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# Isolated systems towards a dancing constellation: coping with the Covid-19 lockdown through a pilot dance movement therapy tele-intervention

Monica Re

## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 lockdown plunged everyone into an unknown state of isolation and standstill. The aim of this article is to reflect on the impact of a dance/movement teleintervention performed in Italy during the 2020 Covid global lockdown aimed at children and elderly people. The purpose was to counter the trauma of the pandemic and to promote and empower well-being and relationships within a resilient community though all of the restrictions.

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**KEYWORDS** Dance/movement therapy; Covid-19; isolation; fear; community; integration; telehealth

## Introduction

Over six/eight weeks between February and March the entire world stopped moving. Everybody was partially or totally locked in the limited space of their houses losing all the landmarks of daily life.

February 26<sup>th</sup> was a crucial date in Italy: schools of all types should have opened after Carnival holidays, but students were left at home, the first step towards a total lockdown. In the following two weeks all activities stopped. Nobody really understood what was going on. It was a chaos, like an earthquake. Images circulating all over the world increased a sense of isolation. The social system needed time to organise a totally new way of life: working, teaching, learning, all activities would be done on-line. It was not simple as there are still some geographical areas without web connection in Italy. Many people were isolated, not connected, alone. For many TV was the only contact with the outside world: a flow of terrifying numbers, contrasting data, images of death and military checkpoints. Uncomfortable feelings arose everywhere. The situation was shocking: a global trauma was on the doorstep.

I personally found myself alone at home and started thinking about this new condition. I had worked as a dance therapist in the women's section of the prison of Torino, one of the biggest prisons in Italy. I realised there were

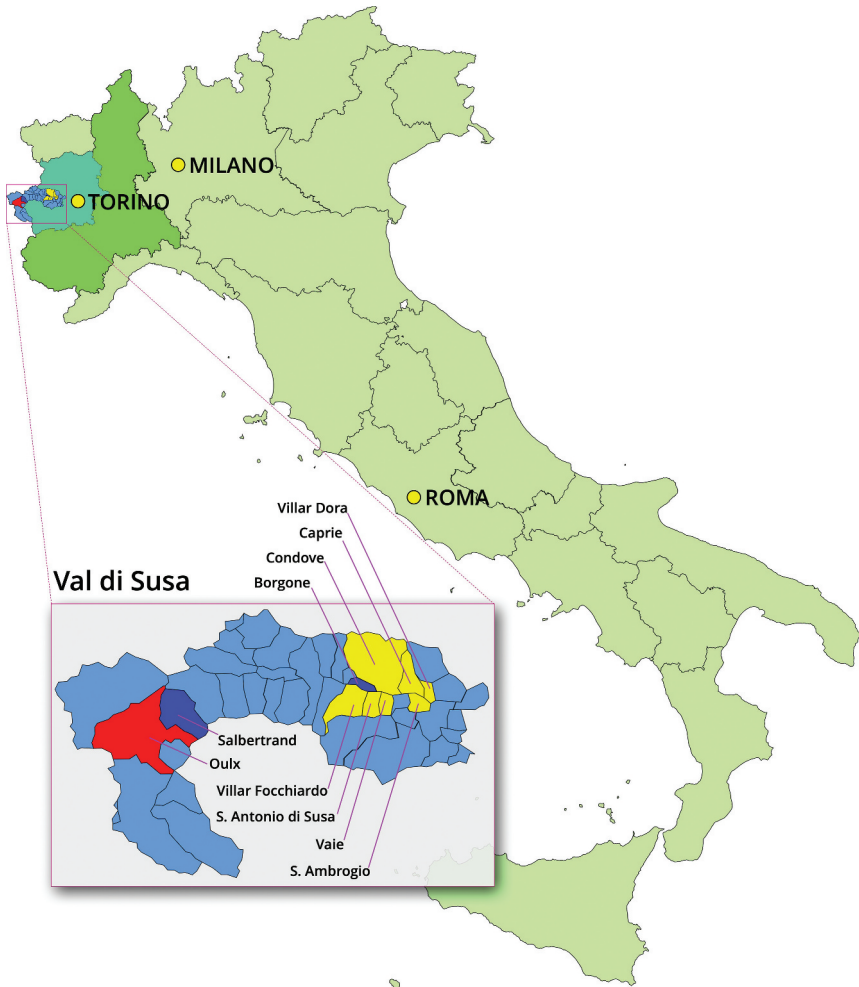


Figure 1.

many connections between lockdown and prison from a physiological perspective. Time and space are different from everyday life there: the body lies or sits in a limited space in the flow of unlimited time. Space limits mean short sighted horizons with a restricted perspective and reduced ability to perceive distance, affecting life quality and vision functioning. The body adapts to standstill position and boredom, falling into a state of hypokinesia. Psychophysical disorders appear, compromising all senses, increasing damages to cardiovascular and pulmonary systems, stimulating diabetes,

obesity and vertigo. A compromised body reinforces mood disorders: anxiety, depression, loneliness, hyper-excitation vs. absolute passivity and panic attacks. Lack of freedom to move, of relationships and of future perspectives become symptoms for an endless 'pain chain'. I also thought about a song I use in my workshops, 'Isolated System' by Muse, and its text: 'In an isolated system, entropy can only increase'. A drawing from a friend represents it as a fat dancer locked in a glass cube and floating on water. Both text and drawing made me reflect on body conditions during a global trauma like Covid-19 lockdown. Our isolated bodies were constantly fed with toxic messages and images. Layers of pain were stuck in mind. How to transform that energy and stop disorientation?

In March I shared my thoughts with a friend from the Italian Social Care System, Monica Lingua, a consultant for the Families' Centre of Consorzio Intercomunale Socio-Assistenziale (Con.I.S.A.) 'Valle di Susa' in Sant'Antonino di Susa (Province of Turin – Italy). These institutions deliver and organise all integrated Families' & Community Services for municipalities and/or territorial departments. My friend was very worried about the impact of the lockdown on the community, especially on fragile and isolated people, such as children and elderly people in residential care homes, deprived of any contact. While the lockdown was protecting them in a Covid high-risk condition, how to mitigate that deprivation? How to give them an opportunity for empowerment? A dance/movement (DMT) on-line programme seemed a possible answer.

### ***Birth of the programme: from music to dance***

The purpose was to offer participants a new place to meet and share emotions, in a new playground where they could be active and proactive. We needed an anchor to support the programme. I chose the suite *Le Carnaval des Animaux* (*The Carnival of Animals – CoA*), composed by Camille Saint-Saens in 1886. It offers many opportunities with its fourteen movements representing different animals: the lion, hens and roosters, wild donkeys, tortoises, the elephant, kangaroos, the aquarium, the cuckoo, an aviary, fossils, the swan. The Royal March introduces all of them and leads to the final choral dance.

Observing the programme from different points of view, we found useful connections between the suite and our needs:

- DMT methodology: CoA images helped play and dance to overcome the distance between participants and the therapist, activate patterns of movement and explore body-effort-shape-space according to Laban Movement principles.

- Connection with the historical period: the title linked to reality. Italian lockdown began during Carnival holidays, so many carnival parades were cancelled and children could not wear their masks.
- Social/educational function: the final step of the programme was a community dance where everybody showed his or her animal's mask, to introduce the use of masks gently and to train for the future 'masked' life outside.

### *Aims*

The programme focused on breaking the 'pain chain' enhanced by lockdown by fulfilling different purposes:

- facilitate the recovery of an integrated body/mind (Vincent, 2018) dimension, nurturing the creative process to maintain the connection with 'the outside' during restrictions,
- facilitate the expression of emotions through DMT and create a choreography to promote a common resilient attitude, from the 'here and now' dimension of each isolated session to the final global dance (Miller-Karas, 2015),
- promote a social network to contrast isolation and reduce distances (Van der Kolk, 2014),
- perform all together in front of a live audience as a long term goal.

### *Engagement*

The programme was proposed by the Families' Center of Con.I.S.A. 'Valle di Susa', involving two residential care homes in the Susa Valley, and by Cento Passi Scholar Institute in Sant'Antonino di Susa, involving two pre-school classes and one elementary class. The Cento Passi Scholar Institute's digital platform on Google Meet was put at the therapist's disposal. Before starting all families were asked to sign a clearance according to the Italian privacy law to allow the use of images from the sessions. Each session was recorded and videos were collected in the scholar institute's data system. The therapist first presented the programme to teachers and residential care homes, to engage them in the project. The presentation included a DMT workshop to introduce the methodology and to analyse together how to engage students and residents. Then it was presented to the families, underlining the importance of participating for health and social purposes. Forty-six families were present with about two persons per family, plus teachers, the school manager, the consultants of Con.I.S.A. with a total of around 105 participants. After the presentations, the project started with children connecting from their houses in different municipalities around Vaie and Borgone, residents from the two

nursing homes located in Borgone and Salbertrand and the therapist from Oulx.

- In Pre-school Class A, there were 22 male/female (M/F) children aged 3 to 5 and 2 teachers.
- In Pre-school Class B, there were 20 M/F children aged 3 to 5 and 3 teachers.
- In the elementary class, there were 16 M/F students aged 9 to 10 and 2 teachers.
- The Nursing home A, with 8 female residents, aged 58 to 80.
- The Nursing home B, with 10 M/F residents, aged 59 to 85.
- For both nursing homes the residents were in the same room with two professionals.

### *Structure*

The programme was organised to last nine weeks. Due to administrative delays it only began at the end of the lockdown, in the second week of May until June 17<sup>th</sup>, lasting six weeks. Students were allowed to go out, but not to school, while nursing home residents were still not allowed to leave the structure. The programme fulfilled its purpose.

Each class met 8 times and each nursing home met 11 times. Each session lasted 45/50 minutes, except the final one which lasted almost three hours. The therapist was involved in 28 sessions plus 15 hours for planning and organisation.

Children:

- Week 1 to Week 3: each class attended its session once a week (9 sessions).
- Week 4 to Week 5: the three classes worked together meeting twice a week (4 sessions).

Residents:

- Week 1 to Week 2: each group attended its session twice a week (8 sessions).
- Week 3 to Week 5: the two groups worked together meeting twice (6 sessions).
- Week 6: last session or final performance. Parents and referees of the project were invited to see the performance on the 'on-line stage'.

The first sessions were aimed at approaching movement and reconnecting the body while adapting to the on-line dimension. Each session started with

warming up to inhabit personal space, focusing on kinesphere and its shaping. Images were used to activate patterns of movement. Different pictures (like a sunflower field or different shells) were used to let the participants observe different shapes or focus on colours. Then they were asked to move following those shapes, focusing on opposites and on transferring between them (big/small – vertical/horizontal – slow/quick – near/far); finally, to create their personal dance of images. It was amazing how expressive and creative they all were. They left written comments or drawings, collected by the therapist to witness their feedback and for the scenography of the long-term live performance.

From the third week the two nursing homes were online together to adapt to the increasing number of people and to start creating the final choreography. Children worked together from the fourth week.

The choreography was the project core: participants had to use movements from the sessions. How to do it? Sessions still started with warming up but without images – only activating the body. After listening to a *Carnival's* movement, the therapist said its title and participants were asked to dance the evoked animal. Observing all the screens the therapist collected the different movements of animals and put them in a sequence to be repeated together. This allowed her to give feedback on the dances since it was not possible to present them one by one. As working on-line with many people reduced the participants' attention, that sequence seemed a highly effective method in a short time frame. After dancing the sequence together, the group was asked to name the most relevant movement of that dance (such as the swan). Each selected movement was included in the final choreography. The therapist's role was to transfer those elements from group to group, explaining each choice and connecting them in the final choreography. The last song was selected based on previous choices as it represented the final parade of the carnival.

All elements of the choreography represented a piece of the group, except the opening. This came from old memories and offered an amazing connection with the present (Malone, 2012). After the first session, Luisa, a woman aged 86, told us that a little movement with fingers and arms had reminded her about playing the piano as a child. She used to live at a boarding school and to have piano lessons, in a room with stuffed animals in glass cases. She was always worried by a spider: she could not play as she was checking the spider. A nun asked her with a German accent 'Why is your music so strange? Don't you have any eyes to look at the keyboard?' Laughing, Luisa told us 'I had eyes, but they were watching the spider. I was worried!' This story became the pivot of the programme. Asking Luisa's permission to joke with it, the therapist used this and her gestures to start the choreography (Stern, 2010). It was possible to weave a canvas from screen to screen, empowering

interest and expectation from group to group in constant mirror games to witness each one's presence.

For the short term performance on-line participants were also asked to create an animal's mask, choosing freely between animals of the suite or another beloved animal. During a session, the therapist had indeed observed a boy using a kitchen pillow to dance the tortoise: bowed forwards with his arms round over his back, he was keeping the pillow as a turtle shell. This image let the therapist decide to avoid prescriptions about materials for the masks. They were all produced using paper or cardboard. Interestingly, that movement seemed to stimulate new ideas for the materials, while for the final masks they used colourful paper or cardboard.

### *Short term performance*

Around a hundred people took part to the last session: children and elderly people as performers; families, referees and professionals as audience. The therapist welcomed everybody and presented the carnival journey introducing the groups. She explained the importance of a dance resulting from joint creativity and asked the audience to be patient for a while, because performers needed to rehearse before performing – a ten minute warm-up followed. They reviewed the choreography without music to find their joint rhythm, helped by the therapist marking the sequence. The choral movement was very touching. The tension, concentration and feelings of the performers were highly perceptible around almost one hundred screens. You felt like you were in a theatre. After the therapist invited Luisa to tell the spider tale, all performers were asked to wear their masks and the music started. It was an amazing surprise: we witnessed a masquerade in unison! Pink swans, grey spiders with long red legs, yellow lions and fluttering cats were dancing on air! A virtual standing ovation followed. The surprise continued. The therapist invited everybody to unmute microphones. She thanked everybody for this touching dance and asked if someone wanted to share anything. Immediately children and residents started to talk generating a Babel tower! All were laughing and excited. Microphones were muted again, the therapist thanked them for sharing and asked them to raise their hands to talk. One after the other, they described their masks and the reason for choosing them. Asked for proposals on how to meet in presence, children proposed a performance to show what they had done: recording and comments will be used to introduce the performance. A boy suggested a performance all together in a park. Someone suggested going and visiting the newly met surrogate grandparents to offer comments as souvenirs and to remember the steps danced together. A couple of siblings, from two different nursing homes, said the workshop had been the only way for them to meet in that period.



It was an endless smiling connection; some opened their arms to welcome or hug the others. The screen was not a barrier anymore.

After about three hours the therapist thanked again everybody and dismissed all performers and parents. Waving their hands to say goodbye, they slowly disconnected.

Teachers and referees were asked to express their feelings with one word: they chose *surprise*.

### **Points of view**

After the meeting teachers and referees answered following questions:

- (1) What needs did CoA meet?
- (2) What skills were developed?
- (3) How did the project empower relationship?
- (4) Do you think CoA guaranteed continuity in your didactic activity? (for teachers)
- (5) What did CoA represent for the elderly people? (for consultants of residential care homes)

### **Feedback**

- *Pre-school teachers*: 'CoA developed interactive web-skills. It offered the opportunity to really meet and spend time together in a special way. Most of the children took part with parents, siblings or pets walking around. A view into others' houses developed connection between families and teachers, while music and movement offered a new way to see each other, creatively levelling differences between families and the institution.'
- *Elementary school teachers*: 'CoA promoted a movement approach helping children reconnect with their body. Social detachment had increased fear and anxiety. Everyone had been hidden at home, turned to uncomfortable dens day after day. DMT workout opened the limited space of our rooms, offering some well-being through dancing and expressing our emotions. From an educational point of view the project empowered imagination, creativity and body awareness. It supported the development of web skills enabling interaction from distances up to 80 kilometres. The new web experience stimulated relationships encouraging them to focus on other people's emotions and feelings.'
- *Consultants from Nursing home A*: 'CoA contributed to serenity. Dancing created a body connection among all participants strengthening the red thread between children and elderly people. The workout empowered creativity, body and mind connection. Playing with children offered the

residents an opportunity for involvement and play without feeling ashamed, for cooperation in building a story as creators and protagonists, choreographers and dancers at the same time.'

- *Consultants from Nursing home B*: '-CoA's- journey began in a very difficult moment. We all felt uncomfortable and alone, even working and meeting in the residence. Loneliness was hard. The programme was a glimmer of light, helping the residents to become aware of the outside still being inside. They were not lost. At the beginning they were surprised, but they joined the game and began to ask about that little woman, prepared the room an hour in advance and checked if she was on time. This confirmed the validity of the programme.'
- *Con.I.S.A. consultants*: 'The programme responded to concrete needs such as feeling useful/important while disoriented by the loss of relationship. CoA helped reconnect people through a sense of community and belongingness, a common goal for the future, as well as endure the lockdown with resilience empowering new practices.'

*Participants gave their feedback without any specific question.*

- *Elderly people*: 'At the beginning we didn't understand what was happening. It was strange to watch a little woman on the screen talking to us and moving in a funny way. Then she explained what to do ... It was funny to wait for her ... We knew we had to learn movements to dance with others and when we met the children it was very touching ... I had so much fun and I was very happy to see my sister on the screen doing the same things ... I felt ridiculous, but it was funny moving in such a strange way and I couldn't stop laughing ... It was nice, but difficult. We were so many and the woman could see all of us. I didn't understand how she did, but it was amazing ... In my life I've done many things, many courses, but nothing like that: I felt good and protagonist of my body and myself ... Nice! I moved arms and legs: I was a spider, tired, but happy ... It was nice and they helped us to move. We were not so good at moving, but I liked it so much and hope we will do it again.'
- *Children*: 'It was nice to see the grandparents and when we meet for real it will be another experience ... It is ok watching each other on TV, tablets or mobile, but it will be nicer to meet in the flesh, without touching each other of course ... We will keep 1.5 or 2 metre distance; maybe in September we will do it! With sanitary masks and our animal masks over them ... We could offer our drawings to the grandparents ... We could make a performance in their houses or in the town centre.'

## Conclusion

As Bessel Van der Kolk (2014, p. 173) writes:

If an organism is stuck in survival mode, its energies are focused on fighting off unseen enemies, which leaves no room for nurture, care, and love. For us humans, it means that as long as the mind is defending itself against invisible assaults, our closest bonds are threatened, along with our ability to imagine, plan, play, learn, and pay attention to other people's needs.

From this perspective *The Carnival of Animals* was an effective answer for the community where far 'isolated systems' met together in a resilient new constellation. At the moment in Italy the lockdown is still impacting daily life, especially in residential care institutions. A second programme has been commissioned involving residents, fragile adults and minors and unaccompanied foreign minors. The programme title is *Map and Territory: a way to know our body in our valley*. The aim is to empower more fragile categories, consolidate the use of technology and investigate how and if similar interventions are useful to provide care not only in emergency cases, but also in psychosocial primary care cases. The question is open and is an invitation to a new and different development of our profession.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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