

Movement Towards Healing: Documenting the effect of Dance Intervention for Women survivors of abuse



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Executive Summary

In partnership with Dance United Yorkshire, this report examines the transformative power of dance-based therapeutic interventions for women survivors of abuse, highlighting their benefits in psychological recovery, emotional well-being, and societal reintegration. Drawing on the findings of a qualitative study, it emphasises the value of accessible, community-rooted programs for advancing trauma recovery and fostering resilience. With practical applications in mental health services, corporate wellness, and community initiatives, this report underscores the potential of embodied approaches to drive meaningful change.



Introduction

Abuse survivors often face profound psychological and physical challenges that disrupt their sense of self and body¹. These can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and chronic pain, alongside disconnection from their bodies due to the traumatic nature of abuse². Traditional therapies, while important, may not address the embodied nature of trauma or facilitate a safe reconnection with one's identity and community. Recovery requires more than cognitive approaches³. Creative, movement-based interventions such as dance can provide survivors with an alternative path to healing⁴, fostering confidence, social connection, and emotional integration.

Central to the effectiveness of this intervention is not merely the deployment of dance as an expressive medium, but the underpinning scaffolding of care developed by Dance United Yorkshire (DUY). This framework constitutes a deliberate and methodical strategy to ensure access, retention, and meaningful engagement among participants, many of whom have experienced complex trauma and systemic marginalisation. The scaffolding encompasses preparatory outreach, including home visits, personalised communication, trust-building conversations, and consistent practitioner presence. Additionally, embedded delivery within the local context and the provision of safe, non-judgmental environments support emotional risk-taking and embodied reparation. Crucially, this structure is not ancillary to the intervention—it is foundational. The therapeutic outcomes evidenced in participants are made possible by the creative practice and the surrounding infrastructure of care. Without this scaffolding, replication efforts risk undermining the conditions that enable recovery, growth, and sustainable impact. As such, it is imperative that these support mechanisms be recognised as core components of the intervention model, appropriately factored into its design, resourcing, and costings.

¹ World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256> (Accessed 8 April 2025).

² Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, 3.

³ Levine, P.A. (2010). *In an unspoken voice: How the body releases trauma and restores goodness*. North Atlantic Books.

⁴ Vecchi, M., Elf, P., Ueno, A., Dilmperi, A., Dennis, C., & Devereux, L. (2022). Shall we dance? Recreational dance, well-being and productivity performance during COVID-19: a three-country study. *Journal of International Marketing*, 30(2), 56-72.

The study has been conducted in partnership with DUY, a charity that delivers dance programmes and offers opportunities for young offenders, troubled children, and abused women to perform on stage⁵. A long-term aim of our partnership is not only to support the mental health and well-being of abused women but also create a sustainable model for integrating innovative therapeutic interventions into mainstream healthcare services, ultimately reducing suicide rates and enhancing the quality of life for vulnerable women across England. This report presents a summary of the results.



⁵ <https://www.duy.org.uk/our-work>

Relevance to Industry

Dance-based interventions have demonstrated potential across various sectors:

- **Mental Health Services:** Non-verbal dance embodied methods align with trauma-informed practices, offering alternative approaches to managing PTSD, anxiety, and depression⁶.
- **Corporate Wellness:** Dance programs can enhance team cohesion, foster creativity, and promote resilience in wellness initiatives⁷.
- **Healthcare and Public Policy:** Community-based programs complement traditional care by delivering cost-effective solutions for underserved populations⁸.

The effect of dance class and performance on stage was examined in this study, introduces empowering dynamics of visibility, agency, and affirmation—uniquely benefiting survivors who have faced years of abuse.

Method

This qualitative study employed Braun and Clarke's⁹ six-phase framework for thematic analysis to explore the impact of community dance programs on the well-being of women survivors of abuse. Themes were identified using post-traumatic growth^{10 11} and embodied cognition¹² frameworks, capturing the psychological and somatic dimensions of recovery. Eleven women, aged 20s to 70s, were recruited from Dance United Yorkshire. Semi-structured interviews explored their experiences of dance and its impacts. Data were coded iteratively, revealing interconnected themes of empowerment, connection, well-being, and life change. Ethical approval was granted by the author's university research ethics committee (E1237).

⁶ Koch, S.C., Riege, R.F., Tisborn, K., Biondo, J., Martin, L. & Beelmann, A. (2019). Effects of dance movement therapy and dance on health-related psychological outcomes: A meta-analysis update. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1806

⁷ Liang, C.X., & Bryant, T. (2024). The use of dance and movement for the embodied healing of interpersonal trauma in women and girls: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(4), 3241-53.

⁸ Lightner, J. S., Collinson, S., & Grimes, A. (2023). Cost Analysis of a Culturally Appropriate, Community-Delivered Intervention to Increase Physical Activity. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 37(6), 841-845.

⁹ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

¹⁰ Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455-471.

¹¹ Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18.

¹² Barsalou, L. W. (2008). Grounded cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59(1), 617-645

Key Findings and Practical Implications

Psychological Empowerment and Emotional Healing



- Dance provided participants with a sense of agency and self-confidence, helping them rebuild their identities after abuse.
- Emotional catharsis was achieved through movement, allowing participants to process feelings that were difficult to express verbally.
- Participants described experiencing elevated mood, joy, and stress relief, with terms like “free,” “happy,” and “alive” being commonly used.
- Dance was often cited as a therapeutic outlet, helping individuals reconnect with positive emotions and regulate anxiety.
- Mastering choreography and performing on stage enhanced feelings of competence and achievement.
- Women reported a sense of “being brought back to life” after prolonged emotional numbness.
- Dance became a tool for self-regulation, with participants using it outside class to manage negative emotions.

Social Support and Connection



- Participants experienced a profound sense of belonging and emotional safety within the dance group, likening it to a “little family.”
- Group dynamics fostered mutual understanding, non-judgmental acceptance, and relational trust among participants.
- Dancing together created physical synchrony, strengthening interpersonal bonds through shared movement.
- Participants reported developing stronger social confidence, enabling them to interact more openly and expressively in everyday life.
- Peer support was highlighted as a key component of the program, with the group encouraging and uplifting one another.
- The dance group provided a corrective relational experience for women who had faced isolation and stigma.

Physical and Embodied Well-Being



- Participants reported improved physical health, including increased energy, flexibility, and reduced chronic pain.
- Dance supported somatic integration, enabling participants to reinhabit their bodies and overcome disconnection or shame.
- Positive changes in posture, such as standing upright, were described as both physical and symbolic transformations of self-perception.
- The embodied nature of dance allowed participants to manage emotions through physical movement, fostering emotional regulation.
- Structured movement routines created a sense of stability and control, counteracting symptoms of trauma-related depression.

Practical Life Changes and Coping Skills



- Dance instilled transferable skills such as focus, perseverance, and emotional regulation, which participants applied in broader life contexts.
- Several women experienced significant life changes, including securing employment, pursuing education, or engaging in community volunteering.
- The program enabled participants to envision new possibilities, reflecting the transformative potential of dance on life trajectories.
- Coping strategies learned in dance, such as using music and movement to lift mood, became vital tools for managing daily stress.
- Empowerment gained through public performance inspired participants to believe in their capacity to achieve personal and professional goals.

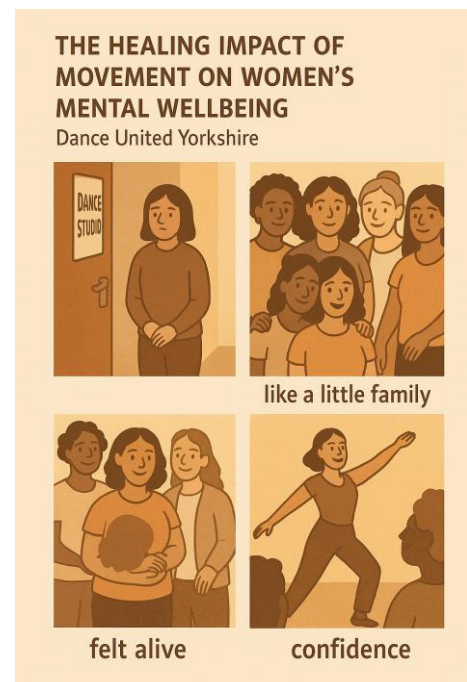
Recommendations

1. **Design Inclusive Programs:** Develop free or low-cost programs to ensure access for marginalised communities.
2. **Adopt Trauma-Informed Practices:** Prioritise participant emotional and physical safety during interventions.
3. **Facilitate Connection:** Foster belonging, social bonds through shared movement and peer support through group dynamics.
4. **Promote Embodied Expression:** Encourage both skill-building and creative movement to support self-efficacy.
5. **Measure Impact:** Use qualitative and quantitative tools to demonstrate effectiveness.

Call-to-Action

Stakeholders are invited to:

- Implement pilot programs incorporating dance-based interventions.
- Sponsor research and community initiatives focused on embodied trauma recovery.
- Collaborate across mental health, corporate wellness, and public health sectors to drive innovative solutions.



Conclusion

This report illustrates how dance-based interventions transcend artistic expression to become powerful tools for trauma recovery. By combining psychological, social, and physical pathways to healing, these programs enable women survivors of abuse to build resilience and rediscover a sense of self. For industries seeking innovative solutions to enhance well-being, the evidence supports the integration of embodied practices as a vital part of holistic recovery strategies. Dance programs provide not only immediate emotional relief but also enduring transformation, enabling women survivors of abuse to reclaim their identities and envision new possibilities. For industries seeking to enhance well-being, the findings underscore the value of community-based, arts-driven practices in fostering both individual and societal resilience.

