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Health & wellness

Q&A | DONNA NEWMAN-BLUESTEIN

Engaging patients through dance, movement

By Karen Campbell | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 05, 2013



COLM O'MOLLOY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

For 35 years, dance and movement therapist Donna Newman-Bluestein has gone into classrooms and institutional settings to spread the joy of movement. She sings and two-steps, greets everyone by name, shaking hands. Newman-Bluestein's dance engagement is not just fun for

cognitively-impaired seniors she works with, but provides physical therapy. Newman-Bluestein is a senior lecturer in Lesley University's graduate school, a performer with the intergenerational dance company Back Pocket Dancers, and the spokeswoman for the American Dance Therapy Association.

Q. How did you transition from dancer to dance therapist?

A. As a shy teenager, I found it tremendously healing to dance on the dance floor, to get up close to the drummer and rock out. In college, I studied dance and found it a real confidence builder and loved to go to performances. After I saw Alvin Ailey three times in one week, I had a dream that I would teach dance to children, and that led me down the path to dance therapy.

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Q. Though you've worked across all ages and abilities, you've focused in recent years on people with various forms of dementia.

A. My father had vascular dementia, and I recognized that people with advanced dementia are undervalued and undertreated. That has become my heartbreak and my passion.

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Q. We tend to think of dance as expression and communication. How do you tap into its healing power?

A. What I'm doing as a therapist is dancing with everyone in the group and making repeated individual connections with people. I mirror the way they use space or their rhythms and pace, connecting them to the group as a whole. I'm seeing very small movements and reflecting that back. When a person sees their movement mirrored, they feel like they're having an impact. It's empowering and dispels that sense of isolation. The emotional component is central. The relationship is what's healing, and dance is the language, the medium that allows for the relationship.

Q. And this works even with people in wheelchairs?

A. I begin with what a person can do and build on it, so rather than ask them to move like me, I move like they do, foot tapping, toe tapping. Then we start to move more parts of the body, feeling the rhythms in as much of the body as possible. I want to see if they can move the torso, because that's where emotions live, and getting them to move the torso helps alleviate depression. Once a person's moving, the more they want to move, getting the circulation and respiration going, building flexibility, strength and moving the lymph system, which is the house of our immune system. Hormones are released, new neuronal pathways are built. I really want to rouse them. Human beings are meant to move.

Q. I know music is crucial, but you also use a variety of props — balloons, streamers, hats. Why are those particularly helpful?

A. About 5 percent do not respond to music, so I'm trying to reach them through every avenue that I can. [Props] expand the movement, so I first use the ribbon wand to make each movement more visible. Using the derby hats, people of all levels of cognition respond to that in a playful way. They have choice about the colors they [pick] . . . and choice is empowering. It's what makes us individuals. That's why aesthetics and the arts are so vital, because that's how we express the uniqueness that is each of us.

Q. Your secret weapon is the Octaband, a stretchy interactive device you invented especially for dementia patients. How does it work?

A. It has a 2½-foot center circle with eight or 16 cloth "legs" in different colors. I think of it as an octopus, reaching tentacles out to each individual and bringing something of them into the center. It gives the feedback that they are valued, connected — people with advanced dementia connect through the nonverbal. One of their deepest needs is a sense of belonging, so loops at the end of each "leg" can go over a person's wrist or ankle, and because it's stretchy, they feel a connection to one another. It motivates them to join in. We're connecting visually, through the tactile, the kinesthetic, the auditory.

I remember one woman had not moved during a group for a couple of months. She loved music and loved to move, but she was dying. Her eyes were always closed. I slipped the loop over her wrist, but when everybody pulled, it came off. She instinctively reached for it and opened her eyes. After that, she kept her eyes opened and engaged in everything.

Q. That's very powerful. It's been used across ages and abilities as well, right?

A. Yes. I got some fabulous photos today of the Octaband being used with teens and adults in Bosnia who lost family in the Bosnian War. And yesterday, from someone using it with adults with developmental disabilities.

Q. Are dementia patients your most challenging audiences?

A. I love working with people with dementia because dance moves to their strengths. They can't initiate, but they can be spontaneous and often don't have a sensor, so they're willing to play. Play is vastly underrated in this culture. Play is how we learn. It's discovery. It acknowledges mutual interdependence. We all get to contribute to the greater good. Together we create something new.

Q. What keeps you going?

A. I learn as much from them as they do from me. It's deeply humbling work. It brings me joy.

Karen Campbell can be reached at karencampbell4@rcn.com.