DANCE TRAINING IS A FORM OF STRUCTURED-EXERCISE

Structured-exercise is a guided form of fitness training that supports and encourages the urge to move by providing designated parameters and standards for movement-based activities, with the intent of producing positive improvements in the participants’ movement repertoire and bodily (somatic) experiences. Structured rhythms, working with clearly organized spatial patterns, and the intentional use of weight, will help the participants develop a more realistic body image and strengthen their [somatic] viewpoint (238, Pallaro). Structured-exercise can help correct weak, inappropriate, or imprecise movement qualities that lack a productive impulse or energetic support. It can help correct shallow breathing or breath-holding, and it can refuel a devitalized, monotone, or obtuse attitude toward embodiment. Adhering to a uniform set of directions and activities that are applicable to everyone in the class creates a mutual ‘group consciousness’ which helps the more tentative individuals find the courage to release their inhibitions.

Ballet is a particularly good example of structured-exercise. Ballet technique training is a strongly guided, purposeful, and engaging fitness program based on pre-determined placements, movements and sequences. Each ballet exercise has a beginning and end. Each exercise requires attention to precision, control, rhythm, and timing. Each exercise also contains a set protocol for general and specific postural details, as well as both static and dynamic balance requirements.

Of course there are situations in which unstructured-exercise would prove beneficial, but in this course we are operating by the premise that what most women need is to refine and re-organize their habitual movement patterns by re-connecting with a more structured and less sloppy way of moving that will enhance their somatic awareness, rejuvenate their bodily experience, broaden their movement repertoire, and yield associated psychological benefits. A possible problem that sometimes occurs with a structured-exercise program is that it becomes an authoritarian environment in which the teacher dominates and the students are subservient to her whims and demands. When this happens, the imbalance of power is such that the teacher alone decides what is correct and what is incorrect. To avoid this potentially detrimental type of relationship, the teacher needs to balance the roles of mother-figure, friendly confidante, and designated expert. It must be clear to the students that the teacher has their best interest at heart, and that she sincerely wants them to succeed. If positive transformation is the fundamental intent of a dance-based holistic fitness program, an underlying sense of comfort, support, reliability, honesty, integrity and unity must exist between the group members and the teacher.
YOUR ATTITUDE CAN HELP OR HURT YOU

Our characteristic attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors are strongly influenced by how we feel about our body’s abilities and possibilities. For example, if I have an injured knee and I am afraid that I might get hurt by falling or tripping, I will become more protective of my body. I will tighten up and become more vigilant and guarded. Though this seems like an intelligent and practical response, it has consequences. The trade-off for increased vigilance is a decrease in the sense of freedom and relaxation.

A vigilant person is always on patrol, always on guard, always looking out for a potential problem or threat. Persistently vigilant thought patterns (“Watch out”, “Be careful”, “Is he going to grab/hit/hurt me?”) manifest as a habitually tense and rigid body. Perpetual vigilance commandeers a portion of the body’s energy, similar to a soldier on round-the-clock patrol. The associated behavioral response to vigilance is greater limitation, confinement, suspicion, and avoidance, all of which are attempts to ward off potential assaults. In effect, freedom and ease have been sacrificed for self-protection and safety. The well-being of your mind, body, and behaviors has been compromised.

Our characteristic attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors are also strongly influenced by how we feel about our bodies’ appearance, not in terms of beautiful or ugly, but in terms of how much we base our Self-perception on the body’s appearance. For example, a woman who has a healthy connection with her bodily experience is less likely to be appearance-oriented. This does not mean that a woman who has a healthy connection to her bodily experience is not interested in how she looks.

On the contrary, a woman with a keen ability for and understanding of somatic awareness knows that her appearance is one of her many resources, but it is not the most important. She is no longer controlled by unresolved ego issues that manifest as the need to be ‘seen’ and to be ‘special’ (154, Pallaro). She doesn’t need to undress or dress up to reveal or conceal her body as a means of feeling special, beautiful, safe, or powerful. She knows that health of the body is more important than the appearance of the body. Furthermore, she has learned to rely on signals that arise from within her body to guide her. She has tapped into the esoteric realm of psychosomatically-based wisdom known as Women’s Ways of Knowing.

WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARD DANCE?

At the mere suggestion of taking a dance class, a woman’s response will tell you much about her attitude and her Self. Some women, especially those with prior dance training or having a cultural connection to a dance form, will be thrilled at the prospect of learning or relearning to dance because they appreciate it as an embodied art form. They know that stylized, rhythmic, and choreographed movement is a fun, creative, artistic, and inspirational activity as well as a constructive skilled learning activity.
Yet when it comes to dance training, many women are initially filled with doubt, fear of failure, and fear of self-exposure. They are afraid of looking clumsy. They are fearful that they will not be able to learn the steps or be able to do it right. This initial anxiety is understandable, not because the women will not be able to learn to dance, but because the typical movement repertoire that a woman needs to accomplish her daily tasks is very limited.

There are virtually no movement requirements in the activities of her daily life that demand grace, poise, specialized forms of balancing, extreme stretching, or conscious self-expression. The limited repertoire of women’s movement patterns and movement qualities is based on convention (socio-cultural conditioning). Convention dictates which posture, stance, carriage, or gait [women] assume in this or that area of life (69, J. Hanna). It makes sense that women might feel apprehensive about learning to dance, because it takes them out of their comfort zone.

**LIMITED NEED / LIMITED USE**

Unfortunately the limited need for refined or skilled movement results in a limited use of refined or skilled movement. This is why so many women’s posture and carriage tend to become sloppy and lackadaisical. Sloppy posture is poor posture, and poor posture is a precursor of poor health and a poor self-image. Pretty soon the same sloppiness, laziness, and lackadaisical attitude begin to manifest in other areas of life - such as no longer showering every day, not wearing make-up, or routinely pulling on the same pair of old jeans and baggy sweatshirt to run your daily errands.

If left unchecked, this downhill slide will sneak up on you. One day you will wake up and realize that your standard for self-care and self-presentation, just like your movement repertoire, has been reduced to the bare minimum. You might even realize that somewhere along the way you lost interest in being the best you that you can be.

**CAN WOMEN OF ALL AGES MAINTAIN VITALITY AND RESILIENCY?**

A very powerful way to maintain or regain mind-body vitality and resiliency is to engage in an activity that makes you feel ‘younger’ (i.e. able-bodied, having fun, feeling competent, feeling good, remembering what you like about yourself). Ask your clients about the physical activities, games or sports that they played during childhood, high school, or college. Common answers are jogging, yoga, swim team, dance team or cheerleader, ballet, gymnastics, volleyball, track team or tennis. Even if they only had one year of dance lessons, make note of it. If they mentioned it, it was and maybe still is important to them. Incorporating activities and exercises that spark fun and fulfilling memories of past successes and enjoyment associated with physical activities is an invaluable tool for promoting Holistic fitness.
Once I saw a 57 year old overweight and under-toned woman with the most horrible slumped and sagging posture suddenly stand up straight and tall as a flagpole, suck in her poochy belly, and perform beautiful, graceful ballet battements (kicks). Apparently the body-based memories of her childhood ballet training had been clearly imprinted in this woman’s soma (embodied Self). It was quite a surprise to discover that buried deep beneath her 57 year old slumped and sagging posture the youthful spirit (stance, carriage and exuberance) of a dancer was still alive and accessible!

Can you recall how the simple joy of movement made life FUN? Can you remember awakening each day with a sense of anticipation, excitement, and energy? What did you like to do in childhood? Were you a gymnast? Did you take ballet and tap dancing lessons? Did you enjoying riding your bike or riding a horse? Did you like to swing on swings or climb the monkey bars? Could it be that every woman still harbors a secret longing for the fun, freedom, and potentialities that were sparked in her youth? Might each woman have inside herself a beautiful memory and perhaps an unfulfilled destiny that reflect the original magic and mystique she felt when participating in a childhood activity or adventure?

What would happen if each woman consciously contemplated and acknowledged the possibility of regaining some of the original thrill and joy of embodiment? What if each and every woman knew, with all certainty, that her dreams need not be lost forever? What kind of a world might we have? What kind of women might we be?

**Learning to dance is a holistic endeavor that has the potential to boost one’s self-esteem and enhance one’s self-image.**

The powerful and positive psychological impact that is associated with the development of competency at dance-exercise is significant. The dance-related attributes that are typically associated with ballet, such as grace, beautiful posture, radiant self-expression, discipline, coordination and commitment provide valuable inner resources that will support us as we meet life challenges (67, Kassing). The skills and techniques that you learn, along with what you learn about your Self, will help you understand that each of your daily activities and encounters are potentially valuable and fulfilling, and that each of your daily activities and encounters deserves your best. ‘Your best’ means doing your best to live the moments of your daily life with beauty, grace, ease, elegance, poise, and equanimity in every step you take, in every hand you shake.