



# dancing mindfulness

## Opening Doors of Wellness in the Counseling Professions

By Jamie Marich, PhD, LPCC-S, LICDC

Working with the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—gets a great deal of lip service in many areas of addiction recovery. However, working with the body in treatment doesn't just mean having a gym available at your treatment center, or putting people on the latest relapse prevention meds. Using body-based interventions like somatic awareness exercises, yoga, breath work, and other creative measures must be a vital aspect of overall treatment. For me, one of the most dynamic practices for recovery enhancement is the creation of safe space for a person to discover their body through dance, specifically through the use of a practice I developed called *Dancing Mindfulness*.

The importance of movement and listening to the body guides my work as a trauma and addiction specialist. Your body tells you what is going on ten steps before your head can even make sense of it. Learning to recognize trauma triggers or cravings at the body level and responding in a healthy way is paramount to wellness. The alternative is to react to the presence of such body level discomfort in an attempt to make that discomfort disappear, a major reason that we see so many addictive disorders in people with unresolved traumatic wounds. When people go through an initial course of addiction treatment or a related recovery experience and only learn how to work with their mind and spirit, a huge piece of the recovery puzzle is missing—working with the body. Thus, relapse rates remain high and people with multiple attempts at a recovery program, often with good intellectual understanding of recovery, are left to ask, "I don't get it—what just happened?"

### Dancing as a Cathartic Experience

*Dancing Mindfulness* is an integrated wellness practice that grew from my own clinical experiences working with trauma and addiction, in addition to my personal recovery journey. Experience in yoga, meditation, or dance is not required. Participants are simply asked to come with an open mind. Classes normally begin with a facilitator guiding participants through a series of breathing exercises and honoring the principles of basic body awareness. Following a gentle 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 the bedroom at home. Many participants find this practice a cathartic experience, especially when supported by the energy of others who are also taking risks. Although some find themselves overwhelmed and intimidated, they are encouraged to just acknowledge their experience, without judgment, and 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 the practice—facilitators emphasize that no one should ever feel forced to participate in any component of the practice.

Mindfulness means being in the present moment, without judgment. There are a variety of ways to practice mindfulness, whether in traditional seated meditation, or through more physical outlets like walking or dancing. The original Sanskrit word from which our modern term *mindfulness* derives simply means to come back to awareness. Many people beat themselves up because they can't stay in the moment, but the intent of the practice is to keep bringing your awareness back to the moment, even if you catch yourself drifting or harshly judging yourself. Many people are initially hesitant to try *Dancing Mindfulness* because they operate on preconceived notions that "I can't dance," or "I'm not doing this right." When participants allow themselves to cultivate an attitude of non-judgment, they are usually amazed at just how freely they can move.

### Indigenous Healing Arts Value Movement

The health and wellness benefits of all movement, especially dance, are well documented throughout the literature in multiple fields. Dance and dynamic movement are major facets of the Native American and indigenous healing arts. In his bestselling memoir, *The Dancing Healers: A Doctor's Journey of Healing with Native Americans* (1988), Dr. Carl Hammerschlag, trained as a psychiatrist at Yale, relates that when he first traveled to Arizona to work with the Indian Health Services, he believed he was bringing a wealth of knowledge about the human brain to a backward people. He soon learned that they had more to teach him about healing than he could ever teach them. He relays a particularly touching story of a tribal elder who, after listening to Dr. Hammerschlag's credentials, asked him if he could dance. To appease him, the doctor did a little shuffle by his bedside. The elder chuckled, replying, "You must be able to dance if you are to heal people."

While any exercise can be productive in recovery, I find dance particularly powerful, especially when it is improvisational. Indigenous cultures around the globe have practiced this logic for millennia. Some people struggle with the amount of improvisation and creativity that *Dancing Mindfulness* promotes because they are used to being told what to do with their bodies rather than using their own creativity as part of the healing.

The community classes in *Dancing Mindfulness* that I facilitate at my local yoga studio in Ohio attract participants who identify as being in recovery. There seems to be a variety of reason for this attraction, which I've learned through participant report and through initial data analysis on our first formal study of *Dancing Mindfulness* (Marich & Howell, in preparation). Participants may become acquainted with their own creativity for the first time. They also report an enhanced sense of connectedness,

not just to other members of the group who are dancing, but also a connection to their bodies. This integration is no small feat considering that disconnection from the self, the body, and the spirit is a major attribute of active addiction. For Rebecca Scarpaci, a woman in recovery who also works as a professional in the field, “It was a way for me to tell my story through movement, instead of just talk therapy.”

I also have taught *Dancing Mindfulness* at professional conferences, such as the annual NAADAC (National Association of Addiction Counselors) conferences in 2012 and 2013. Conferences are known for having their attendees sit in uncomfortable hotel meeting room chairs day after day, listening to lectures and viewing PowerPoint presentations. By getting up and moving as part of a conference session, participants experientially encounter the power of accessing the body in the healing process.

Natalie Fryar, a counselor and cancer survivor who took part in *Dancing Mindfulness* at the 2013 NAADAC conference in Atlanta explains, “Since being diagnosed with cancer I had not moved-physically. I felt frozen in my body with fear because of what cancer and chemo had done to me. Through my participation in this ‘training to help others’ I found a release that I could not explain. It was exhilarating to be able to be free to move my body like I hadn’t in months. It not only gave me a personal healing experience that I will continue to pursue, but it also helped me professionally to bridge the gap in therapy for my clients.”

### Clinicians Practice and Facilitate

Many other clinicians who’ve been exposed to *Dancing Mindfulness* and regularly practice it report a positive impact on their clinical practices. For Jacqueline Glaros, a counselor and certified *Dancing Mindfulness* facilitator, “It has definitely helped to re-center me and improve my focus and attention levels with working with my clients.” Jacqueline actively uses mindfulness practices in working with her clients in private practice, and she has even started a small class for clients focused on using the practice for stress relief. For Ramona Skriiko, counseling intern and certified *Dancing Mindfulness* facilitator, practicing mindful dance has allowed her to view the therapeutic process as a dance, an idea that Carl Rogers espoused: “When empathy is at its best, the two individuals are participating in a process comparable to that of a couple dancing, with the client leading and the therapist following” (Raskin & Rogers, in Corsini, 2000; p. 135).

At present, I’ve taken 25 clinicians and yoga teachers through a *Dancing Mindfulness* facilitator training program, and others are currently studying with me to teach the practice in their settings. Many clinicians, like social worker Kelsey Evans, indicate that taking time out each week to practice dance with others in the community makes them better at their jobs because they can release and clear their heads. *Dancing Mindfulness* is being taught in the community, in campus counseling centers, in community mental health centers, and in residential treatment settings as an adjunct to services or as a mindfulness-informed intervention.

Counselor Abbey Carter Logan uses *Dancing Mindfulness* and related movement practices in a variety of ways at The

Ohio State University. She shares, “There are moments in session where I will ask clients to listen to a song or to stomp it out through their feet. This could be a Gestalt technique or some other form of creative movement, but the freedom that I have received from both practicing and facilitating mindful dance has helped me to be more creative in session and in my conceptualization of clients.” Glaros, Skriiko, Evans, and Logan all agree that they would like to see more helping professionals use practices like *Dancing Mindfulness* as a measure to enhance their own self-care.

Although *Dancing Mindfulness* blends two very ancient wellness practices, dance and mindfulness meditation, it is still a very young practice in the conceptualization described here in this article. Those studying to be facilitators see a wide variety of applications for the practice, explaining some of their motivation for getting trained. Marta Mrotek, a recovery yoga instructor based in Arizona, sees *Dancing Mindfulness* being used in ways similar to the various recovery yoga movements. “Dancing moves energy, can be used to process and reflect, a physical action to be taken to relieve stress and maintain physical and mental health for relapse prevention,” she explains.

Christine Courtney, a counselor trainee, sees herself using the practice in residential settings or with at-risk youth: “I feel like adolescents have a difficult time expressing emotions using words many times. I really appreciate the idea of an alternative way of expression of thoughts and feelings.”

### Another Option for Therapeutic Activity

Psychology student and residential monitor Holly Ann Rivera dreams boldly. Says Rivera, “I see *Dancing Mindfulness* to be another form of standard therapy options. In a residential setting, many ‘alternative’ therapies are already used (yoga, drum circles, etc.) and have a positive effect on residents who need to find their niche for coping skills and recovery friendly communities. *Dancing Mindfulness* greatly increases a program’s ability to connect with residents by providing another option for therapeutic activity. After experiencing it, I was able to incorporate many aspects into the groups I run for my residents. The ability to dance without judgment is something I saw spark energy and enjoyment into residents who do not normally participate in activities. Adding a mindful component to listening to music allows them to increase creativity and open up to more sensitive feelings.”▼

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