindfulness* has assisted you in further cultivating any of these qualities.
(11) Please make some comments about what works for you in terms of facilitation style in *Dancing Mindfulness*. Comment on what, if anything, works about Dr. Marich's style of facilitation. What else might you need from a facilitator that Dr. Marich doesn't provide.
(12) What role, if any for you, does music play in facilitating a *Dancing Mindfulness* practice for you?
(13) What is your experience with having a *Dancing Mindfulness* class with two facilitators? (e.g., a separate yoga facilitator for the beginning and the end with Jamie leading dancing in the middle).
(14) What role, if any, does the space/venue of the *Dancing Mindfulness* classes play for you? It time in my busy week to be able to express my inner feelings without words.

Dancing Mindfulness practice a "natural remedy" and a "divine treatment intervention."

Theme 2: Experiences of the Various Components Within *Dancing Mindfulness*

The emotional and spiritual growth described in Theme 1 did not just happen, rather, there are various components used in the practice of *Dancing Mindfulness* that participants identified as vital to their overall experience: dance, yoga, music, facilitation, and venue. In this section, each component identified by the participants, is explored. Four of the participants were willing to comment on desired changes and those are also reported.

Eight of the participants described their experiences with the *dance* in *Dancing Mindfulness* as an emotional experience. Happiness, acceptance of emotions, and empowerment emerged as descriptors. However, the majority of the participants (seven of the 10) identified the importance of catharsis and release in *Dancing Mindfulness* practice. Participant #1 (who called *Dancing Mindfulness* a "natural remedy" and "divine treatment intervention" in Theme 1) also shared, "There is something therapeutic about dance for me and everyone." Participant #4, a 49-year old with a history of depression and PTSD in recovery from compulsive spending and sugar addiction, disclosed, "I don't remember ever feeling so free." Participant #8, a 60-year old with no history of addiction or mental illness, recalls a very specific, cathartic experience: "Emotionally, in one class, I was taken back to the age of six dancing with my Dad … how wonderful and freeing."

Every participant in the study shared something about the general experience of dance within the *Dancing Mindfulness* class, with various comments emerging about the experience: anyone can do it despite individual differences, it allows you to learn something new, it is mutually beneficial, and it is a good workout. For Participant #9, a 31-year old in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, recognizing (through *Dancing Mindfulness*) that she does not need alcohol or other drugs to dance was an awakening. Four of the 10 participants commented about the human connection and energy of connecting with other dancers in the class. Participant #4 (in recovery from compulsive spending and sugar addiction) identified that she needs dance to survive. She also shared, "On the occasions when the [music] playlist includes a song I don't like, it's harder for me to respond to it, although so far, in those cases, the group energy has been enough to carry me along." Eight of the 10 participants, a majority, report that doing what feels right in the practice without a script or without being pushed is a major strength of the dance experience. Participant #5 commented, "I like the non-traditional, non-scripted format." Participant #2, the study's youngest (aged 18 years), described the facilitation style as such: "She guides you through the mechanisms of *Dancing Mindfulness* while still allowing you the space to personalize your own *Dancing Mindfulness* experience." Participant #7, as a desired change, indicated that she would have liked different viewpoints from other facilitators as part of her practice (an experience that could now be possible because facilitators other than the developer exist).

In her description of *Dancing Mindfulness*, the developer indicates that while certain yoga elements can be used in a class, especially as a way to stretch and warm up, yogic language and yoga concepts are not required in facilitation. The developer typically uses several yoga-based stretches and concepts at the beginning of the *Dancing Mindfulness* classes. The role of yoga for the participants was not a major area of varied commentary; however, five of the 10 participants shared that the yoga used in *Dancing Mindfulness* was fun and different. One participant identified the yoga elements as relaxing. Another participant, as a desired change, requested more yoga that focuses on mental elements.

Music is another mechanism of the *Dancing Mindfulness* experience that surfaced as a subtheme. Two of the participants expressed that music is the key to the success of *Dancing Mindfulness*; one participant reported that the music elicited spiritual connection for her, while another participant described the music's role in promoting a sense of inner-connectedness. Five of the participants commented on the enjoyable mix of music used in the classes. Participant #1 commented, “Some of the rhythms resonate with my spirit and seem to flow where they are intended to be. They cause me to move the way my body needs. It does not feel conscious at times when certain music is played. It feels divine.” Participant #2 said, “Without the variety in the music's style and pace, I probably would not have been able to follow the principles of *Dancing Mindfulness* like I did.” Participant #5 commented, “The music makes it!”

Three of the participants described how the music took them to a special place emotionally where they could not get to by talking, although the participants were not specific about whether or not lyrical or non-lyrical (instrumental) music took them there. Participant #1 commented, “My favorite thing about this practice is that it is perfectly fine to tell your story, release the negative, take in the positive, and necessary energy through movement and music where and how you need it without so much as a word. It's the time in my busy week to be able to express my inner-feelings without words.”

Other comments emerged in this theme regarding the venue and desired changes, although most of these subthemes surfaced in the form of singular comments as opposed to the clusters from multiple participants throughout this session. In terms of venue, for one participant, a chance to take a *Dancing Mindfulness* class outside led to a more spiritual experience for her, while another participant expressed that having an open floor plan in the studio yielded more expression for her personally. A third participant expressed a desire for even more space, which for her would have led to more expression and less distraction. The same participant also desired a longer class time. Other desired changes included more time to explore injuries (one participant) and more focus on individual work vs. bringing the group together for parts of the practice (two participants).

Theme 3: Mindfulness Experiences

All the 10 participants indicated experiences with practicing mindfulness and accessing its benefits during their *Dancing Mindfulness* experiences. The participants' descriptions of mindfulness can be organized into three major sub-themes: acceptance (one of the attitudes of mindfulness practice identified in the Kabat-Zinn synthesis previously referenced), positive changes to self, and increased application of mindfulness techniques and strategies to the real world.

In the realm of acceptance, seven of the 10 participants described experiencing self-acceptance, in concert with happiness, during their *Dancing Mindfulness*. Participant #2 said, “*Dancing Mindfulness* was a great step in the direction of self-acceptance.” Participant #3 (who identifies as being in recovery from alcohol) commented, “I'm able to enjoy and accept who I am and don't have to worry if I'm not very talented when it comes to my dance moves.”

Participant #5 commented, “*Dancing Mindfulness* allows me to have patience with myself because I know I deserve it.” Participant #4's response explains the connection between patience with the self and acceptance of the self: “I have experienced some powerful emotions during the classes and learned that I could honor, accept, and release these emotions, rather than trying to escape from them, bury them, or brood over them.”

Another major cluster of responses in the subtheme of acceptance referred to non-judgment. Seven of the 10 participants also identified experiences with non-judgment. Several specific comments explain how *Dancing Mindfulness* fosters non-judgment. The youngest participant said, “*Dancing Mindfulness* provided a judgment-free zone that allowed me to not be so self-conscious of my surroundings.” Participant #7, a 37-year-old female with a family history of mental illness and no identified treatment for herself, “It (*Dancing Mindfulness*) for me is a way to feel my body move in an environment that is non-judgmental.” Participant #8 commented, “I have noticed that I am more able to notice without judgment more in my everyday life,” an overlap to the final subtheme in this area on applying mindfulness techniques and strategies to the real world.

A third cluster of responses (four of the 10 participants) identified the experience of no fear/worry during *Dancing Mindfulness* practice, a close parallel to the mindfulness attitude of letting go, with one participant specifically identifying the experiences of no/fear worry as that of letting go. Two participants reported an increased ability to accept others through *Dancing Mindfulness* practice, and a single participant described the phenomenon of no expectations during *Dancing Mindfulness*, indicative of the mindfulness attitude of non-striving.

The second major subtheme in this area of mindfulness experiences related to changes in the self. Five of the 10 participants identified specific changes to their selfhood through participation in *Dancing Mindfulness* practice with one participant (#1) boldly declaring that *Dancing Mindfulness* changed her life. Another participant (#10), a 40-year-old chiropractor with a prior history of post-partum depression, shared that mindful experience within *Dancing Mindfulness* increased her self-worth. Two other participants indicated increased ability to trust (a mindfulness attitude), and two different participants described improvements in the area of confidence. Three of the participants who described experiences in this subtheme also reported that *Dancing Mindfulness* positively impacted their respective abilities to make time for themselves.

The third major subtheme, applying mindfulness techniques and strategies to the real world, is closely related to the previous subtheme of changes to the self, identified in participants' lives outside class. Four of the 10 participants specifically described the experience of being able to better deal with emotions outside class and in other situations. A comment made by Participant #9, who got sober primarily through Alcoholics Anonymous, verbally encapsulates the general experience of the other women in this cluster: "There have been a series of events that have happened and bettered my life since then—but it all started that moment and the awareness that *Dancing Mindfulness* had brought to me." Participant #7 also identified an increase in her creativity overall and an increase in her comfort level with herself.

DISCUSSION

As a collective sample, the women described positive experiences with the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice. Areas of improvement were predominantly in emotional and spiritual domains (Theme 1), and the primary benefits derived can be summarized as increased acceptance, positive changes to the self, and increased application of mindfulness techniques and strategies to the real world (Theme 3). These themes are concomitant with themes in the existing qualitative literature on general mindfulness practice regarding experienced changes: increased emotional awareness, non-judgment, acceptance, increase in relaxation and calmness, enhanced emotional regulation, enhanced spiritual connection, and overall increases in well-being. These preliminary findings suggest that dancing can a method for cultivating mindful awareness and practicing meditation, promoting benefits that are similar to more traditional mindfulness practices. With debates currently waged in scholarship and clinical practice on what constitutes *mindfulness*, this preliminary finding seems to indicate that non-traditional, creative practices with a Western spin-like *Dancing Mindfulness* may have just as much value.

Theme 2 offers some insight into the mechanisms of actions at play within *Dancing Mindfulness* that allow for this deeper sense of emotional and spiritual exploration. The major component identified was the dancing itself, an element that is not present in traditional seated meditation or in modern practices developed for Western wellness and medicine like MBSR. Happiness, acceptance of emotions, and empowerment were the major descriptors applied to dance within the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice. Existing literature identified increases in metacognitive awareness, exposure, and sustaining attention as major mechanisms of action leading to clinical efficacy of mindfulness practices.[21] It is possible that adding the more physically dynamic and creative elements of free-form dance to the practice of mindfulness heightens these experiences for certain practitioners and allows for deeper levels of emotional processing. The identification of music as another major area of experience within the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice, coupled with dance, suggests that for some people, arts-based methods of practicing mindfulness may be more optimal than traditional meditation approaches. This contention, originally made by Coholic[36] in her qualitative review of teaching mindfulness to underprivileged children in the mental health system, is supported by the findings of this research.

Although certain desired changes were expressed by the sample, none of these comments seemed to inhibit the participants' enjoyment of and experience of the *Dancing Mindfulness* practice. Any negative feedback received related primarily to stylistic preferences such as wishing for different music choices, venues (e.g., outside vs. insight), or in the case of one participant, more use of yoga language. Most significant to the exploration of *Dancing Mindfulness* as a trauma-informed approach, none of the negative feedback given seemed to suggest breaches in physical or emotional safety to the participants during their experiences. This finding is important considering that eight of the 10 participants in this sample identified as being in addiction or mental health recovery, either presently or in the past. The developer identifies that training facilitators in trauma-informed values, including meeting the participants where they are *at* in a very mindful way and not forcing participation, as a major feature of the *Dancing Mindfulness* approach. This emphasis is not necessarily found in other conscious dance/yoga dance forms or even in many permutations of clinical dance therapy. With future research being conceptualized to investigate the value of *Dancing Mindfulness* in clinical populations as a specific treatment intervention, these initial (albeit indirect) findings about safety are promising.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH

Broad conclusions about the utility of *Dancing Mindfulness* as a clinical treatment strategy cannot be made because the sample was drawn from a community-based class, not a sample taken from a clinical setting or from clinical screening interviews. The nature of the program was brief, with most participants engaging in only 2–3 sessions at the time of their interviews. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, long-term benefits were not assessed, although this opens up an avenue for potential future research. The potential clinical implications of this inquiry's findings are noteworthy in considering the sample's history with addiction and mental health recovery (only two of the 10 participants identified no current or historical issues with mental illness or addiction). This limitation naturally clears a path for further research on *Dancing Mindfulness*: investigating how the practice is being used within clinical populations and settings. At the time of this writing, 61 *Dancing Mindfulness* facilitators are now trained in 10 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, and the United Kingdom, with many of these facilitators actively teaching *Dancing Mindfulness* in clinical settings. Using both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, grounded theory and pre- and post-test designs likely being the most feasible, investigation about practice implementation and its effect on an individual's recovery can provide valuable information in making this emerging practice even more ethically sound, trauma-informed, and clinically relevant. A randomized controlled study is currently under preparation to investigate the plausibility of *Dancing Mindfulness* as a specific approach to psychotherapy.

The most significant limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the sample. Although white heterosexual Caucasian women are the largest demographic of participants coming to the community-based studio where the developer developed and continues to teach the practice as a home-base, *Dancing Mindfulness* shows promise as an arts-based mindfulness approach that can potentially reach minorities and the marginalized. At the time of this writing, there were three Latina women (foreign born, native Spanish speakers), three African American women, and at least three homosexual women trained as *Dancing Mindfulness* facilitators, with more minority women currently awaiting training. At the time of this writing, a facilitator training was scheduled in Puerto Rico following a request from a psychotherapist native to Puerto Rico who identifies the value of the dance medium for healing. Refugee organizations, displeased with the limitations of talk therapy in working with foreign-born survivors of trauma, have reached out to the *Dancing Mindfulness* community because of its somatic and arts-based focus for services. In one addiction treatment center where *Dancing Mindfulness* is currently taught as an adjunctive service, an equal number of men and women are drawn to classes, and the developer has worked with men in her teaching of *Dancing Mindfulness* across the country. Clearly, in future studies on *Dancing Mindfulness*, regardless of the specific approaches used, the experiences of minority and male practitioners must be examined.

Another possible exploration in future research is the impact of *Dancing Mindfulness* practice and facilitator training on clinicians who engage in and/or facilitate the practice. There is a plethora of literature demonstrating the positive impact of mindfulness practice on professional counselors' health, wellness, and job performance (a review of which exceeds the scope of this article). With many state licensure boards still having rules in place dismissing trainings that focus too much on self-care and self-discovery as being valid education, the developer has faced challenges about the legitimacy of training clinicians to facilitate a dance practice as *educational*. Further investigation will need to be conducted to determine if the same positive impacts described in the general literature also apply to clinicians and other health and wellness professionals using *Dancing Mindfulness* for their own self-care.

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