

Making our mark -- an introduction to dance therapy in Australia

by [Heather Hill](#)

Dance-movement therapy as a formal profession began in the United States in the 1940s, when professional dancers were invited by psychiatrists to work with groups of returned servicemen recovering from war trauma and other patients in psychiatric hospitals. In the 1960s the American Dance Therapy Association was formed.

In Australia, dance-movement therapy grew out of dance in education and creative dance and the early Australian pioneers were already working in the 60s. The Dance-Movement Therapy Association of Australia was formed in 1994. 'Dance-movement therapy combines the creative process and the study of human movement into a holistic approach that draws upon the elements inherent in dance' (DTAA).



Dr Hill and patient -- picture from *Invitation to the Dance: Dance for people with dementia and their carers* (Hill, H. 2001), reproduced by kind permission of Stirling University Books.

In writing about dance-movement therapy, it is inevitable that one must start with answering the question 'what is it?'. People outside the profession may hazard the guess that it is therapy for dancers; many others simply stumble over the word 'dance' and get no further. Indeed, because of preconceptions about the nature of dance, many dance therapists have chosen to use the word dance-movement in order to more clearly delineate their profession.

So how best to explain dance-movement therapy? And how can we connect dance/movement with therapy?

Well, in the first place, it is necessary to understand 'dance' in a way which is much broader than normally recognised in our society. As a society – Western 21st Century urbanised – we tend to think of dance as a technical form, mainly for performers with young, lithe bodies, or in a social context for people who 'can dance'. In our culture people are divided into dancers and non-dancers. Yet, other historical eras, everyone was a dancer. While one might ask 'what do you dance?' it would be nonsensical to ask 'can you dance', as nonsensical as asking 'are you breathing?' If you're human, you dance. As one writer (J.L. Hanna) says, 'To dance is human'. Historically and even in many cultures today, for example in Africa, dance is absolutely part of being human. People dance to express their joy, their grief, to educate and socialise the young into the life of the community, to bring people together, to connect. Dance is a human activity of expression and communication.

This brings us to a fundamental tenet of our belief system as dance-movement therapists, namely that we are all embodied persons, that is, that we live and function through our bodies. The body affects mind and feeling, and mind and feeling affect the body: they are integrally connected. This goes against much traditional Western thinking with its separation of mind and body, although recent neuroscientific research is tending to support an integrated view of mind/body (which we dance-movement therapists knew all along!).

For the dance-movement therapist then, in working with a person's body, s/he is working with the whole person - mind, body, feeling.

Dance involves movement, but is not only movement. It goes beyond the functional to the aesthetic. And by the aesthetic, I mean it is movement done with feeling and with involvement in the movement, and it is done for the sheer pleasure of doing it rather than to achieve a functional goal. Dance is also about creating form and making meaning. As such it touches the human, the person, and this it shares with all the arts. Although the arts tend to be viewed as peripheral in our society and are certainly last in line when it comes to government support, it is in fact the arts that people turn to in times of difficulty or suffering, for example, one of the first things the Jews did when they were forced into the Polish Ghetto was to establish an orchestra.

And the connection of dance and movement to therapy? Given the above understandings, it should become clear that dance-movement therapists work with people in their totality using their prime mode of being in the world (body movement) and tapping into core elements of dance such as meaning-making, sensitivity to the quality of movement, connection to feeling. Some of the areas of human functioning they may work with are:

- relationships
- self-esteem
- mother-infant bonding
- community health
- body image
- educational contexts
- traumatic injuries; medical problems; rehabilitation
- mental health conditions

While dance-movement therapy in Australia is a small profession, its members have spread far and wide. There are no dance-movement therapy positions advertised in the newspaper, so every job has had to be created by enterprising dance-movement therapists. Dance-movement therapists are now working in diverse settings: special developmental schools, rehabilitation centres, hospitals (medical and psychiatric), aged care facilities, prisons, psychiatric clinics, community health centres and in private practice. There are several dance-movement therapists who have written masters theses, journal articles and contributed chapters to local and overseas books. We may be a small profession but we're making our mark!

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**This article was first published by Arts Hub Australia
Wednesday, January 17, 2007**