

Biodanza and Affectionate Intelligence

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“Bio” in Greek means life and “danza,” in Spanish means movement with emotion, so Biodanza means movement with emotion that promotes life. We have been dancing from the beginning of time and continue to do so; it must be very important for us to express our soul freely and have pleasure relating by dancing together.

Biodanza is a group therapy. While traditional psychotherapy is interested in analyzing the wounded part of the individual, Biodanza focuses on the community expressing higher qualities of the human spirit and healthy states of consciousness: peace, harmony, love, affection, courage, human kindness, tenderness, trust, vitality, happiness, the desire for contact, instinctual awareness, respect for all life, the awakening of one’s creative potentials, personal identity and personal power, the ability to surrender the individual I to a greater totality, the determination to overcome obstacles, the motivation to live life fully, enthusiasm, openness to new possibilities, the cultivation of pleasure everyday - as you walk down the street feeling the breeze or the warmth of the sun touching your skin.

A session of 14 Biodanza movements is called a vivencia. As participants experience the various movements, they contact profound feelings and emotions. The vivencia provides these direct emotional experiences that will impact on the individual’s behavior over time, changing how they feel, think and relate to others, to themselves and to life on the planet.

Expressing in this way through the dance create strong templates of authentic relatedness. We all have the potential to relate in these loving, affectionate, creative, sensual, vital ways and the different movements provide these opportunities. We are not talking about these subjects, we are having an immediate experience of them in the here and now. All these potentials exist within us and the skilled Biodanza facilitator gently leads people very slowly into the practice of relating to one another. This is not an exercise or dance class. You cannot do Biodanza alone because we do not exist in isolation but in relationship to each other.

Usually we are running so fast, we barely have time for each other and quiet time for ourselves. Often we force ourselves to move at a velocity that increases stress and disassociates us from our feelings. In the Biodanza vivencias, we stop this anxious rhythm and dedicate time for companionship, tenderness and authentic ways of communicating with others. The group experiences are an opportunity to practice affectionate interactions and a healing way of seeing the world, and individuals respond with love, peace and harmony toward one another.

Biodanza is a well-known movement therapy in South America and Europe, but practically unknown in the United States. The creator of Biodanza is Rolando Toro.

During WWII he became profoundly agonized by the horrors and human suffering of a global society motivated toward death and destruction. He developed Biodanza as a corrective response to revert human sorrow and reeducate us about relationships, love and tenderness.

Toro in the 1940's was an anthropologist who studied hundreds of universal dance movements from different cultures throughout human history. He organized them into the system he called Biodanza. Hundreds of movements and specific music are organized into five categories:

Vitality - health, vital impetus, happiness to be alive

Sexuality - sexual pleasure, eroticism, reproduction, passion

Creativity - innovation, construction, imagination, openness

Affection - love, friendship, altruism, empathy

Transcendence - connection to nature, feeling part of a greater totality

Toro believes that when these five categories are fully developed within the individual, they can experience inner balance and mental health.

The movements induce a visceral emotional response; there are many movements - movements to express affection, creativity, vitality, sexuality and connection to a transcendent source.

1. For the category of Vitality the music would be euphoric, happy, energizing;
2. For the category of Sexuality the music would be erotic, flowing, sensual;
3. For the category of Creativity the music would be expressive, different, intense, inspirational;
4. For the category of Affection the music would be tender, soft, flowing, harmonious;
5. For the category of Transcendence the music would be sublime, ethereal, mysterious, glorious;

We begin a session with a walk movement and this playful way of promoting contact with others is non-threatening and the accompanying upbeat music induces happiness and vitality. Walking is a movement that is inherent to all human beings. The way a person holds their muscles and skeletal structure in their walk reveals a great deal about their mental state. For example, a depressed person walks with a lack of vitality and their

muscle tonus is flaccid. People suffering from depression may walk slowly in an aimless way, and in the Biodanza session they practice walking with vitality.

Rather than analyze why the person is depressed Biodanza induces feelings of aliveness. We play a Benny Goodman tune and ask people to walk with a slight bounce with their arms swinging in harmony to the music and feel the rhythm in your body. With this movement we are stimulating an inner impetus - enthusiasm to face life; their posture is erect, their chin is slightly raised and the spine is straight. We practice walking not only with our legs but also with our entire body. As people walk across the room they are asked to greet other group members and develop affectionate interactions.

When two people hold hands and walk together to the rhythm of the music and no one is leading and no one is following, we practice developing mutual respect and sensitivity for each other's way of being. Harmonizing your movement and bodily rhythm with the movement and bodily rhythm of another creates a third movement that is neither yours, nor mine but ours.

People experience true contact and communication, relaxing the armature. The experiences will register in the body, mind, spirit, initiating new neurological responses, and new imprints over time.

Usually each session begins with accelerated movements to stimulate the sympathetic nervous system and slowly we decelerate the movements and musical affect to engage the parasympathetic nervous system. We begin with outer-directed movements and gradually introduce movements that prepare participants to enter deeper states of relaxation or trance.

In Biodanza, by progressively slowing down the movements and music, we can return to deeper states of early psychobiological development. The movements gently lead the group into a state of deep relaxation and members experience a nonjudgmental, n state of wholeness. The neocortex is relaxed, the defenses are diminished and the mind is receptive and sensitized. In this state anguish and anxiety disappear. The individual experiences a state of well-being that is difficult to describe, including feelings of respect, love and openness for life. The body is subtle, receptive, and feels deep pleasure being in the moment with what is. It is similar to the oceanic state of consciousness of the newborn, but on a higher level of consciousness.

Movement predates verbal knowing and our first means of relating to the world was through movement. Biodanza movements access emotional states of being that rational dualistic intelligence is not able to. Rather than offer information to the intellectual mind we educate the instinctual corporeal soul level of knowing.

During a session, we do not communicate in words, only through movements of emotion. There exists a cultural tendency to discredit the instinctual responses as irrational. The function of the instinct reveals a type of biological wisdom of the human species that has

its own inherent logic. Being aware of our instinctual intelligence maintains health and survival.

Words bring us back into the intellectual mind and we want to explore other ways of thinking. For this reason the entire Biodanza vivencia is nonverbal. During a session we ask people not to talk but to feel. Biodanza reconnects to deep levels of instinctual human awareness that many people living in technological societies are not in touch with anymore. Presently, many of us function on automatic, producing and "doing" as if we were machines, totally disrespecting the natural wisdom and needs of the biological organism.

Each session plants seeds within the subconscious or unconscious mind. The response is first learned in the body, and then it filters through to the mind. Each session is designed to create these healing experiences where participants deeply feel their higher potentials of human intelligence. We are trying to connect to the instinctual sensory feeling mind, the original state of knowledge that is embodied.

Ken Wilbur says that all deep structures of consciousness are remembered whereas all surface structures of consciousness are learned. Some of the deepest structures of the human psyche, such as the archetype of Wholeness - feeling unity with the Totality of existence - are not comprehended through the intellect but experienced in a transcendent state outside of the rational mind.

The practice of affectionate intelligence is another one of the major tenets that uniquely characterizes this group therapy. Through affectionate intelligence we can empathize with other people, understand them, feel tenderness, compassion, gentleness, friendship, maternity, paternity and affinity with others.

“Bonding with others is necessary for our mental health and Biodanza fulfills this need. Participants progressively relate emotionally to one another through fluid and harmonious movement interactions that express our human need for connection, closeness and the instinct of solidarity. When people are denied meaningful relationships with other humans or animals they feel depressed. Prolonged separation from loved ones yields despair. These biological impulses of co-operation, of integration, of solidarity culminate in feelings of altruism and constitute the genesis of love.”

– Rolando Toro

Biodanza provides an experience of deep bonding to oneself, to others and to a higher force in the universe. Many of the movements prepare the human organism for the process of entering into the primordial state of consciousness called regression to the origin. Toro believes that the key to healing is this return to the original state where deep structures of unity with life, inner peace and ecstasy are experienced in the present moment. We are being liberated from the critical judgmental mind and in the state of non-duality, the mind engages in a state of wholeness and profound connection with the totality of existence. These unity experiences of the individual with the group and with the greater totality are one of the unique aspects of Biodanza group therapy.

During a vivencia, fears, such as abandonment, are replaced by new integrative feelings of being touched by a group member who symbolically represents a mother or a father or a loved one. The feeling of abandonment or loss is replaced by one of belonging, of being accepted, of knowing authentic contact with others. Experiencing in the present moment feelings of acceptance, tenderness, peace and deep connection to others is one of the healing methods Biodanza utilizes.

There exists a life force within us that is able to go beyond the identification with how we were conditioned. The regressed state is a return to the Original Self before the trauma was imprinted. The person is exposed to corrective emotional experiences. By that I mean feeling states they may never have experienced sufficiently when they were young. These corrective emotional experiences provoke a series of chemical alterations within the body. Toro believes that the affectionate movements activate specific neurotransmitters that alter the body's biochemistry. These chemical-hormonal alterations repeated over time stimulate new neurological responses on a cellular level in the body-mind. As these mental states are experienced on a regular basis they create new positive mental states that are remembered on deep levels of the body, mind, spirit when one comes out of the session.

Each Biodanza session builds upon the next and as the groups emotional ties strengthen, people begin to feel the warmth and security they may never have felt in the relationships with their family of origin or with other people in their life. We say that the Biodanza session is an emotional laboratory where we can experiment letting ourselves feel in this protected environment that the world is a safe place; we look into someone's eyes with an open heart, tenderly touch their face and smile at them. In this moment of encounter, the defensive armature is gone and the person is unprotected, celebrating life fully. This positive memory has been planted in the unconscious mind. Something has been truly lived that is not easily forgotten. Interacting with people on this authentic level of human contact and getting one's emotional needs met on a continual basis, imprints feelings of being loved and accepted.

What distinguishes Biodanza from other group or movement therapies is its focus on developing affectionate intelligence through touch. Affectionate touch is necessary for mental health. Life in both the animal and human species needs to be caressed or touched in an affectionate way. Both Dolores Kreiger and Barbara Brennan, among other teachers, have documented the healing power of therapeutic touch. From the beginning the baby needs to have her primary caretaker affectionately caress her soul by gazing into her eyes, affirming their bond. The baby monkeys in the Harry Harlow experiments, or the children raised in orphanages that Rene Spitz observed, both these researchers have confirmed that affectionate contact nurtures and its absence wounds.* Human touch is a necessary emotional component for health.

** The significant finding in the Harlow experiments was that the baby monkeys preferred to embrace and be with the soft flannel mother rather than the wire mother who supplied the milk. Once the babies were fed, affectionate touch was favored over food. Those monkeys that only grew up with the wire mothers and did not have the cloth mothers to cuddle notably appeared more neurotic. It appears that living organisms*

that do not experience this contact are emotionally starved and those that do are capable of vital healthy relationships to themselves and others because of this initial bonding.

Brains of neglected children show neurons missing by the billions. Even the experiments done with plants showed that those exposed to music, spoken and cared for with affection, grew more abundantly than those plants that did not receive these forms of communication.

An important movement of affectionate touch is the embrace. This embrace does not only have a sexual connotation but can be a feeling of fraternity. I can embrace someone I do not know very well and this contact symbolizes that we recognize each others humanness. There is no single word in English that translates the Portuguese word "semelhante." Semelhante is an expression of humanity acknowledging one another as equals or members of the same species, the same ecological family, regardless of race, economic status; we embrace one another as equals.

The group becomes an affectionate protective community where we can experience universal love. One of the goals of Biodanza is to experience universal love for all humankind, for our semelhante, in addition to feeling it for a specific individual. The group affirms the possibility of feeling undifferentiated love, as opposed to love directed toward one special person. In undifferentiated love, we are very interested in encouraging feelings of love or affection toward humanity. We feel affection for people we do not know because we recognize that they are members of our species and part of humankind.

Practicing exercises with people in the group sessions develops this feeling of common affinity and undifferentiated love for others. Although some people may be more attractive to us than others, when you can get past the exterior packaging, fundamentally we realize our common natures - we all have dreams, hopes, fears and the desire to be loved.

It is necessary to talk about your fears and blocks to intimacy and in the part of the session reserved for verbal group process, participants can express their emotional reactions to the different movements. There are no right or wrong emotions. Some people may want to make eye contact, others may not feel ready to at that particular time. All emotions are valid. Each person is accepted for who they are.

There are beginning, intermediate and advanced movements. When we practice doing any of the exercises, it is important that we respect our emotional needs and do the exercises at each level only when we are ready to. That is the basis of building a firm foundation of safety and acceptance for self and others in the group. We never invade someone's space or allow our personal space to be invaded. Go at your own pace and honor that you do not have to do anything other than what you are able to do and accompany each person where they are, respecting your limits and the other persons.

It is important to differentiate between contact and affectionate touch. A mechanical contact in itself is not really therapeutic. It is a sensitive touch accompanied by attitudes of affection, empathy and caring for one another that nurtures.

We can also practice our affectionate intelligence through looking into someone's eyes. Our culture approves not showing what we feel. Eye contact brings up feelings of embarrassment.

In the beginning of a Biodanza session we may look at one another, putting our hands over our eyes and just peeking out at people in a playful way. Progressively, as people feel safe in the group environment and know they are cared for then they can experiment making eye contact with different people in different ways. This is the power of working in group.

As the group matures we can do more intimate exercises of eye contact. For example, walk around the room and connect with someone you would like to dance with by making eye contact. Slowly, walk closer toward each other. Get in touch with your longing to be with this person. Allow this feeling to grow inside as you slowly draw closer. Enter in touch with all the feelings that arise. Maybe you feel vulnerable, fear, happiness, and desire - just watch and let each one be. When you finally meet this person, let the embrace be slow. Feel the coming together as if you were embracing a long lost friend. There are different kinds of embraces in Biodanza. There are embraces of friendship, of sexual desire, of protection, of melting into another person's breathing and the two becoming one in a moment of eternity.

As Biodanza is practiced over time, the individual becomes freer and lives life more fully. They identify with their Original Self. This breaks their identification with the wounds and allows the individual to partake in the pleasure, love and the celebration of Life.