

**UMass Amherst Grant Announcement:**

“Assistant Professor of Dance Science McCullough to direct clinical trial funded by the National Endowment for the Arts”

Study title

“Effects of a group-based dance/movement program in survivors of domestic violence”

Please describe your research— What are you trying to discover? How does it relate to the fund’s intention?

The purpose of this two-year clinical trial is to determine the effects of group-based dance/movement on physical and mental health in survivors of domestic/intimate partner violence. Specifically, the study seeks to confirm a dose-response relationship between exposures to group-based dance/movement, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and changes in heart rate variability in women who are survivors of domestic/intimate partner violence.

The \$190,000 trial is funded, in part, by a \$95,000 Research: Art Works award from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), with additional support from the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund. The NEA Research: Art Works grant program aims to address the current dearth of available studies that rigorously evaluate the impact of the arts on various aspects of health, development, and society. The Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund is a New York City-based foundation that strives to improve access and opportunity for all New Yorkers. The grant is provided through their Arts in Health initiative, which supports organizations using the arts to address health issues affecting New Yorkers, with particular attention to increasing access to care and addressing disparities in health outcomes.

Our mixed methods randomized controlled trial directly addresses the need for further research on the effects of dance, in particular, on PTSD symptoms and heart rate variability in survivors of domestic/intimate partner violence. In addition to collecting the aforementioned mental and physical health data, we will also conduct focus group and individual interviews with intervention group participants. These qualitative data will help us to better understand participants’ experiences of the group-based dance/movement program and their reflections on how it impacts their daily living.

Who is involved in the project?

University of Massachusetts Amherst Assistant Professor of Dance Science, Dr. Aston K. McCullough, serves as Principal Investigator for the trial. McCullough is joined by project Co-Investigators Dr. Allison Ross, Deputy Clinical Director at Sanctuary for Families; Kara Gilmour, Senior Director of Community Action and Strategic Initiatives; and Yasemin Ozumerzifon, Director of Community Action at Gibney in New York City.

Dr. Ross (Sanctuary for Families) brings expertise in trauma-informed care, mental health, and survivorship among women who have experienced domestic/intimate partner

violence. Gilmour and Ozumerzifon (Gibney) will provide oversight of Gibney's group-based dance/movement intervention throughout the study.

Sanctuary for Families is New York's leading service provider and advocate for survivors of domestic violence and other forms of gender-based abuse. Offering a wide array of clinical, legal, shelter, and economic empowerment services, Sanctuary's trauma-informed holistic approach is instrumental to successfully promoting healing. Gibney's Community Action model was designed in collaboration with artists, clinical experts and survivors. Within the Community Action model, professional dancers share tools of choice, self-expression, collaboration and self-care with survivors of intimate partner violence through dance/movement workshops.

"Movement, physical awareness and creativity can play a remarkable role in trauma-informed interventions, as one participant shared after participating in the program, 'I feel like I'm coming alive again'."

- *Yasemin Ozumerzifon, Gibney*

"In collaboration with Gibney, Sanctuary for Families continues to provide survivors with the opportunity to address their trauma symptoms through dance and movement. This creative physical and emotional outlet can have a profound and lasting effect on participants. As one survivor shared, 'For a long time I never thought about my body, it was just numb from the abuse, but this has helped me become connected to my body again.' As a staff member, it's been inspiring to see the cathartic effect dance has had on our clients. We look forward to participating in this research project with UMass Amherst and delving more deeply into the impact of dance on the physical and mental health of domestic violence survivors with Gibney."

- *Dr. Allison Ross, Sanctuary for Families*

"I believe that the interdisciplinary team that we've developed has been key to this project's success to date. Each person brings a unique specialization or expertise to the study, with domain knowledge extending across the fields of kinesiology, statistics, dance, and mental health. I'm grateful to be working with such a talented group of people who are committed to understanding the benefits of dance in the lives of survivors."

- *Dr. Aston K. McCullough, University of Massachusetts Amherst*

### What has your research experience been thus far?

Early results from a feasibility study led by McCullough showed that an 8-session exposure to Gibney's group-based dance/movement intervention significantly reduced PTSD symptoms associated with "Re-experiencing" in survivors of domestic/intimate partner violence when compared to a usual care control group. Women who danced also reported that the program was enjoyable and that they were able to use skills acquired during the intervention in their daily lives when asked about their experiences of the program during individual interviews. These mixed methods findings appear promising. Given early results, the two-year trial will double the number of group-based

dance/movement exposures within the intervention group in order to better understand the relationship between dance and wellness in survivors.

“Twenty years ago, we dreamt up an idea,” says CEO, Artistic Director and Founder, Gina Gibney. “How could dancers engage with the issue of intimate partner violence? What would partnership look like between artists and clinical professionals? There was no model in place, no peer arts organization doing this, so we took a leap of faith. Over the years, Community Action has grown to support artists around the world who are integrating art and social action, to work with youth to prevent violence and promote healthy relationships, and to present performances by survivors sharing their often-silenced stories. I am thrilled to build on the program's incredible history and continue to demonstrate the power of this work through the support of this NEA Research: Art Works grant.”

“We are excited to be working with Sanctuary for Families, our long-time partner organization, alongside Dr. McCullough and UMass Amherst to explore the impact of dance and movement on the physical and mental health of survivors. Gibney has been providing 365 movement workshops annually in domestic violence shelters throughout New York City for over two decades, and yet the effects of the work have never been assessed scientifically. This research will provide important and foundational data as well as shine a light on the power of creativity, choice, voice, and collaboration. We are honored to be a part of this multi-disciplinary team.”

- *Kara Gilmour, Gibney*