



## **Young women's embodied inner narratives of desired future in mild-to-moderate depression**

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This paper examines the lived experiences of seven young women with mild-to-moderate depression on dance-based participatory research from the perspective of narrative futuring (NF). The data consists of letters on desired future and reflective letters. The letters were analyzed with inductive thematic content analysis and later

abductively interpreted with the concepts of inner and lived narratives drawn from the model of narrative circulation. The findings were condensed into four themes: 1) Love, self-respect, and self-actualization; 2) The tripod of peace of mind; 3) Peer support at significant turning points; and 4) The future. Overall, the method of danced NF facilitated a bodily connection, allowing the individual to discover personal meaning-making on depression, to envisage the possible desired future and to take steps towards it. Therefore, the corporeally and socially affirmed inner narratives contributed to the lived narratives. In conclusion, the findings suggest that embodied inner narratives derived from the desired future may contribute to lived narratives and improve mood in the short term. Although the findings must be considered preliminary, they may have practical implications for the prevention and alleviation of depression and possibly offer a multimodal and youth-friendly approach in health-care services.

**Keywords:**

*embodied narrative, late adolescence, dance-based participatory research, depression, model of narrative circulation*

## INTRODUCTION

Depression is a public health crisis (Herrman et al., 2022) that has been estimated to affect around 350 million people globally, and it is among the leading causes of disability worldwide. It is estimated that 14 % of young adolescents (10–19 years of age) experience some form of mental health conditions, but many of these remain unrecognized and untreated. The consequences of failing to address adolescent mental health conditions such as depression may extend to adulthood: impair both the individual's physical and mental health and limit one's opportunities to lead a fulfilling life (The World Health Organization [WHO], 2010; 2018; 2021). Additionally, depression may lead the individual to despair of the future and subsequently have an impact on the abilities to fully participate in society (Lakshmi et al., 2023). Therefore, the adoption of different psychosocial interventions aimed at promoting and preventing mental health and well-being among young adults is recommended (WHO, 2020).

Generally, the symptoms of depression can be divided into three main categories: emotional, cognitive, and somatic symptoms such as a depressed mood; fatigue; and the inability to experience pleasure in everyday activities. Studies conducted on adolescent depression have revealed that the individuals commonly experience a feeling of losing connection with themselves and others close to them (Dundon, 2006; Granek, 2006). There are several factors that may influence an individual's susceptibility (e.g., a family history of depression and exposure to psychosocial stress) (Thapar et al., 2012). Previously, young people's narratives on depression have revealed four specific "tracks" through which young

people viewed the origins of their depression and interpreted the challenges encountered in their lives in terms of the normative expectations for a young person: 1) growing up on a sidetrack, where the individual struggles with challenging experiences from an early age onwards and difficulties in meeting normative expectations; 2) falling off the track, where the person's expected life course was disrupted by experiences that caused or exacerbated the appearance of depression; 3) missing the track, where depression may be related to the experience of failing to fulfil normative expectations, and 4) questioning the track, where depression may intertwine with the individual's dilemma between living up to normative expectations and making one's different kinds of choices. (Issakainen & Hänninen, 2016, pp. 247–248)

So far, antidepressants, psychotherapy, and their combination are the most frequently used forms applied in the treatment for depression (Cuijpers et al., 2014; Emslie et al., 2006), but their effectiveness can be considered as far from optimal (Herrman et al., 2022). Therefore, physical exercise and body–mind therapies have been suggested as adjunct treatments for depression, and similar components have also been included in psychotherapy (Jeong et al., 2005; Liu & Nusslock, 2018; López-López et al., 2019; Sleiman et al., 2016). Interestingly, dancing, with its multimodal nature, may interlace all of the themes addressed above in a unique way and can therefore be thought of as a potentially promising adjunct treatment for depression. The possibilities to utilize dance in the treatment of depression have been actively investigated in recent years and both therapeutic methods (e.g., dance movement therapy), and different dancing genres as well as systematic literature reviews (Karkou et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2019; Meekums et al., 2015) have explored the different aspects of using dance in depression. The potential benefits of dance on depression have specifically focused on adults from three perspectives: physical activity, awareness, and experientiality. Regarding physical activity, low to moderate strenuous dance exercise has been investigated in several studies stating that dance alleviated the symptoms of depression while increasing physical functioning (Akandere & Demir, 2011; Gao et al., 2016; Hellem et al., 2020; Johar et al., 2015; Murrock & Graor, 2014; Pinniger et al., 2013). Some investigators have also focused on the experientiality and awareness of danced movements. These studies emphasized the psychosocial dimensions of dance in reducing depressive symptoms by the increased motivation and commitment to participate in and continue dancing, the enhanced awareness skills, improvements in social acceptance, finding meaningful interactions with group members, elevated self-esteem and the ability to relax, as well as knowing

oneself and helping to better process emotions. (Federman et al., 2019; Hyvönen et al., 2020; Murrock & Graor, 2016; Pinneger et al., 2012; Pohjola et al., 2019; Pylvänäinen et al., 2015). Interestingly, a few of the studies profiled the background factors related to the participants' depression: challenges and problems in close relationships, low awareness skills and fixation on fearful states, a negative body image, and difficulties in regulating and expressing emotions (Kella et al., 2021; Punkanen et al., 2014; Pylvänäinen et al., 2020). Although the literature regarding dance and depression remains heterogeneous, nevertheless the studies indicate that dance may be an important form of adjunct treatment that can complement medical therapies. (Koch et al., 2019) It has to be stated that in the context of dancing, much less research has been undertaken to examine the situation in children and adolescents with depression and what is available has tended to focus on overall health promotion (Tao et al., 2022). However, dance-based therapy has been claimed not only to improve emotional responses and evoke changes in the levels of important neurohormones in adolescents with mild depression but also to reduce somatic symptoms and lessen their emotional distress (Duberg et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2005).

The previously introduced research literature has focused on the impact of dance on depression from the perspective of physical activity, and on the importance of psychosocial and therapeutic factors in various dance interventions. Interestingly, there is a lack of understanding about the specific factors and pathways through which dance as an art form exerts its therapeutic effects (e.g., Chappell et al., 2021). Additionally, there has been little research on dance as a form of narrative – as an embodied method of storytelling – and how this can have a beneficial impact on depression. In the last decades, the concept of narrating has been emphasized as a way of both making sense of experience and of conveying this experience to others (Hänninen, 2004). Although narrative has usually been conceived as a linguistic construction, narrating is also possible via other means of expression (e.g., Abbott, 2002), such as through dance. Dancing is a profound and universal embodied language, and through dance, people are able to disseminate stories that give meaning to their experiences: these stories can express meanings that words cannot convey. Thus, stories live within dance and enable a connection to be created with others. Nonetheless, in our current Western culture dominated by language, dancing has become a marginal way of telling stories.

The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of young adults with mild-to-moderate depression of dance as a performative art form and as an embodied narrative from desired future, allowing the participants to build an

embodied narrative about their desired future. Theoretically, we will focus on dance and depression from the perspective of inner and lived narratives (Hänninen, 2004) by applying the method of narrative futuring (NF). Initially, the study design and its methods as well as the analytical process are introduced. Then, the findings are presented separately and conjoined in accordance with the related theoretical framework to allow conclusions to be drawn.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Recruitment and participants

The study was conducted in the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) in collaboration with the Department of Technical Physics (UEF), which provided use of its Human Measurement and Analysis Laboratory to obtain three-dimensional (3D) whole body kinematics. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Kuopio University Hospital (registration number 1653/2021).

The participants were recruited from several sites. An information letter and research call were distributed in the Department of Adolescent Psychiatry of Kuopio University Hospital, in the Youth Mental Services of Kuopio City Health Services, and in different educational institutes (upper secondary school, universities) and third-sector associations. The inclusion criteria of the study were as follows: a diagnosis of mild-to-moderate depression according to the International Classification of Diseases, 10th edition (according to WHO, 2010), a legal age (i.e., 18–25 years), and online accessibility via a remote access device (e.g., a mobile phone or PC). No previous dance experience was required. The exclusion criteria were as follows: current suicidality / suicidal ideation, an unstable clinical condition, pregnancy, current physician-diagnosed substance abuse, and a physical trauma/condition that would prevent full participation. The principal investigator (PI) evaluated the eligibility of participants for the study.

Altogether, seven participants from Eastern, Western, and Southern Finland were enrolled in the study; all of them participated in the dance lessons; six in the choreography lessons and motion capture (five on site, one remotely). The participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and withdrawal at any stage was possible without further explanation. After a full explanation of the study, and a possibility to ask further questions, written informed consent was obtained. In addition, a copyright transfer form was signed by the participants who participated in the motion capture sessions on site.

### **Inner narratives from the desired future**

A modified method of NF was applied to enable inner narratives. Generally, NF is a psychological approach to futuring (i.e., imagining the future through storytelling), which aims to imagine a personally meaningful future through writing letter. In doing so, as a method, NF is in conjunction with the emerging interest in the future over the past decade in psychology, sociology, and other social sciences; this could be even described as a turn towards time and its temporality (see e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Sools, 2020). For example, in psychology, it has been emphasized that humans have an innate ability to travel both backwards and forwards in time by using imagination; the latter can be characterized by the term *homo prospectus* (Seligman et al., 2013; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Furthermore, as sociologist Ann Mische (2009) suggests, human activity should be viewed as projects that are in tension between the present and a desired, yet unknown future that has many possibilities (see also Gergen, 2015; Horst, 2021).

The background of NF is in a creative writing exercise called Letters from the Future. In the NF method, the imagination is linked to narrative psychology, and it involves the construction of future scenarios via narrations. Therefore, NF is also linked to narrative identity (see e.g., Sools, 2020). Even though NF is a new branch of narrative psychology, it holds promise in influencing actual well-being and promoting mental health. For example, NF has been found in previous studies to increase well-being and resilience (e.g., Sools, 2020; Sools & Mooren, 2012; Tarragona, 2021). Specifically, it is noteworthy that in futuring, the future is used as a guide for current thoughts and actions. Therefore, the focus is on both the product of futuring (i.e., psychosocial imaginaries) and on the prospective-reflective process of imagining possible and desired personal futures. Personal futures could be about personal lives, social situations or society at large, but as seen from the perspective of individual actors or actors joining to create collective visions of the future (e.g., Sools & Mooren, 2012; Sools et al., 2017; Sools et al., 2015). Specifically, it is noteworthy that in futuring, the future is used as a guide for current thoughts and actions. Therefore, the focus is on both the product of futuring (i.e., psychosocial imaginaries) and on the prospective-reflective process of imagining possible and desired personal futures. Personal futures could be about personal lives, social situations or society at large, but as seen from the perspective of individual actors or actors joining to create collective visions of the future (e.g., Sools & Mooren, 2012; Sools et al., 2017; Sools et al., 2015).

Generally, writing a letter to one's past self appears to be a good method for people of various ages and with a wide range of mental health conditions. However, writing a compassionate letter to one's past self has shown to improve the mood more than writing to future self, especially in case of the negative feelings in a present situation. (Sugimori et al., 2024) A significant characteristic feature in the current method is the temporality of time: the future is not perceived from the present moment, but from the desired future that has already happened. Thus, the desired future is therefore seen as lived, and not as a vague possibility. In a nutshell, in the current method, the participants did not write a letter to their future selves but instead to the present selves from the lived future with an embodied, danced, affirmation. This temporal shift in the narrative may therefore enable the participant to free oneself from possible constraints of the present and to use one's imagination to orient towards a vision of the future based on realistic probabilities.

However, NF is emphasized on cognitive and linguistic capabilities. Originally, the instruction given in NF is to write a letter to an audience in the present about the depicted future and the path that led to this future. Afterwards, the letters may be shared with others in the group. In this case, the subject is both a teller and a listener. (Sools, 2020) Hence, cognitive and motor restrictions such as difficulties in writing or speaking (e.g., aphasia), fear of social situations, and difficulties in identifying and describing feelings (e.g., alexithymia, depression, anxiety) may affect the ability to narrate. As the NF method requires the readiness to verbalize one's feelings and thoughts and the capability to write about them, depressed mood might also affect narration skills. Therefore, an additional embodied narrative approach to futuring, where experience could also be expressed through non-verbally might be beneficial.

Here, the method of NF was applied through the art of dance, as an embodied inner narrative in addition to the written letter. Thus, the participants were given dance improvisation exercises to depict their desired future and these movement improvisations were later collected together as a group-based choreography with 3D motion capture. The process was carried out in three phases: 1) six remote dance lessons (once a week via Zoom, 90 min), with 2) three remote or hybrid choreography lessons (via Zoom, 120 min), and 3) one movement capture session (max. 150 min). The dance lessons were held remotely at the request of the participants due to the long distance of some participants from the study location. The main content of the lessons was also available in a separate recording, allowing the participants to decide whether to attend the lessons in real time with others or alone in their own time.

During the first four dance lessons, the participants were introduced to different elements (e.g., body awareness, weight, space, movement qualities etc.) that are generally used in contemporary dance and improvisation, focusing on body awareness, creativity and self-expression. The fifth dance class was the NF exercise; after a short warm-up and guidance on the exercise, the participants both danced (5 min) and wrote (30 min) their desired future. Thus, the inner narrative of one's desired future was approached by both dancing and writing. Afterwards, the letters and experiences of the class were shared. The sixth dance class was an introductory transition to the choreography lessons. During the last dance class, the participants summarized the most meaningful experiences of the danced NF by verbalizing, as well as dancing them into danced phrases, sequences of related movements from their desired future: finding time for oneself, importance of leaving the past behind and growing into one's roots, understanding the value of setting boundaries and the importance of pausing and opening oneself to the world, feeling proud and seizing the good in life. These became the cornerstones for the choreography, in which these six stories about the desired future were interwoven through the movement improvisation. Later, the movement sequences were rehearsed during the choreography lessons. Finally, a motion capture (Vicon Nexus v.2.14 software) was used to record and preprocess the 3D kinematics of the different dance segments and OpenSim open-source software system (v. 4.2) and Matlab software (Mathworks, Inc.) were then utilized to edit and disseminate the choreography.<sup>1</sup> The whole process was guided by a professional dance teacher (PI).

### **Data collection and analysis**

The data presented in this article consists of two written letters by each participant: a narrative futuring (NF) letter and a reflective (R) letter. The NF letters were written during the fifth dance class and the R letters were written after the 3D movement capture, from approximately a week to a month and a half later (depending on the participant). The writers positioned themselves either in the imagined desired future (NF letters) or the present (R letters): in the latter case, the dancers reflected on their thoughts and experiences during the two-month choreographic process. Both letters were originally written in Finnish and later translated into English (by the PI). The handwritten letters (seven NF and six R letters sent by those who participated in choreography) comprised approximately twelve pages of text in English (totaling 4 435 words, Times New Roman, font 12, spacing 1,5). Translated original quotations from the transcripts are presented in

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<sup>1</sup> Publicly available. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIwoY\\_Q8H00](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIwoY_Q8H00)).

this paper as in-text quotations within quotation marks and/or using indentation. Owing to limited space, only English translations of the excerpts are included. The original quotations are written without any identifying content to secure the anonymity of the participants.

During preliminary analysis of the letters, it was discovered that these narratives lacked typical narrative order, plot, and linearity. However, the coherence in the written letters was instead found in subjectively given meanings. Therefore, the letters were not analyzed according to their narrative characteristics or narrative typology (e.g., Hänninen et al., 2022) but by using inductive thematic content analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the letters were read multiple times to ascertain the characteristics for defining the themes within the letters. This stage was conducted and completed individually by two researchers (HP, VH) to validate the analysis process. Then, the idea units in the letters were coded and these codes were condensed into main four themes: 1) Love, self-respect, and self-actualization; 2) The tripod of peace of mind; 3) Peer support at significant turning points; and 4) The future. In the following section, the first two of the aforementioned themes are concerned with the NF letters; they describe the content of the inner narratives, whereas the latter two themes refer to the R letters and represent the lived narratives.

Later, these themes were interpreted by using the concept of inner and lived narratives drawn from the model of narrative circulation (MNC) (Hänninen, 2004). The MNC categorizes the relations into three modes of narratives: inner, told, and lived. The inner narrative represents the experiential mode of the narrative form and is an individual's interpretation of one's life viewed from the perspective of past events, the present situation, and an assessment of the future – the story we tell ourselves. This is relevant when the aim is to understand how people experience certain events and episodes in their lives. When the inner narrative is shared and told, it is revised during that process. The lived narrative is shaped by the interplay between the individual's life conditions and the inner narrative – referring to the actual life of the narrator and how these impacts on one's activities. (Hänninen, 2004) In this paper, we focus on the inner and lived narratives and their interactions.

## FINDINGS

### **Love, self-respect, and self-actualization**

The tone in all the NF letters was peaceful, self-loving, and even caressing. Love (which is not customarily explicitly mentioned in Finnish culture)

could be seen in the addresses of the letters, such as “Dear beloved”, and the endings, such as “With loving regards” and “I love you”. Sometimes, this tone was explicitly stated in the introductory paragraph of the letter (e.g., “First of all, I want to say I love you.”). Self-love was sometimes also seen as being a result of therapy, and sometimes, the letters reminded the present “I” of its strengths with pride, and of the importance of acknowledging this strength with every cell of the body. The letters also encouraged the recipients to love themselves and to be loyal to themselves. Sometimes, this might have involved defending themselves against the demands of others, as one of the participants wrote in the following:

*Remember what you have been taught: you don't have to be nice and easy anymore. Take your space. You deserve it.*

In three of the letters, it was told that the future “I” had started doing something in which they were able to express themselves and use their talent, something that was both enjoyable to them and useful to others. This constructed a thread between the innermost self and other people. This was also prominent in the meaning of the future occupation and work: work was perceived as interesting and rewarding, as there was an opportunity to fulfill oneself, but also to help others through the work. As one of the participants stated, it was important to be able to enjoy work and to be able to control working time, instead of being controlled by work. Work also not only provided a sufficient living and freedom from financial worries but multiplied meaningfulness in various ways in the community:

*I'm in a lucky position in that I enjoy with all my heart doing things that are also useful to others. I'm happy about how many people I have had the honor of influencing positively and, what is the best, I have been able to help them to do the same.*

To summarize, all the letters conveyed self-love, as well as self-respect and appreciation, as if walking with oneself without abandoning oneself. Knowing oneself and believing in oneself gave wings in the letters to grasp life's surprises and opportunities and to open to life. It was also significant to dare to be valuable in close relationships and to find a communicative, dialogical relationship with others, as all the letters mentioned other people as elements in the new positive future. In three letters, a couple relationship was explicitly mentioned as a part of the future situation. The companion or loved one could be the same as in the

present, and their love had deepened. One letter predicted finding a new partner and reassured that everything would be fine. Relations with the next of kin were also mentioned as having improved and as giving the future self a valuable social role as a spouse, a friend, and an aunt. Other people were sometimes mentioned in general terms as a supporting network. In addition to human relationships, a dog friend, “a fur baby” (cat), and animals in general, as well as nature, were mentioned as meaningful parts of life. The reciprocity of a good relationship was especially mentioned, for example, as having found encouraging and inspiring people around oneself, being good to other people, and mirroring good feelings back to others. According to our interpretation, the meaningfulness in these relationships essentially emphasized love. In addition to people, animals, and nature, the sensation of love even extended towards life itself, as one of the letters indicates:

*I have learned to receive undemanding love. ... Love has manifested itself in my life with such a force that I don't doubt it anymore.*

### **The tripod of peace of mind**

Enjoying the present, not ruminating on the past, and being trustful about the future seemed to constitute a tripod bringing peace of mind. Firstly, in the letters, time (of the future) was indicated explicitly, such as by referring to a particular year or the future self's chronological age, or implicitly, such as through reference to a stage of life or a significant transition in life (e.g., “I am my mother's age”, “I have completed my studies”, “I have children”). Some of the writers also described the place at the time of writing, as well as the moment of writing, its presence and the atmosphere. Thus, many of the letters grasped the present by enjoying the moment. For example, the sensual pleasure of the light and warmth of the sun on the balcony where they wrote the letter, and the joy of exercising or hugging a loved one were mentioned. All the letters conveyed being in the moment without rushing, focusing on things that matter most to oneself, and wishing oneself and others well.

Secondly, another common theme was letting go of the past. Forgiving other people and oneself, not regretting the choices made, and accepting the past adversities were ingredients of leaving the burden of the past behind: even the painful past had been accepted as part of the course of life. When past could not be forgotten altogether, a new attitude towards the past was still possible, as one letter indicated by introducing the past with the metaphor of picking different stones that

one had been collecting on the path of life as weight for a rucksack. The writer suggested that in the desired future, it was no longer necessary “to carry all the stones or take them beside oneself in bed, at least not very often,” and therefore the narrator could let them go in some sense.

Thirdly, partly due to the idea of the NF method, the letters taught the so-called present me to be trustful of the future. The letters particularly emphasized finding inner peace and the ability to relax. At the time of writing, some of the participants felt fear and anxiety, especially due to the possibility of a third world war and climate change. However, peace and balance prevailed inside, even if there was a storm in one's personal life or in the world. Thus, the writers had learned that there is nothing to fear and be stressed about, at least nothing that cannot be overcome. It was also important to accept the emotions experienced in everyday life, anxiety and depression, but to know how to live in harmony with them. One of the participants connected this finding of harmony with the opportunity to grow as a person: “even though restlessness may prevail as a part of life, there is room to grow” as a human being. In addition, thinking about the eternal aspects of nature brought calm to the restlessness about the future:

*You focus on how the birds always return and the motion of the sea doesn't stop.*

As the letters were written in the context of a group-based process for depression, it is not unexpected that writers referred to mental challenges. Interestingly, only one of them referred explicitly to “depression”, while rest of the writers used implicit words to refer to their mental problems, including anxiety, restlessness, being stressed, having a difficult time, or “feeling like shit”. In one letter, the writer had named priorly diagnosed depression as “möykky” (a lump). A complete disappearance of mental problems was not celebrated in any of the letters, although in some letters these problems were not mentioned at all. Instead, the writers indicated that they had in different ways made the problems an accepted companion in their life, as the following three short excerpts suggest:

*I have learned to live with myself and the problems.*

*I have learned to control them.*

*Möykky does not control things anymore. I breath more easily and the thing called möykky has given space in my chest and*

*thoughts, just for myself. We have learned to know each other better.*

It is important to note that most of the letters mentioned a concrete improvement in living conditions, such as making more time for oneself, making a living through a job in one's own field, completing a degree or buying a dreamed-of privately owned flat. It seems, however, that in this context, these matters were not felt to be primary factors in relation to the mental problems or more generally in relation to well-being.

### **Peer support at significant turning points**

In the reflection letters, the atmosphere in the group, the connection within the group, and peer support were especially emphasized. Interestingly, even though the process was not intended as a form of therapy or peer support, and the focus of the group's activities was solely on the choreographic process, being in the group was perceived as being a very empowering peer support. The group's internal coherence, connection, and experience of shared reality were highlighted in the reflection letters. According to the dancers, they felt safe when working in the group. Several of the dancers stated that in terms of experiencing the sense of security achieved, it was important that the guidance in the process was gentle and encouraging. With peers, the atmosphere of the group remained permissive and open, and it was perceived as safe to be oneself, as the others understood possible nervousness or fear. Working together was also a key part of experiencing peer support. In addition, listening to peers' thoughts helped participants to see and experience their own feelings and increase self-acceptance, as one of the dancers stated in the following excerpt from the letter:

*Another great experience in our project was peering and working together. I have never participated in anything before where peer support for depression was possible. It felt meaningful to be in a group whose members you knew had similar experiences in some way. I also found it wonderful to hear other people's stories and see their feelings. It also helped me to be more accepting of my own feelings.*

The group met remotely and in a hybrid format: some of the dancers reflected on the formation of peer support and perceived connection from different

perspectives. Some wished that the entire process had been carried out on-site to enhance the effect of peerage, the feeling of security, and the group spirit. One of the dancers stated that it was also lonely to share only one's own space: preferably this participant would have liked to feel the energies of others. For example, the participant compared the experience of the so-called balloon exercise to dancing remotely alone: specifically, the participant emphasized the importance of feeling the energies of others. For some others, the remote implementation helped them to truly focus on themselves, because, for instance, the tendency to compare themselves with others decreased. The weekly dance lessons offered the participants an opportunity to pause and sense their own body. For a mind that is constantly in motion, as one of the dancers described in the letter, the usual difficulty of calming down for a moment eased during the lessons, as they reminded only to exist here and now. The dance lessons were praised for their gentleness, and they were perceived to brighten up the day and eventually also to calm anxiety. According to one participant, directing concrete movements that were perceived as physically meaningful and positive directed the mind in the direction of pleasure as well. Most importantly, feelings of success were also felt during the dance lessons. In addition, an established moment for ones' own dance improvisation during the dance lessons, the so-called freestyle portion, received praise from the participants.

In the reflection letters, two phases of the process were especially emphasized: the exercise of NF during the dance class (i.e., the fifth dance lesson) and movement capture. During both of these, peer support was a bearing and supporting element, as the NF exercise, dancing and writing, were felt strongly in the group. Writing the letter was perceived as a purifying experience. The authors described it as an unforgettable, beautiful, and very special moment. This magic was related to both the experience of being seen (i.e., by oneself and others) and the openness and acceptance of the group participants at the time of sharing the letters. In the letter, one of the dancers emphasized a key realization at the time of writing: the text came naturally when finally putting oneself in a position where to write about current feelings instead of writing from the perspective of what oneself wanted. Another participant described the experience as follows:

*And it feels like with the fourth dance lesson and writing the letter, something fell into place, both physically and mentally. In personal life, too. Maybe the fact that you painted good things and acceptance of things for the future, or the way you heard your own thoughts and experiences from the mouths of others, or the fact that after writing you immediately started*

*moving. I don't know what it was, but I felt really good after that dance lesson.*

For most of the participants, the motion capture was the most exciting and perhaps the most demanding part of the artistic process. Simply creating the movement composition itself was exciting: questions arose, such as do I know how, am I able to, and am I capable of this. "Inhabiting" the movement, dancing to the music and transferring one's own movement composition to the space to be motion captured took time and was challenging in a positive way. The excitement, encouragement of others, and the significance of each dancer to the whole group were highlighted as a path to tackle the aforementioned uncertainties:

*At first it was hard to be satisfied. You had to taste the movement and when the music was included, the dance started to feel more and more like your own. Among the other participants, there was an absolutely great team spirit of fun, and just how wonderfully everyone's own piece fitted into the music, personalities and, moreover, the whole choreography.*

*The excitement grew when I saw the beautiful movement qualities of others and the doubt about my own ability started to rear its head again. However, when at the end I received the same applause and encouragement as the others, the feeling faded. While walking away, the feeling was wistful. Although I only met the others face to face once, they had all become important "contacts" for me.*

According to the participants, it was particularly rewarding to succeed, surpass oneself, and be encouraged to dance alone in front of others, but at the same time be part of the whole, part of the common narrative. The participants also stated that it was significant to see one's own dance from the outside, as a stick figure modelling the moves, and to notice the beauty of one's own movement, dynamics, and the connection between emotions and movement. One of them underlined this very special moment, framing it as a question: "Was it really me?" Motion capture ended the journey of the group, and many of the dancers described the longing they experienced when the group broke up, as the following example illustrates:

*After the motion capture, I was in a strangely dreamy state. What we created together is something beautiful and reflects well everything that is difficult to tell, and the experiences and sensations in the body that can be challenging to put into words.*

## **The future**

Thoughts were also raised about the future, and some of the dancers thought about possibly participating in peer support groups and wanting to continue dancing, or at least to listen to their bodies more. Interestingly, some of the dancers were already heading towards their desired future while writing the reflection letter. For example, one of the participants had started to apply and use the NF technique more widely in daily life and used the technique, for example, when preparing for excitable situations and imaging to receive a positive outcome from the future situation. The participant felt that participating in the research had brought new insights and experiences, and that many of the aspects described in the NF letter had already started moving towards the desired future: "I think it's because since I started to see certain things as possible for myself and also knew how to verbalize them, I have been able to start walking towards them." Moreover, many of the dancers understood the root causes of their depression, such as negative experiences in the past, comparing themselves with others, low self-esteem, or, as in the following example, a lack of self-fulfillment. By understanding the background to one's depression, it was also possible to change one's actions and agency in everyday life, as the following quote from the data suggests:

*My depression has been linked a lot to the fact that I feel that my life situation demands too much from me and, on the other hand, also gives me too little of the things I miss. There has been too little space for me in everyday life. Even so, I have given up on some things that are important to me, because I have not believed that there is room for them in my everyday life. I now think that yes, there must be, if without them I experience such dissatisfaction. I have now started ... // ... I feel that I can fulfill myself at least somehow, despite this life situation.*

Although the end of the dance research and the whole choreographic process brought feelings of longing, it also brought gratitude: paradoxically, even for the fact that depression finally brought the group together and allowed all the

members of the group to interact. One of the dancers summed up a wish that no one would have to carry the weight that depression and heavy experiences bring into one's life. However, the participant felt that the experience in this process was so valuable, and was grateful that such a feeling of togetherness, of shared joys and insights, as well as great physicality, movement, creativity, and self-expression can arise within a group suffering from depression. From this, changing and changes are possible:

*Internal changes are reflected in external reality. In the past, my challenge has been that even though my environment has started to support me and my dreams, I still haven't been able to trust it and seize opportunities easily, because my past experiences have colored my present experiences more than my future dreams. There has been a change here and I feel that participating in the research has strengthened my ability to see and experience the desired future as a real possibility in my life. And not just as a possibility, but as an anchor point that also defines the present.*

## DISCUSSION

In the current study, we investigated a dance art-based participatory research aiming to explore the experiences of young women with mild-to-moderate depression of dance as an embodied inner and lived narrative from desired future. Generally, storytelling is a bodily communicative event and activity that involves other – embodied – persons and the social and cultural situation. Hence, storytelling and listening to stories is something that is inherently social. Furthermore, an embodied approach places a stronger emphasis on the performance of storytelling rather than on the text. (Hydén, 2013) Through the arts, this performative aspect may enable the narrative not only to be told, but also to be witnessed as an inner narrative for others as well as for the individual him/herself. At best, this might lead to reflective storytelling that steers the person to undertake everyday actions differently and possibly leading to positive changes in life. This was evident in the data and in the following paragraphs in which we will discuss and interpret the findings in accordance with the inner and the lived narratives and their interaction (Hänninen, 2004).

Here, the inner narratives were enabled with both dancing and writing. In other words, the current research complemented NF by producing embodied narratives: in conjunction with the written letters, attention was also

focused on non-textual aspects such as corporeality, pre-reflective knowing (cf., Damasio, 1999). Thus, we evaluated the concept of subjective body awareness that refers to a person's perception of their own body and its experience, which is influenced by beliefs, feelings, attitudes, assessments, and memories (Mehling et al., 2009). In the data, this was referred to as finding one's own meaningfulness in the movements performed. Clinically, this may be relevant in the treatment of depression as suggested by the current literature on neuroscience (Jola, 2013). For example, it has been claimed that body awareness enhances proprioception and increases interoceptive sensitization. While proprioception refers to the sense of our body's positions, movements, and muscle tension, interoception can be used to sense the functioning of the body's organs for example, through heartbeats, breathing, and emotions. The insula, an anatomical structure considered to be the interoceptive center of the brain, is critical for evaluating how the body will respond to potential stimuli (Paulus & Stein, 2006). In particular, dysfunctions in interoception have previously been suggested to be related to both anxiety and depression (Paulus & Stein, 2010), as well as alexithymia (Brewer et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Damasio, the core self is the summation of extero- and interoceptive stimuli that form the experience of the self as an integrated entity (Damasio, 1999; 2003). Therefore, reflecting upon oneself relates to an individual's self-concept and plays a crucial role in the maintenance of one's emotional and physical equilibrium. An awareness of the internal state modulates an individual's approach and distancing behavior, which, in turn, help in maintaining and regaining homeostasis (i.e., regulation of the internal body state) (Paulus & Stein, 2010). Theoretically, this can be further explained through the active inference theory of allostasis and interoception in depression (Barrett et al., 2016).

Regarding the lived narratives, the artistic process suggested to have positive implications for the significance of the desired future: the embodied narratives appear to have enhanced the feelings of agency and self-efficacy among the participants. Both agency and self-efficacy play crucial roles in psychological adjustment, alleviating psychological problems, improving physical health, and are considered to be useful in professionally and self-guided strategies aimed at evoking behavioral changes (Maddux & Kleinman, 2021). As the reflection letters indicated, it was important to the participants that they could envision their desired future, and to find hope and meaningfulness in their current lives. This might also have directed their everyday decisions, as some of the participants already indicated that they intended to make changes or had made changes to their everyday actions and to implement the method of NF in their lives: this

emphasizes the meaning of one's agency. Interestingly, the concept of agency also bridges the personal, relational, and sociocultural levels. These can be limited in depression for several reasons, especially in young adults, who might encounter difficulties in meeting society's expectations and normality (cf., De Mol et al., 2018; Issakainen & Hänninen, 2016).

The previously described young people's narratives on the origins of their depression (Issakainen & Hänninen, 2016, pp. 247–248) did not appear in the current study: these story types were referred to indirectly as the focus was on how the choreographic process was reflected in the individual's desired future. Here, we have demonstrated an alternative narrative: the possibility of how an individual can live in harmony with depression and accept it as a part of the life story. Additionally, the narratives appeared to have facilitated a meaningful way for the young women to delve into their feeling about the depression: seeking support, succeeding in forming a connection and handling distress (cf., Issakainen, 2015). Moreover, the participants seemed to feel safe to explore challenging and exposing themselves in an embodied way by dancing, as well as witnessing these actions in others. This may refer to the concept of kinesthetic intersubjectivity (Foster, 2011), which was present in the process as a shared experience revealed in both non-verbal and verbal ways. In other words, the participants' experiences of watching and being seen, or witnessed, could be defined as an example of a communicative body that is in a relationship with others and with oneself at the same time, consisting of these two (Frank, 1991, p. 54). Hence, courage in exposing oneself to others, without a shield or role, and self-acceptance were essential. Interestingly, this could be also seen in the title that the participants themselves chose for the choreography, which perhaps sums up their most important insight gained during the process. The title, "Minuina" ("As Myself" or "As Ourselves"), can be seen as a word play in the Finnish language, referring at the same time to singular and plural forms. Most importantly, "Minuina" refers to both self-discovery and self-acceptance: it is not to become me, but to be me already. The title also refers to community; to the fact that one was allowed to be oneself within the group. In this case, the process emphasized the experience of being seen by oneself and by others, which resonates with the theories of kinesthetic intersubjectivity and communicative body, as they are grounded in dialogical relations (cf., Buber, 2004).

It is also noteworthy that many of the participants wrote in their R letters that they had challenged themselves by merely taking part in something new and exciting, and how surprised they were that they had excelled in the dance. This perhaps made it possible to experience a dialogical relationship, equality, and

meaningful peer support, topics which were often referred to in the data. In other words, it was an essential aspect of the choreographic process that the choreography was created within the group from the perspective of the subject body (i.e., as the subject of the action itself, also referred to as body subjectivity; cf., Parviainen, 1998; Purser, 2011), while being guided by the choreographer (cf., Butterworth, 2009) as a co-creator. The artistic process was characterized by flexible joint decision-making, while offering opportunities to influence one's own actions. For example, the forms of participation (remote or in-person participation, group participation, or the option of using recordings) could be selected by each participant, the application of the NF method was directed according to the wishes of each participant (e.g., concrete images in dance improvisation and instructions in the exercises), and self-derived (i.e., given by oneself) decision making was made available during the dance lessons (i.e., within all the exercises and also as a separate "freestyle" improvisation exercise). The fact that the guidance required nothing more than what everyone was able to do allowed the participants to perform their own movements, bringing a sense of security and providing a possibility to express oneself freely. Additionally, focusing on positive thoughts such as wishing for good and the themes of finding love and peace possibly also reduced rumination (i.e., repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms) (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). In other words, it seemed that the presence of depression also challenged the participants to reflect on their own lives and motivated them to carry out the necessary changes. As a summary, the R letters revealed some observable changes and personally relevant issues: e.g., personal growth, setting boundaries, adopting a new attitude towards depression, knowing one's personal needs, and believing in one's abilities. Thus, it might be said that the process constituted a form of therapeutic narrative (cf. Ludwig, 1999), where the narrative assisted in making sense of one's experiences. In this way, the multimodal method of NF embedded in this process may partly and unintentionally resemble a form of narrative psychotherapy (cf. Angus & Macleod, 2004; Macleod, 1997).

Altogether, our findings are in accordance with the suggestion that instead of merely focusing on personal characteristics and/or stressful life events, depression needs to be understood within a framework that considers both the material and discursive conditions which shape the lived experiences of depression (Stoppard, 2000, p. 208): this was apparent in both the inner and lived narratives in the study. The findings especially emphasize how the individuals were able to support and develop a relationship with their one body, such as via increased body awareness, as well as enabling the participants to build appropriate

social relationships. These are in line with several recognized psychosocial elements such as the creation of meaningful interactions within a group and consequently social acceptance, increased self-esteem, as well as knowing oneself and processing emotions (Murrock & Graor, 2016; Pohjola et al., 2019). Furthermore, the psychosocial components emerging from the data are in line with factors which have been identified in successful recovery from depression: 1) hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy; 2) working on oneself; and 3) social factors available for the re-constructing of self and a functional lifestyle (Kok et al., 2018). Additionally, our findings are in accordance with the significance of perceived social support and group membership in helping an individual to recover from depression (Richardson & Barkham, 2020).

As far as we are aware, the current study is one of the first to describe the experiences of young adults with mild-to-moderate depression in the context of performative dance associated with a specified and embodied narrative psychological method, NF. Thus, some limitations should be noted. As the seven narratives only offer a narrow window into the experiences of the participants, the findings should be generalized with caution. Research bias is also possible: the participants may have had previous positive experiences of dancing and elevated mood, or had positive expectations, or were trying to fulfill the expectations of the researchers (also known as the expectancy effect, or “Rosenthal effect”, introduced by Rosenthal in 1966). The subjective inner narratives were possibly confronted, constructed and enabled. To lessen the impact of the latter, the participants were given a collaborative and active role with respect on how to modify the process according to their experiences and wishes. In addition to the multimodal nature of the process, this is also one of the study’s main strengths. The process, built on the terms of its creators, is also characterized as a continuous interpretation process, which can enable the experiencer to have a true autotelic experience (cf., Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2021). The participants implicitly referred to this in the data as an experience of ease, fluidity, and flow. The feelings of belonging mentioned in the data can also be seen as verifying these properties: in the encounters within the group, the participants described at a rather deep level, where the subjective inner narratives were possibly confronted, constructed and enabled.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that the awareness of embodied inner narratives and their possibilities derived from the desired future may contribute to lived narratives and improved mood, at least in the short term. Although the findings must be considered as preliminary, they may have practical implications for the prevention and alleviation of depression and possibly represent

a multimodal, meaningful, and youth-friendly low threshold form of treatment to be provided by the health-care services.

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