

Exploring the impact of drama therapy in dementia care: A holistic perspective

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Dear Editor,

I am writing to share insights on how integrating the principles of drama therapy within physiotherapy can meaningfully enhance dementia care. Drama therapy, widely recognized for its therapeutic benefits on emotional and cognitive well-being, provides innovative methods that align well with physiotherapy goals, especially for dementia patients navigating the progressive cognitive and emotional changes associated with their condition. Drama therapy's inherent flexibility, creativity, and person-centered approach can help fulfil the dual needs of physical and psychological support for dementia patients within a physiotherapy framework (Harel, 2024).

Dementia, characterized by the gradual loss of cognitive abilities, memory and functional autonomy profoundly impacts patients' emotional health. Integrating drama therapy principles into physiotherapy offers a way to address these multifaceted needs through movement-based interventions that foster not only physical engagement but also emotional resilience and cognitive connection. Here, I explore key drama therapy concepts such as aesthetic distance, nonverbal self-expression, person-centered approaches, and reminiscence—that can transform traditional physiotherapy into a holistic, engaging, and compassionate approach to dementia care (Falzon Aquilina et al., 2015; Giannouli et al., 2019).

One of the foundational principles in drama therapy is aesthetic distance. This concept allows patients to engage with their emotions through an imagined, "as-if" reality, maintaining a safe boundary that minimizes the risk of becoming overwhelmed. For dementia patients, creating a therapeutic space where they feel safe to explore movements and emotions while anchored to a familiar framework can significantly enhance participation and reduce anxiety. By adapting this principle, physiotherapists can create activity-based exercises that resemble recognizable, everyday actions like reaching, bending, or lifting thereby supporting both physical and cognitive goals. Exercises that mimic household tasks or daily routines, such as "setting the table" or "watering plants", help patients activate motor skills in a meaningful context, allowing for both muscle engagement and cognitive recall. Physiotherapists could introduce props such as lightweight pretend dishes or small watering cans to bring these movements to life. These props provide a safe way to interact with objects while promoting gross and fine motor control. By linking exercises to real-life tasks, physiotherapists

help patients maintain a sense of purpose, autonomy, and connection to their daily lives (Mitchell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Drama therapy also emphasizes self-expression and spontaneity through nonverbal methods like puppetry, role-playing, and the use of symbolic gestures. Many dementia patients experience difficulties with verbal communication as their condition progresses, but nonverbal expression remains a powerful way for them to connect and communicate. Integrating these approaches in physiotherapy allows patients to use gestures or simple props to represent family members or past experiences, fostering self-expression while enhancing motor control. A patient might be encouraged to "introduce" a puppet or prop as a family member, sharing a memory by using gestures or expressions rather than words. This approach offers an opportunity for emotional release, helping patients form positive associations with movement. For physiotherapists, these moments of nonverbal interaction can provide valuable insights into patients' emotional states and past experiences. Additionally, by encouraging patients to spontaneously interact with objects or engage in role-playing scenarios, therapists promote greater flexibility and adaptability, qualities that can improve patients' responses to other treatment modalities and help build a more resilient sense of self (Mimica & Presečki, 2010; Holmwood, 2021).

Another core principle of drama therapy is the person-centered approach, which prioritizes the strengths and preserved abilities of each individual. This approach is vital in dementia care, as it supports patients' dignity, autonomy and sense of identity. In the context of physiotherapy, a person-centered approach would involve structuring exercises around each patient's unique interests, preferences, and past routines. By tailoring exercises to each patient's lived experiences, physiotherapists can create sessions that are not only functionally relevant but also deeply empowering. Patients with a history of gardening could participate in therapeutic exercises that mimic planting or watering actions, while others who enjoyed sports could be guided through movements reminiscent of their favourite activities. This personalization fosters a sense of achievement and confidence, enabling patients to see themselves as capable and valuable. Moreover, incorporating social interaction and group-based activities into therapy can create a supportive community atmosphere, which is essential for the emotional well-being of dementia patients, who often face isolation and loneliness. Group activities that incorporate partner

or mirrored movements can foster empathy and connection, encouraging patients to feel a part of something larger than themselves (Holmwood, 2021).

Drama therapy's focus on reminiscence and life-story work holds great potential in physiotherapy settings, where exercises can be transformed into memory-stimulating activities. Reminiscence activities encourage dementia patients to reconnect with positive memories, boosting emotional resilience and cognitive focus. In a physiotherapy context, these activities can be as simple as introducing movement patterns that align with familiar actions from patients' pasts, like waving, clapping, or dancing. Exercises that incorporate memory cues or storytelling such as "mirror exercises," where patients mirror a partner's movements support coordination and social interaction, fostering a sense of community and belonging. When paired with music or sensory cues, these exercises can stimulate more vivid memory recall, transforming physiotherapy into a multifaceted therapeutic experience. Furthermore, storytelling-based activities allow patients to relive joyful memories, reinforcing their sense of self and helping to counter the disorienting effects of dementia (Harel, 2024; Mimica & Kalinić, 2011).

The integration of drama therapy principles within physiotherapy has the potential to address both the physical and psychosocial needs of dementia patients in several impactful ways. First, by linking movement exercises to familiar and meaningful activities, physiotherapists can facilitate a sense of comfort and purpose. This approach can alleviate the anxiety and confusion that often accompany dementia, encouraging patients to engage more fully in their treatment. Additionally, the emphasis on nonverbal expression provides an outlet for patients to communicate emotions that may be difficult to express verbally, fostering a sense of safety and connection (Jaaniste et al., 2015).

Moreover, the person-centered approach strengthens the therapeutic alliance between patients and their therapists. When patients feel that their individuality is respected and valued, they are more likely to respond positively to treatment, contributing to improved motivation, mood, and self-esteem. Finally, the incorporation of reminiscence and life-story work within physiotherapy sessions supports cognitive engagement, helping patients anchor their physical activities to meaningful memories and reinforcing a positive self-image (Mitchell & Agnelli, 2015).

Incorporating drama therapy principles into physiotherapy for dementia care offers a transformative approach that aligns with holistic health goals. By addressing the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of health, physiotherapists can create a well-rounded, compassionate treatment plan that enhances the quality of life for dementia patients. Through imaginative scenarios, nonverbal expression, person-centered interactions, and reminiscence, we can provide a therapy experience that honours patients' dignity, supports their autonomy, and empowers them to engage with their treatment actively. I hope this perspective inspires more interdisciplinary collaboration, ultimately elevating the standards of dementia care.

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