Abstract

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (2009), there are approximately 1.35 million people who experience homelessness on any given day. Psycho-social issues that these individuals must address to survive daily vary, but most common are depression, stress, alienation, lack of continuity in their life, and uncertainty of their future. Engagement in leisure is one way to reduce the various psycho-social consequences of homelessness. Thus, the purpose of this case report is to discuss the benefits of a leisure activity, specifically a structured dance class for adults experiencing homelessness. The intent of the class was to decrease stress, increase positive feelings, encourage self-determination, and learn how dance can be used as a coping mechanism. Dance was used as a context for coping with stress and other effects of homelessness. Results indicated that participants experienced an increase in positive effects and a decrease in negative effects after participating in the dance class.

KEYWORDS: Dance, homelessness, leisure, self-determination, stress
Being homeless can present individuals with a unique set of problems and circumstances that require strong coping skills and a supportive network to rely upon. Given that individuals who experience homelessness expend much of their efforts securing basic needs for themselves and their children, leisure needs can become secondary or neglected. Neglecting one's leisure needs is problematic because recreation engagement can be an effective source for coping with stress, creating a sense of belonging, improving one’s self-esteem, and creating a sense of life satisfaction. One potential leisure-based coping mechanism is dance participation. The purpose of this case report was to examine the effect of a recreational dance program on the perceived stress, positive feelings, and self-determination of adults temporarily residing in a homeless shelter.

This project began when a homeless shelter opened in a suburban Midwest town and was asking for volunteers. In response, I (Melissa Knestaudt) made first contact with the shelter. The shelter serves as a transitional housing opportunity for up to 35 residents (adults and families) while they look for work and a home. Initially, the shelter provided many social services and educational opportunities, but the residents had few opportunities for self expression or meaningful physical outlets. Upon orientation to the processes and goals of the homeless shelter, I noted that while many resources were provided to ensure basic needs were met, very few leisure opportunities existed to encourage coping skills, increased quality of life, and autonomy for the residents. Familiar with the benefits of leisure and therapeutic recreation, I proposed to use the TR process to implement a program to address some of the leisure needs of the participants. I then began teaching a weekly dance class in an attempt to provide a means to cope with stress, create a sense of belonging for participants, and help to improve their quality of life. At the time of the project, I was a student working towards a B.S. in Therapeutic Recreation as well as a B.F.A. in Dance Performance.

After receiving approval, I designed a dance program as a therapeutic recreation intervention that addressed some of the physical and emotional needs expressed by the residents. According to interviews and discussion with staff and adult residents ranging in age from 18 and 70, common problems associated with being homeless were stress, embarrassment, shame, and isolation. The program that ensued was, therefore, designed to use recreational dance as a coping mechanism for stress relief, to increase positive feelings, promote self determination, facilitate socialization, and to teach residents how dance can be used as a coping mechanism.

**Literature Review**

On any given night in the United States, nearly 1.35 million people are homeless (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). This estimate accounts for people who are living in shelters, on the streets, in parks, and under overpasses. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, one of the fastest growing segments of the population of people experiencing homelessness are families with children. Even though homelessness is usually not permanent, an estimated 3.5 million people experience homelessness during the course of a year with the average length of homelessness being 6 months (Armour, 2003).

Persons who experience homelessness are in the situation for a variety of reasons. The causes of homelessness can range from unemployment (i.e., insufficient income), to natural disasters, unstable mental health, or victims of domestic violence (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Although the causes of home-
lessness may differ, those who experience it appear to share many common psychological and social problems (Armour 2003).

According to Dumbleton (2005), having a place to call home is more than simply meeting the physiological need for shelter. “Home” provides certain meanings including comfort, control, privacy, well-being, and most importantly, a sense of identity and belonging. When one experiences homelessness, these meanings are no longer identified with and a number of effects are the result. Loneliness, isolation, guilt, hopelessness, loss of confidence, disconnection, and emptiness are some of the common feelings and emotions expressed by those who experience homelessness (Dumbleton). Even though each person’s situation is unique and presents an individual set of cognitive, emotional, physical, and social problems to deal with, many share common perceptions and underlying themes during their experience.

Depression, alienation, hopelessness, and loss of personal identity are among the most common psychological problems described by people who are or have been homeless (Armour, 2003). Other common threads of homelessness are a high level of stress, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts, and feeling stigmatized by others in society. Individuals who are homeless may also experience a mix of negative emotions surrounding the lack of permanent shelter including a lack of stability, uncertainty, and a diminished sense of belonging. According to Armour, some individuals who experience homelessness feel a sense of shame for not meeting society’s expectation that success equates with a consistent and permanent home environment. Many ignore their physical health and general well-being because finding a home becomes a priority, and is a very time-consuming endeavor (Fried, 2006). In addition, homeless individuals with children often express feelings of inadequacy and failure when they cannot provide a home for them (Armour 2003).

Addressing issues of homelessness is complicated and often requires a multidimensional approach. The most common method for dealing with homelessness has been to offer temporary shelter (i.e., homeless shelters). Religious organizations (i.e., churches) and specific charitable agencies have been the predominant providers of food, clothing, shelter, counseling, job placement, and other social services. While these services are critical to meeting the basic needs of those who are homeless, statistics about the greater needs of these people indicate that these services are not enough to address the person as a whole. Recreation is often considered to be a stabilizing component in a person’s life when they are experiencing a crisis, stress, or transition such as that brought about by homelessness.

The Role of Therapeutic Recreation with Persons Who Are Homeless

Therapeutic recreation is founded on social service principles, specifically using recreation to address social problems (Russell, 2006). TR professionals are uniquely positioned to use recreation interventions to address self-esteem, sense of belonging, feelings of satisfaction, stress management, and coping skills of people who are homeless. Given that these individuals are expending much of their efforts to secure basic needs for themselves and their children, their leisure needs are often unmet. Yet, recreation engagement can be an effective way for them to cope with issues and feelings they are experiencing as a result of homelessness.

As previously identified, a common experience of individuals who are homeless is stress (Klitzing, 2004a). While stress is a natural part of the human experience, it can be compounded by homelessness. Ac-
According to Klitzing, people who are homeless are most likely to experience chronic stress, the extreme anxiety that builds up and accumulates from major life changes and/or traumatic events over time. Thus, it is important for individuals who are homeless to develop and maintain healthy coping mechanisms. Recreation engagement and utilization of leisure skills are useful in forming healthy coping mechanisms (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997).

There are limited studies on the use of therapeutic recreation with people experiencing homelessness. One important study was conducted by Klitzing (2004a) in which she investigated how women who were homeless were able to better cope with stress through leisure. Klitzing asked women in a homeless shelter to take photographs of things they considered leisure, keep journals about their leisure, and discuss both of these in personal interviews. Klitzing found through their reports that people experiencing homelessness used leisure as a diversionary means to “get away” and for social support.

In another investigation, Klitzing (2004b) reported that people experiencing homelessness also have a disconnection from others and the community. According to social attitudes and previous research, homelessness is strongly characterized by a lack of social support and weak social networks. Through interviews with women experiencing homelessness, Klitzing determined three social connections that were important in building a supportive social network. Family, friends, and other people experiencing homelessness were considered by the participants to be in their social network. The relationships were built, maintained, and strengthened through leisure activities that were similar to leisure activities of people not experiencing homelessness.

The results of Klitzing’s study showed that, contrary to common beliefs, many people who are homeless are not lacking a social support system, including those living in a transitional shelter. While some of the research participants reported that their previous network of family and friends encouraged destructive behavior, most described relationships with family, friends, and others in similar situations as positive influences in their ability to cope with chronic stress. They also expressed that leisure was an important factor in providing a context for these relationships to develop and facilitate social interaction (Klitzing, 2004b). During leisure, opportunities are presented in which people learn commonalities and unique differences between one another such as strengths and weaknesses, preferences and opinions, and cultural history. These commonalities and differences then present further opportunities for socialization and recreation participation among people with common interests.

Role of Dance with Persons Who Are Homeless

The art of dance has long been identified as an activity that is unique and universal, containing different genres that can be utilized depending on the needs and preferences of participants. Furthermore, dance can be considered at both individual and interpersonal levels (Ravelin, Kylma, & Korhonen, 2006). Within these attributes, dance can bring about many positive consequences to the self as well as in relation to a group. For instance, dance fosters experiencing oneself in a new way that promotes autonomy, self-acceptance, self-expression, and self-understanding. It enables one to discover and improve body image, learn new skills and talents, process and express emotions, and address cognitive and spiritual well-being (Ravelin et al.). In relation
to others, dance has the ability to connect people through verbal and nonverbal interaction and participation. It also provides a context in which to experience physical, mental, social, and spiritual communion. Dance has been recognized as an effective intervention in the field of mental health.

According to Ravelin et al. (2006), dance in mental health has a distinct definition:

...dance helps people experience mental, physical, social, and spiritual wholeness. In practice, this means that using dance as a mental health ... intervention may promote one's self-understanding at several levels and social interaction with others. (p. 308)

Herber (1993) asserts that dance not only improves communication and self-expression in people with mental illness, but improves patients’ attitudes, affections, and levels of tension and apprehension as well. Additionally, it is believed that dance has the capability to simultaneously affect the mind and body through the use of movement in a way that promotes health and personal growth (Levy, 1992; Ravelin et al. 2006).

As shown in the case study by Levy (1995), dance as an intervention provides a means for individuals to address situations by practicing new positive behaviors and/or roles in a safe environment so that new responses will be generalized and useful in other contexts. Similarly, Steiner (1992) states that dance can help people acquire and improve coping skills by providing a safe, structured, and supportive environment in which experimentation and mistakes are an acceptable and integral part of the process. It is noted by Steiner that this practice promotes greater self-understanding and awareness and increased self-responsibility. Because of its close relationship to music, the rhythmic movement of dance can also be used as a coping mechanism by bringing a sense of order into disordered situations (Tosey, 1992).

When used in a therapeutic setting, dance involves a deliberate and systematic process to address and further the psychological and physical well-being by integrating all domains of the individual with the surrounding environment (Heber, 1993). Heber suggests that such an intervention does assist in the rehabilitation of individuals expressing anxiety, tension, apprehension, and low self-esteem. He also indicated that the same individuals displayed significant changes in attitudes toward self, affect, ability to communicate with peers, and release of tension and apprehensiveness. These same feelings are also expressed by people experiencing homelessness. Heber’s findings, in conjunction with the elevated coping ability and self-determination provided through dance, leads the authors to draw the hypothesis that dance may be a beneficial therapeutic intervention for some of the many affects associated with homelessness.

Case Content

Discussions with staff clearly indicated that residents were being provided with basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter; however, there was little offered to encourage increased quality of life and overall well-being during their stay at the shelter. This observation was consistent with findings from the literature review as well. An additional concern expressed by the staff was that residents had social networks and leisure preferences that were destructive or counterintuitive to the services being provided. Thus, the dance program was designed and implemented in an effort to decrease stress, increase positive feelings, and encourage self-determination and the use of dance as a coping mechanism with individuals who are homeless.
Participants

The dance program participants were children and adults living in a homeless shelter in a suburban Ohio town; however, this paper focuses on results and observations regarding the adults only. Representing the Caucasian (n = 9), Latina (n = 1), and African American (n = 1) races, participants ranged in ages of 18-50, including three male and eight female adults. Residents were encouraged to take part in a free dance class offered twice a week for 8 weeks. Not all were able to attend every class because of varied schedules and transitions into new homes. Duration of homelessness was unavailable due to confidentiality restrictions. Personal information received from participants indicated that there was a range of duration of homelessness including temporary transitioning to chronic homelessness. Many participants were only residing at the shelter long enough to be involved in one class (n = 2), some participated two (n = 5) or three times (n = 2), and the maximum consistency of participation was four classes (n = 2).

Setting

The living facility was located in a former hotel. The sleeping quarters were separate from the community living space and were arranged in a communal or dormitory style. The community living space included a lounge/family room, kitchen, and recreation room, which contained lockers for residents’ personal belongings as well as games, movies, and other recreation resources.

The recreation room was used for the dance program as it was large enough to accommodate 10 participants. To set the room for the program, the furniture was moved to the perimeter of the room and the games or were cleaned up and put away. There were several challenges in using this space due to its nature and defined usage of this room. It was a community space with a high volume of traffic by other residents of the facility. At times the participants became distracted by this interruption.

Assessment

At each meeting, the program began with a group and an individual assessment. Prior to the program, the facility director informed me of pertinent health information about the participants only as necessary for engagement in the dance program. Due to confidentiality restrictions, in-depth medical health and history data was not available for this program. The purpose of the group assessment was to gain information about minor/acute health and physical restrictions as they related to participation in the dance program for that day (e.g., sore ankle). This verbal “check-in” also created a relaxed and safe atmosphere. Additionally, it allowed me to initiate a personal rapport with participants, to enable them to feel more at ease with the idea of dancing, and begin to build trust between the participants and me. An individual assessment was also done prior to participation and at the completion of each dance class, where the adult participants completed an individual stress scale. Through the duration of each class, I encouraged participants to inform me if they were experiencing any pain or discomfort so adjustments or modifications could be explored and implemented.

I asked the participants about their dance experience and the type of music they enjoyed so the program could be designed to meet their needs and interests. Questions about dance included items such as “Have you ever taken a dance class before?” and “What type of music do you enjoy?” Much of the information about the physical, psychological, cognitive, and social needs of the population was derived from previous in-depth reviews of the literature.
Plan

The goal in planning the dance program was to find a common ground so as many individuals as possible could benefit from the experience. The advantage of the medium of dance is that it uses the one element every participant was able to bring to the class: the self. The physical body and all other aspects of the self (cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual) are able to interact intra-personally as well as inter-personally. While this experience can be intimidating, frightening, and create vulnerability for some, it is in this common experience that dancers are able to relate to each other, share, and grow. Given that the participants’ interests and experiences in dance were assessed at the beginning of each class, I was prepared with a variety of music and general prepared choreography. Most of the participants’ interests were contemporary and popular dance such as hip-hop and country-line dancing.

I based class plans on the National Standards for Art Education Content Standards. In particular, Standards #1, #3, and #6 (listed below) were particularly useful as a basis for planning this program (AAPHERD, 2011).

- Standard 1: Identifying and demonstrating movement elements and skills in performing dance
- Standard 3: Understanding dance as a way to create and communicate meaning
- Standard 6: Making connections between dance and healthful living

These standards were used in the planning process for setting goals and evaluating progress. The overall objectives for the adult classes were to promote physical engagement in the class as a means to relieve stress, make social connections, establish confidence, and promote self-determination. Additionally, framing the program on these standards was also helpful in creating a flexible activity to accommodate the varied nature of the facility and participants.

Implementation

Each class for all participants was conducted for 50 minutes with 15 minutes of “warm-up” activities, 30 minutes of instruction and culminating execution of the day’s lesson, and 10 minutes of “cool down” and debriefing.

Each session began with gentle stretching exercises such as standing with feet together rolling down the spine to hang the torso over the legs; reaching the arms overhead then to each side with a bend in the waist; twisting the torso to the right and left; or other specific stretches to target muscle groups that would be utilized in class.

Exercises that promote elevation of the heart rate and raise core temperature to prevent injury were also conducted by using faster more integrated movements such as jumping-jacks, sit-ups and push-ups, and jogging in place with high knees. Lastly, some of the dance combination elements being used that day were integrated into the warm-up so that they were familiar to the participants when they were introduced later in class. Introducing the day’s dance elements also served to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed for new participants.

Based on the participants’ experience and preferences, four genres of set choreographed movement were utilized: hip hop, country-line dance, ballet, and creative movement/improvisation. One idiom was chosen to be taught in each class, depending on the interest of the participants present. The dance was taught at a flexible pace depending on the participants’ abilities, and questions were encouraged to ensure clarity, prompt engagement, and increase confidence. Repetition was built into the program delivery until participants verbally expressed a level of comfort and demon-
strated a clear level of skill competence. I challenged the participants to execute the dance without the instructor’s demonstration as well as perform for each other.

The most successful genre for the class was hip-hop. In this class, a popular contemporary song was chosen and the movement contained strong accents. The nature of the dance required a specific performance quality which emphasized personality and imagination. Using imagery, the instructor encouraged the participants to create a narrative for themselves that would influence expression. For example, an arm punch that initiates a turn could be prompted with the idea or suggestion of “being so angry you could fight someone.” Four steps forward and a head turn could be interpreted as “trying to approach someone, but then becoming shy.” In some classes, participants were encouraged to create their own movement and imagery. One lesson involved the “name game” in which each participant created a movement to coincide with their name, which was then taught to the group and all names/movements were performed as a string of choreography.

To conclude, the same gentle stretching as the warm-up was repeated, targeting any specific muscle groups that were used extensively with intention to achieve resting heart rate. During this time, an informal debriefing session allowed me to evaluate the participants’ experiences and successes. Open-ended questions were asked such as “What do you think you did well today?”, “What would you like to do/not do again?”, “How did you feel when you started/when you ended?”, and “How did you feel when [specific incident or moment from class or combination]?"

**Evaluation**

Data were collected for program evaluation purposes rather than scientific research purposes. Before and after the adult class each participant completed a survey containing a Likert-type scale (1 not at all to 5 extremely) on which they rated the degree to which they were feeling happy, motived, relaxed, depressed, frustrated, energetic, sad, joyful, stressed, and tired. I developed the instrument for the purposes of the program, but it was based on assumptions of self-determination and concepts of coping. There was also space on the instrument for participants to add additional effects that were not listed or comments about the class they did not wish to share verbally during debriefing (See Table 1).

I recorded all verbal responses during debriefing in a journal immediately following each class (see Table 2 for sample questions). In an effort to maintain a recreational atmosphere, instead of a research approach, responses were recorded after the participants left the room. Unless a response was particularly unique, the comments were grouped according to the day and not the specific person who replied.

At the beginning of each session, a verbal check-in was conducted. Then, each participant was handed an instrument, and asked to complete it and return it to me. At the end of the day’s session, each participant was handed another instrument, and again asked to complete it and return it to me. I also made anecdotal notes and observations of participant behavior and interactions. Instances of cooperation, asking questions, and ability to adhere to verbal corrections or constructive suggestions were also identified. The purpose of noting this type of information was to discern comfort levels, whether people were engaging in personal challenges with dance, and if people were open to creativity and innovation.
### TABLE 1:
*Perceived Mood Relative to Dance Questionnaire*

Right now I feel:
1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = neutral, 4 = moderately, 5 = extremely

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mood</th>
<th>Score 1</th>
<th>Score 2</th>
<th>Score 3</th>
<th>Score 4</th>
<th>Score 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (identify)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Something I would enjoy or like to experience today/ Something I enjoyed or liked today:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Something I would not enjoy/did not enjoy today:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the efficacy of a structured dance class to decrease stress, increase positive feelings, and encourage social connections and self-determination for adults and children experiencing homelessness.

What Worked

Participants reported that their positive affect was either the same or was increased when pre- and post-survey results were compared. They indicated that they felt happier, more energetic, more relaxed, and joyful following engagement in the dance program. The instructor verbally asked the participants how they felt at the conclusion of the dance program before they completed the post instrument. Responses were mostly positive and indicated that they felt more energetic, more relaxed, and more joyful. One participant stated “That felt great. Now I’ll be able to get a good sleep tonight.” Another participant commented “This is a great idea that you are doing this.”

Participant’s responses also indicated that engagement in the dance program decreased their negative feelings. The decrease of stress was the most notable change in affect. Throughout the classes participants displayed smiles, laughter, and relaxed facial expressions. They socialized with each other and initiated questions for the instructor. Participants reported and discussed feeling more relaxed physically and mentally. Participants also stated that during the class they were able to forget about other things and enjoy the time focusing on something different than usual. Participants reported a 20% decrease in their stress. They also indicated a decrease in sadness and frustration, although some reported an increase or no change in frustration. I speculated that this may be attributed to the complexity or unfamiliarity of dance as some participants commented (verbally and in writing on the survey instrument) that the pace was too fast for them or that they needed more time to learn the dance movements.

Self-determination was encouraged rather than directly measured. To promote self-determination, the instructor made music available to the participants and verbally encouraged the participants to practice the routines and dance movements during times when the program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-class</th>
<th>Post-class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do your legs/arms/feet/other body parts feel?</td>
<td>How do your legs/arms/feet/other body parts feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does your brain feel?</td>
<td>How does your brain feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me what you like about dancing?</td>
<td>What were you thinking about during the class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me what you like about dancing?</td>
<td>What were you thinking about during (specific portion of choreography)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is good to dance? Why/why not?</td>
<td>Do you think it is good to dance? Why/Why not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about the highlight of your day/week so far?</td>
<td>Tell me a really great thing about your day/week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you enjoy the class, why/why not?</td>
<td>Did you enjoy the class, why/why not?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2:
Sample Journal Questions

“IT GIVES ME PURPOSE”
was not being conducted. Several observations were made by the instructor that may indicate self-determined behavior. First, during the brief breaks during classes, several participants were observed practicing the dance routine instead of getting water. They also requested more frequent classes and stated a desire to learn more dance types and genres. The adults were interested in practicing dance movements independently rather than with the help or demonstration of the instructor. In one instance, a husband and wife team had the evening meal chore, requiring one of them to prepare for the meal instead of attending the dance class. The husband prepared for the meal and his wife attended the dance class. Even though he could not attend the class, he was interested in learning the day’s lesson. Following the class, the wife taught her husband the lesson for the day so he would know what the group learned and would be prepared for the next class.

Challenges

Some challenges encountered during the program included the ability to shift the construct of what was normally a community room to a class room setting. Participants were often distracted by fellow residents walking through the space or became self-conscious when others peeked in the doorway. Also, the unpredictable attendance created a challenge in participant-based planning since I was never sure how many participants would be new or returning to the class week to week. If attendance were more regular, results and observations may have been more specific and longitudinal rather than simply pre- and post-class.

In the future I would adjust the program according to the challenges I encountered as well as the comments from the participants. Because it was difficult to gain a consistent class attendance from week to week, I would try holding class daily if possible. This may help for people who were unable to make it on a particular day but could come on any other day. Also, because the shelter is a transitional place for many residents, a daily class may allow for individuals to attend more frequently during their short stay. Furthermore, a daily class could be planned in a progressive manner so that participants could build upon what was learned in each session, set and achieve daily or weekly goals, and simply remember the movement and information from the previous class more easily.

Insights

Over time, I observed an increase in the comfort level exhibited by the participants when practicing, demonstrating, and executing the dance routines. At first, participants were apprehensive and not very engaged in the program. For instance, their movements were confined to a small space, doing only part of a dance move or not using full range of motion. After several classes and sometimes within one class, their movements became more open in that they used a larger range of space and motion. I also observed a notable increase in the frequency of social interactions before, during, and after classes as the weeks progressed.

The results of this case also indicated a decrease in the participant’s frustration, tiredness, and an increase in feeling more energetic. The use of recreation activities such as dance has long been identified as an intervention that could be used to decrease negative affect and stress. I learned that, given the common emotional experience of those who are homeless, dance may be uniquely positioned to improve some negative implications of homelessness.

Another goal of this program was to use dance as a coping mechanism. While some individuals may be able to effectively verbalize their level and sources of stress, others may not. Dance can be a medium
to nonverbally express one's level or source of stress. The evaluation data indicated decreases in several negative outcomes typically experienced by individuals who are homeless. One participant expressed that the dance program “was a good way to let go of the bad couple of days I just had.” A female participant, who was about to move out of the shelter, inquired as to where in the community she could continue to participate in a dance program as she found the experience a very positive one. Recreation engagement in general has been noted as a way for individuals to cope with life changes, transitions, and as a source of continuity (Lee et al., 1999). For instance, Lee and colleagues found that recreation engagement was a source of continuity in helping individuals who newly acquired a spinal cord injury transition in coping with their disability. I learned that engagement in a dance program could be a useful source in aiding individuals who are homeless to cope with the many life changes they are experiencing.

Limitations and Future Studies

The purpose of the presented case report was to explore the benefits of a structured dance class for adults and children experiencing homelessness with the intent of decreasing stress, increasing positive feelings, encouraging self-determination, and learning how dance can be used as a coping mechanism. Given that the nature of this case report was evaluative, the findings reported should be treated as such. In as such, the results have limited generalizability in that strict scientific parameters were not adhered to in all aspects of this project. Secondly, more research is needed to better understand the effectiveness of TR for people who are homeless. Studies from which to frame this project or explain findings were scarce, requiring the use of literature from other disciplines as support. Given that one of the outcomes of leisure involvement is the ability to cope with change, transition, and loss, few studies have explored the effects of leisure on homelessness. Such examinations would be useful for not only therapeutic recreation, but add to the body of knowledge of other helping professions on the usefulness of leisure as a coping mechanism. Thirdly, the use of dance as a specific coping mechanism has not been widely explored in the leisure literature. Studies examining the use of dance to promote self-determination, increase one’s sense of belonging, especially in a time of transition, and as a way to decrease stress would aid in understanding the effectiveness of specific interventions. Lastly, longitudinal studies and studies that would explore follow-up after moving out of a homeless shelter would aid in the understanding of the role of dance as a coping mechanism during a difficult period such as the state of homelessness.

Summary

This case report demonstrated that dance can be used as a coping mechanism for individuals experiencing homelessness. The participants reported a stronger sense of belonging, exhibited self-determined behaviors, and expressed a degree of reduced stress from having participated in this program. Future studies should be conducted to determine the efficacy of programs like this, in increasing coping abilities and enhancing self-determination.
References


