unearthing Cultural Wellness

Through dance

Session 1: The History, Culture and Benefits of Dance

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Summary:**

Practices that support health and wellbeing have taken place in some form in all cultures throughout history. Whether through active lifestyles, close connections with family and community, the desire to acquire knowledge, or a myriad of other beliefs, behaviors, and actions, we can learn valuable lessons from many cultural practices. In this session, we explore the roots of dance and identify ways that dance supports healthy longevity.

*“Everything in the universe has rhythm, everything dances.”* – Maya Angelou, American author and poet

# NOTES:

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Session 1: The History, Culture and Benefits of Dance

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**A Brief History**

Dancing is universal. It is a form of expression that dates back to the earliest humans. Depictions of people dancing have been documented in cave paintings from Indonesia dating back 20,000 years. Dance is found in the social structure of all human cultures across the world and serves a variety of purposes.

Ancient dance was an important part of spiritual worship and religious ritual. Dance was used to pay tribute to the gods and to seek help with challenges in life such as famine, fertility, and warding off evil. The rhythmic movement of some sacred dances could bring about a trance, which was believed to be a pathway to connect with the supernatural. Costumes and body art, headdresses, and simple instruments (such as shell bracelets) were a part of ceremonial dress used to add to these rituals.

Dance was used to share news by bringing people together to celebrate special events such as births, marriages, and deaths. This form of celebration created historical memories for the community before writing was a form of historical documentation. Dances told stories and passed knowledge from one generation to another. For example, dances mimicking animal behaviors taught young hunters about the animal’s habits while also increasing the dancer’s endurance for the hunt. Dances develop within cultures and change over time as society changes.

**Why We Dance**

Dancing touches four areas of focus that enhance our wellbeing, including our physical health, intellectual vitality, social connection, and peace and fulfillment.

* **Physical Health.** Our bodies are meant to move and expressing our humanity through dance is natural. The movements of dance include shifting the body through high, middle, low, and deep-low planes. As the body constantly flexes, stretches, twists, turns, and bends through these planes, it builds muscle strength, greater agility, and flexibility and increases the aerobic fitness of the heart and lungs. Dancing also stimulates the senses of vision, hearing, touch, and vestibular movement (which tells us where our body is in space). Each of these senses transmits information to different parts of the brain. The right side of the brain, the artistic, emotional, and creative side of the brain, is fueled through dance.
* **Intellectual Vitality.** Learning a new dance with steps, turns, and arm movements, is a form of dual-tasking – combining physical and cognitive actions together. Dual-tasking strengthens short-term and working memory. The quick decisions made while dancing; where to place a foot, how to position the body, or when to swing an arm, all challenge the brain. And the more one dances, the more the brain responds. Dancing is one of the best forms of regular physical activity to help reduce the risk of dementia.
* **Social Engagement.** Dancing is a social connector. Whether you’re dancing while focused on one person, dancing as part of a larger group, or dancing the same dance together with a group, most dancing takes place with others. In his research, Yosef Garfinkel, professor of Archeology, suggests humans danced initially as a form of courtship, similar to how bugs and fish attract each other. Moving through human history he proposes that dance phases were layered one upon another, expanding from courtship to rites of passage, altered states, and calendrical ceremonies, to the current phase of urban specialization “where professional dancers perform elaborate choreography for the entertainment of others.”Dance continues to be a pathway to express desire and social connection and remains a popular activity not only for young adults seeking partners, but for all ages.
* **Peace and Fulfillment.** Peace and fulfillment can be found in dance, through pleasure, self-expression, appreciation of art form, social connection, and as a physical and emotional release to express joy or reduce anxiety or stress. Dancing can be play-like, drawing out creativity or laughter. The movements of dance can immediately make you feel better as moving muscles pump blood and oxygen around the body increasing levels of serotonin, the “feel-good” hormone, helping to neutralize stress. These good feelings continue after dancing, improving mood for an extended period of time.

**Dancing for Happiness**

Dr. Tal Shafir, Ph.D., studied how body posture and physical movements of the muscles and joints send signals to the brain on what is happening in the body. The brain responds with feelings that match the signals, and this action affects our emotions. Therefore, to enhance a certain emotion you can perform the movements the brain associates with that emotion. Some of these mood-enhancing movements include:

* **Moving with Lightness** (e.g., such as skipping)
* **Expanding the Body in Horizontal and Vertical Directions** (e.g., stretching outward and upward)
* **Upward Movements** (e.g., raising the arms above the head or jumping)
* **Repetitive, Rhythmic Movement**

All of these movements are used in dance! Dancing enhances wellbeing, so go ahead and dance, and raise an arm, leg, or knee to healthy longevity!

**SELF- REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS**:

* What do you enjoy the most about dancing?
* How have you felt, physically or mentally, while watching dance, engaging in dance, or after dancing?
* If you had to choose a form of dance as your most comfortable preference, would you choose structured dance (in which the steps are learned) or free dance (where you move as you wish)?
* What type of dance fascinates you the most? What is it about that form of dance that appeals to you?
* What forms of dance have you seen that you might not consider to be “real” dance? Why is that?

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1) How might I engage in dance more? (Example: Dance a few minutes each day.)

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2) One step I could take toward my idea above: (Example: Play your favorite song and enjoy moving to the beat.)

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3) Ways I can break step (#2) into smaller actions: (List as many actions you can think of: i.e., list your favorite songs, decide when in the day works best, freestyle and/or structured dance, dance with partner or by self, participate in dances with a group, etc.)

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