This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in International Journal for Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy on 14th of October 2026, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2026.2744999

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Embodiment of experience-near attunement to a teen's inner world: Out of the frozen self

Abstract: In this article, the author presents the case study of Chloe, a 12-year-old girl who sought dance movement psychotherapy (DMP) for anxiety, insomnia, digestive issues, and loneliness and feelings of not belonging. Through our work together, we strengthened her sense of self and supported her to find ways for positive social connections. The author incorporated the self-psychological framework of Heinz Kohut into the DMP to understand Chloe's psycho-emotional needs and how best to meet them. The self-psychological concepts that enhanced the author's attunement include 'being experience-near', nuclear self and twinship selfobject function. These will be discussed in the article.

Keywords: self-psychology, loneliness, adolescence, selfobject, experience-near, dance movement psychotherapy

Introduction

Positive relationships are fundamental to well-being (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). Feelings of not belonging or loneliness are dreadful and painful. Loneliness is a sense of isolation (Murano, 2003/2025; Turner et al., 2024) which can deeply impact mental and physical health particularly in adolescence, (Matthews et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2024). This need for others is echoed in Kohut's self-psychology which offers a framework for understanding our basic human needs of being seen, understood, and feeling a sense of belonging. Attuned responsiveness to these needs supports the development of the sense of self.

The sense of self develops through verbal and most importantly nonverbal interactions with trusted, consistent others. DMP is a dance and movement-based psychotherapy where relationships between client and therapist are engendered through nonverbal bodily interactions, movements and play. The Dance Movement Psychotherapist moves with the client, mirroring and attuning to the clients' nonverbal dynamic affective expressions. Empathic mirroring, or kinesthetic empathy (Fischman, 2009) addresses the clients' relational needs of being seen and understood as well as creating a sense of belonging and likeness. Fischman (2009, p.42) explains that 'kinesthetic empathy facilitates the expressiveness of the self and restores the damaged self in a nonverbal way'. Through kinesthetic empathy, the client can begin to rediscover or regain their nuclear self, who they authentically are. The nuclear self becomes stronger as it is nourished through nonverbal engagement with the therapist (Lauffenburger, 2016). Dancing and moving together foster a sense of belonging with another. The focus on empathy and the development of self aligns DMP with Kohut's self-psychology framework.

This paper focusses on an adolescent's journey to find a sense of self assisted by the therapist's experience-near approach, where a twinship selfobject experience was offered to meet the adolescent's needs. The sense of loneliness was uncovered in the therapeutic relationship by staying experience-near with the adolescent. As the adolescent led the dance and play, her desires for belonging emerged. Together we co-created a selfobject experience, increasing her capacity to be an authentic self.

To protect confidentiality, informed consent was obtained from the client and her guardians, and a pseudonym is used throughout this article.

Adolescence

Adolescence is divided into three stages: early adolescence (10-14), middle adolescence (15-16), and later adolescence (17-21) (Spano, 2004). In early adolescence, belonging and friendships are the most important needs. To belong to a group and prevent feelings of anxiety (Barrett, 1996), the early adolescent can make choices that may not serve their deeper sense of self. Adolescence is a critical time for forming identity and autonomy, and increasing social connections (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). For most children, family support and peer relationships provide positive interactions and assist in identity development during adolescence (Branje et al., 2021; Branje, 2022). I met Chloe when she was twelve years old and sensed that early adolescent issues were emerging.

Selfobject experiences, selfobject functions, and the development of a sense of self

How do human beings develop a sense of self? From infancy, the self emerges within relationships with others and is shaped through ongoing interpersonal experience (Stern, 1985). Within self-psychology, a selfobject experience refers to the experience of being in relationship with another in a way that supports the cohesion, continuity, and vitality of the self (Strozier et al., 2022). Selfobject experiences are also essential for the integration and regulation of affect (Socarides & Stolorow, 1984).

The earliest and most fundamental selfobject relationship is with the primary caregiver, who provides selfobject functions through physical, emotional, and nonverbal attunement or empathic responsiveness to the infant's affective states and needs (Banai et al., 2005; Ornstein, 2015). For example, when an infant cries due to hunger or discomfort, the caregiver's timely and empathic response provides regulatory support that the infant cannot yet provide for themselves. Similarly, when the infant expresses excitement or joy, the caregiver's attuned mirroring affirms the infant's subjective experience. Ideally, caregiver and infant engage in a reciprocal, interactive process in which the infant's expressions of need and affect are met with empathic understanding (Lee & Martin, 1991; Roser & Rohde, 2019; Rustin, 1997; Stern, 1985). When the caregiver's response

is experienced as empathic, the infant has a selfobject experience and feels seen, understood, and emotionally held.

Kohut identified three major selfobject functions which emerge within early relational contexts: mirroring, idealising, and twinship (Doctors, 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2019). Through mirroring, the caregiver recognises and affirms the infant's emotional experience, supporting the development of self-esteem and vitality. Through idealising, the child experiences the caregiver as a calming and reliable presence with whom the child can psychologically merge, fostering a sense of safety and emotional stability. Twinship provides the experience of essential likeness and belonging, supporting the development of connectedness and continuity of self.

Importantly, Kohut emphasised that healthy development does not require perfect empathic attunement. Rather, optimal frustration (MacIsaac, 1996) - inevitable empathic failures that are repaired within a stable and responsive relationship - allows for the gradual internalisation of selfobject functions. Over time, these internalised functions contribute to the consolidation of a cohesive sense of self, reflected in self-esteem, a sense of agency, and the vitality with which individuals engage in their lives (Lee & Martin, 1991). In contrast, chronic failures in selfobject responsiveness may lead to enduring vulnerabilities in self-cohesion and affect regulation (Zimmermann et al., 2019), which frequently emerge in clinical settings.

Selfobject experiences are necessary throughout our lifespan, albeit in varying age-appropriate forms and degrees. The need for belonging termed twinship in self-psychology becomes amplified in early adolescence. This selfobject function is best met in an experience of essential likeness with an Other (Doctors, 2020; Kottler, 2015).

Lee & Martin (1991) postulate that the Self can be viewed from the perspective of having a nuclear self and a peripheral self. The peripheral self develops through the influence of our culture, social norms, religious beliefs, family expectations, and the demands of the external world, which must be met. The nuclear self is the essence of who we are, our ambitions, ideas, skills, and talents. A nuclear self exists from conception but can be hidden or distorted by the need for safety and survival in the external world. In a therapeutic setting, we often initially encounter the peripheral self of the client. The goal of our therapeutic work is to assist our clients in developing, regaining, or reclaiming the nuclear self. Thus, how do we, DMPs, work to develop the client's nuclear sense of self?

Experience-Near

As therapists, we try to understand clients' challenges from their point of view and experience. The therapist begins by trying to empathetically attune to the client's experience as a whole verbally and nonverbally. In self-psychology, the process of trying to understand the client's subjectivity 'from inside their skin' is called being 'experience-near' by Kohut (1982, p.396, as cited in Lauffenburger, 2016). This is significantly different from labelling or diagnosing a client based on a theory or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders category.

An 'experience-near' approach involves the application of vicarious introspections, often called empathy (Lee et al., 2009). Empathy, however, is not an intuition that the therapist holds, but getting to know the client's inner world or internal subjectivity with a trial-and-error approach (Lee & Martin, 1991). The clients' subjective data is 'collected [by the therapist] via self-introspective examination and reflected back to the client' (Lauffenburger, 2016, p. 2) to co-create a personalised narrative. The therapist aims to 'stay as close to our client's experience as possible' (Lauffenburger, 2016, p.2-3) as it allows clients to better understand their feelings, thus be able to explore them. When the client experiences attuned, experience-near responsiveness, the client's arousal reduces, they come back to their body, and they begin to feel less in pieces or more cohesive. Over time, cohesiveness allows the client to become more capable, able to function with resilience, to increase their self-confidence and to find hope. The client begins to shift from

being highly distressed, tense, terrified or numb, become self-regulated and self-organised, feel hopeful, and emotionally available. In this way, the client begins to own or regain a sense of self. The experience-near approach can be verbal, nonverbal and/or bodily.

Dance Movement Psychotherapists apply an experience-near approach in a primarily embodied manner. We mirror clients' movements, use dance and play to enhance emotional resonance and connections, and offer attuned, nonverbal responsiveness (McGarry, & Russo, 2011). DMPs use their internal gaze, or interoceptive felt sense, to attune to clients' embodied experiences and emotional states. An experience-near approach needs to occur in an intersubjective space. Intersubjectivity, emphasised by Stolorow et al.,(1994), must be relationally, mutually and reciprocally shaped in a child-caregiver relationship where the child feels seen and heard. However, when attunement is absent or not reciprocally received, the intersubjective space can become a site of profound isolation and unmet needs, rather than mutuality and belonging.

Berrol (2006, p. 308) defines intersubjectivity in DMP as the 'embodiment of empathic processing between self and other when witnessing an action or an expression of feeling of another'. In the early stages of a therapeutic relationship, clients present their unconscious desire, their deeper self-need for relationship, which may emerge as a distancing from or a merger with the therapist. Within this initial dance of relationship, the therapist begins the process of understanding this 'bodily expression' in an experience-near manner. The therapist senses into the client's need for comfort, avoidance, or even numbness within the intersubjective space. In a DMP space, the therapist aims to work in an experience-near manner with the nonverbal material displayed by the client.

Case Study

Chloe suffered from insomnia, anxiety, and gut issues that impacted her school and home life tremendously. With older siblings, Chloe often felt left alone while playing, as well as expected to grow up as fast as she could. Chloe described her father as busy, often absent, and grumpy. Her mother experienced burnout and a serious health condition that led her to stop working a year ago. I imagined that the mother was finding it difficult to meet Chloe's emotional needs, as she herself was not in good health.

Chloe struggled to go to school due to her poor physical and mental health. Her parents summarised Chloe's state simply: "her body is not her friend." A key issue was Chloe's difficult relationship with food. Due to Chloe's digestive conditions, she was unable to eat any food from outside the family home. Water made her feel sick, and she struggled to drink it. Although her weight was in the 10th percentile of the average for her age, she wasn't diagnosed with an eating disorder. She found it hard to sleep, was groggy in the morning, and significantly distressed about getting ready for school. Chloe struggled to find friends who understood her and accepted her as she was. Chloe would send her parents a text from school saying: "I hate school" hoping she could leave. She often missed up to three days per week.

Parachute- Hide and Seek

In our first session, I found myself curious when she commented, "When you are older, you have to think about others. But when you are small, it is like carefree." When I opened my suitcases of props, the parachute caught her eye. She grabbed it and tossed it into the air where it began to hover and fly. During our 14-month work, Chloe used the parachute in every session. One of us would catch the parachute, while the other slid in under the fabric. Gradually, this repeated movement created a shared nonverbal rhythm between us. We negotiated with our eyes and began a game of hide-and-seek in the church hall, which had few hiding places, silently communicating our roles as we played. The song from the movie Frozen "When I am Older" often played in the background. It is sung by the imaginary snowman Olaf who was created as a playmate by Elsa for her younger sister Anna. I noticed how the song, the parachute, and the hide-and-seek game

together created a playful world in which Chloe could be small or big, hidden, searched for, and found. At the same time, I was reminded of how familiar the feeling of being alone had been in my own childhood, and of how deeply I had longed for companionship.

Considering her age, I was initially puzzled by her repeated need to play hide-and-seek, but I remained attentive to her needs. Chloe moved between hiding under the parachute and emerging to be found, often using quick and direct movement as she slipped beneath the fabric, followed by a more sustained pause as she waited. When she was found, I was met with her slightly long gaze and she often said, "This is satisfying." Feeling curious about the word satisfying, I entered her experience of feeling 'satisfied'. I wondered if the anticipation of and the delight in being found offered Chloe a satisfying experience of connection. I came to understand the hide-and-seek game not simply as a regressive enactment, but as one possible embodied expression of a deeply unmet relational need. I trusted Chloe's nonverbal emotional engagement with me was an expression of her desire to be seen fully. The selfobject function that I offered was to keep seeing her, following her pace, and being with her as she was until she could begin to sense herself. I sensed Chloe's loneliness existed not only in her play but extended to many parts of her life: her eating circumstances, friendships, sleep, and health issues.

Pas De Deux

After 6 months, the Frozen songs became foreground, and the hide-and-seek gradually transformed to a dance. She would jump on the children's long table and throw her hair clip from her hair with strong and direct effort (Hackney, 2003). Chloe reached her arms out to me, and I could feel Chloe's deep desire to be close to me. Developmentally, her movement shifted from a push away to reach toward (Frank & La Barre, 2010) and was often directional, or spoke-like (Hackney, 2003). These qualities suggested a growing desire to reach out not only to me but perhaps to the larger world. The church hall no longer felt so large as the space between us became more intimate. Chloe's confidence in dance grew visibly during our sessions; she would open her arms wide, roll, twirl, and leap. In our intersubjectively created space, I offered the selfobject function of consistency, trustworthiness, and encouragement, allowing ALL movements to become possible.

Previously Chloe had become teary when she saw others at dancing classes and she couldn't join them. I imagined our dancing together offered the reconnection to herself and a reclamation of her love of dance. I saw a new Chloe in this moment. She was a confident and expressive teen. Often, we were hand in hand in synchronised energy, and once she asked me to lift her. Rather than two solos, our dance became a pas de deux, where we were deeply connected bodily and emotionally. Internally, satisfaction of being with another emerged. Chloe took me beyond her kinesphere, to her dynamosphere, or 'the inner landscapes of movement moods' (MoveScape Centre, 2014). As I mirrored Chloe's desire for proximity, I allowed myself to be in her dynamosphere. I was deeply emotionally connected with her.

As Chloe and I moved in shared rhythm and proximity, I sensed a change in the quality of my presence for her. Initially, I had felt the need to remain steady, accepting, and available, tolerating whatever distance she needed from me and wherever she needed to be in the space. This seemed to offer Chloe a sense of safety and consistency, providing an idealisable selfobject function. Later, however, our movement felt more synchronised and companionable, as though we were dancing as 'sisters', alike in energy and play. From Kohut's self-psychological framework, I came to understand this as a shift toward a twinship selfobject experience. This understanding emerged through Chloe's willingness to be close, her bodily expressiveness, confidence, and growing pleasure in shared movement. Around this time, her mother reported that Chloe had attended school for five days, and that the family had begun walking together after dinner to support her digestion and sleep. These changes suggested that the embodied experience of being met, accompanied, and alike may have supported Chloe's emerging sense of self beyond the therapy room.

Bue Princess

After her need to play the hide-and-seek dominated less of our sessions, Chloe constructed a den-like-space called *'Enclosure de Chloe'* and stayed there. Each time she entered it, she would begin to babble. She called herself a species and asked me to send her food. She turned down all the non-veggie food I sent and said "I am a vegetarian! No meat! More food!" While I kept sending the food she wouldn't accept, she asked me to stay away from her and inhibited herself in the closed space. After many months, she finally emerged and said, "I used to be able to put my whole body in, but now I can't because I grew! I am a human!". The Enclosure de Chloe became bigger, more expansive, and comfy for sleeping.

Meanwhile as part of her 'growing' her play became increasingly primitive and nonverbal. She created a character called 'Bue Princess' who spoke the Bue language. "Bood, bood……Get me bood (food)." I was confused by our interactions as she began 'trapping me', where I felt captured in a 'prison-like' corner. While Chloe was hissing at me, attempting to kick and punch me with direct and sudden efforts (Hackney, 2003), I experienced anger-like emotions in this moment. I felt the interaction was too intimate and challenging, wanting to get out of the prison, although I wasn't allowed by Chloe. In the next session, she released me from the prison and gestured to 'provoke me' to 'fight back' against her. I initially felt confused with her gesture and couldn't figure out how to respond to it. However, I sensed her anger, firmness and directness about her needs emerging. I wondered about 'who' she needed to trap and force to endure her anger and how much she needed that anger to be reflected back and accepted.

Every week, she expanded her enclosure saying "Booger! Booger (bigger)!" In her play, she depicted herself as the most powerful and strongest creature in the world. As I did not understand her 'language', the princess created a 'translation machine' which articulated her wishes. "Bue is smarter than English-speaking people. Your job is to play with the Bue Princess." "How old are you?" "She has not reached the age (of doing something other than play) yet." I pretended to type on the machine, "Have you got any worries, Bue Princess?" "……." There was a pause, and she babbled. She typed and said, "Yes, spiders, snakes, and school friends." I could not stop myself from asking her further if I could help her. Immediately, she replied to me, "I think you have helped me to come out of the shell a little bit." At the end of the session, she drew ONLY the head of the young Bue Princess.

Proximity and Distance – Coming to an end

As my work with Chloe was financially limited, we created a choreographed dance that I hoped she could bodily remember and perhaps incorporate a dynamic felt sense of the selfobject functions I had provided. Her composition offered us relationality as well as mutuality through a pas de deux. Chloe continued to expand into larger dynamosphere. Although I still felt her need to be close to me, a healthy range of distance ultimately emerged.

I believe that Chloe's experience of being fully seen by me supported her psychological development and increased her sense of self (Stern, 1985). While the Bue Princess continued to use her own language, a complete figure of the Bue Princess, wearing a dress and crown emerged in the drawing. When she was not playing the Bue Princess, she could express articulately her anger towards her friends who judged her. "I cannot be who I am if I am with them. I could not be me. I am trying to find my identity." I witnessed emotional growth occurring for Chloe and her nuclear sense of self emerging.

There were more positive changes in her family too. Her mother went back to work and appeared healthier and brighter. I imagined that she may have been more emotionally present for Chloe. Both parents engaged fully in discussions about Chloe's difficulties. And Chloe herself had joined a school production and would be singing and dancing on stage.

As I formulated it through my self-psychology lens, the journey with Chloe through the parachute, hide-and-seek, and the Bue Princess made more sense to me. In the repeated embodied needs such as hiding, reaching and dancing, I sensed her deep desires of being seen, understood and belonging and came to understand my role as providing selfobject functions. In the following section I will discuss how the absence of or misattunement by selfobject functions can impact development of a child's fundamental needs, and how nonverbal play and dance helped restore Chloe's sense of self.

Discussion

A child needs an attuned, responsive and idealisable parental figure or selfobject in whom they can find admirable qualities as well as trust the safety and consistency brought to their world. Feeling into Chloe's inner landscape, I imagined her on a lonely planet, with distant 'family/friends' planets somewhere in the system. From Chloe's accounts, and from the loneliness that appeared in her play, I wondered whether emotional availability at home had felt inconsistent or difficult for her to rely on. This seemed connected to the lack of soothing I sensed in her bodily expressions, particularly because I first met Chloe's 'dancing body' which was shut down and 'frozen'. I wondered whether Chloe's emotional development had become held within unmet relational needs.

Her mother was unwell and, understandably, may have struggled to attend to her own emotional needs, as well as Chloe's. Chloe also described her father as often absent and "grumpy", and her mother described him as "missing tenderness in the name of disciplining the children". I wondered whether Chloe had learnt to minimise the impact of these emotional responses in order to preserve an attachment bond with him at all costs. Children whose emotions are not sufficiently mirrored may lack a clear sense of what they feel. Had her father's grumpiness been normalised by Chloe and her mum as bad-tempered, explosive, or even a frightening response? I wondered whether some unspoken fear in relation to her father may have contributed to Chloe's frozen state.

Had it been terrifying for a young Chloe because she felt abandoned in different ways but by both parents? Or had it created a deep longing and collapse because there was little hope that she would get what she needed? Chloe's fundamental needs for nurturing and bodily care were impacted not only by physiological causes but also by psychological issues. Chloe's difficulty with sleep was no doubt more complex than she could articulate to me, and a result of inadequate selfobject experiences of soothing and safety. A child needs a warm, holding environment where every part of their self is seen and cherished, and their emotions, big or small, are welcomed with interest and support. In other words, a mirroring selfobject function is needed for the development of a more cohesive and expressive nuclear self (Schwartz Stav et al., 2021).

Finally, a twinship selfobject experience (Banai et al., 2005), belonging to the group, being part of a larger section of humanity, is also needed. With preoccupied or fragile parents, Chloe looked toward her siblings, who were too old to play with her, and she was often left alone within her family. From Chloe's point of view, her home was not nurturing as it should have been. Instead, it was a lonely place in which she had to rely on herself or no one as she trod her path of development. Nor could she find twinship selfobject experiences at school, even though she was in 'the friends' circle'. Her digestive system impacted her sleep, and she regularly missed school. The more she missed school, the more isolated she felt.

Because in this world Chloe could not expect her needs to be met, she met me on a therapeutic planet where play and dance were a transformative medium to vitalise (Schmais, 1985) the frozen body. For Chloe, the needs to be found, followed and joined in movement were consistently present in our relationship. Symbolically, as Chloe and I were searching for each other at the beginning of our journey, Chloe was searching for who she was meant to be. Concurrently, I was searching to deeply attune to her needs. Chloe gradually shifted our hide-and-seek game to a dance. She no longer needed to hide from whom she was forced or expected to be. Rather, she

found her body provided a sense of self within our relationship. I felt that she grasped my kinesphere/dynamosphere when she trapped me in a corner. She needed to be bodily close enough to use or incorporate my presence. She needed to be with another person on her lonely planet. Through the twinship selfobject function that I offered, she seemed to begin finding her nuclear sense of self in the embodied experience.

Her frozen body gradually melted into a free and expressive dance where she was able to 'let go' of the frozen body. The weight effort of her movements changed from light to strong (Hackney, 2003). She slowly let go of the peripheral self that tried to be what others needed. Instead, perhaps she was exposing her nuclear self to more nurturance and warmth through her relationship with me. Like the line in the Frozen song, *Let it Go* that says 'that perfect girl is gone', Chloe chose our choreography, rather than let it be imposed upon her. As Chloe stood confidently and threw her body into my kinesphere/dynamosphere, her body conveyed "Here I stand and here I stay". 'Here' represented Chloe's sense of self, and I received her kinesthetically. I felt nonverbally and emotionally connected with her. I felt close to her.

When she created and entered her Enclosure de Chloe, she built a house-like space and kept 'storing' food. She continued demanding more food and later created a cosy space for sleep. I sensed her younger self needed to hibernate and be nurtured until her fundamental needs were met through our play. As the Bue Princess was not 'old enough' to stop playing, I wondered whether the Bue Princess held a younger, less verbal part of Chloe's experience, one that needed to nonverbally play, demand, trap and be met. Over time, drawings of the Bue Princess grew from just a head, and took shape, growing into a full body. I imagined this was a symbolic expression of her developing sense of self. When I inquired about the brave confrontation with her friends, she answered from a more confident and verbal sense of self (Stern, 1985).

Although the choreography was Chloe's own expression, I also saw it as a felt sense, nonverbal transitional object (Winnicott, 2005) for Chloe to take away when I was not with her. Outside the therapy, Chloe's parents began to become more physically and emotionally available: Chloe practised our dance with her mother on Sunday nights. Her father's presence and participation in family discussions created a more cohesive family environment and allowed Chloe to feel more supported and understood. Chloe's overall wellbeing was supported not only by the embodied therapeutic experience but also by her family's growing emotional presence. Through my self-psychological framework, I might interpret that the parents were gradually providing more needed selfobject functions in Chloe's life.

At the end of our journey, Chloe no longer needed to hide from me but rather followed behind me. I imagined that she now had my back. Chloe danced with me dynamically, using all planes, shapes, and efforts (Hackney, 2003) as well as large kinesphere and more complete dynamosphere. I sensed that a more 'complete' Chloe was present. It was a true twinship duet, a dance of 'equals' with a sense of deep connection and being together.

After a year of our work, her mother contacted me. Chloe had been in a school theatrical production, singing and dancing, and was academically excelling. And she had found a meaningful friendship circle at school. Although her diet still required modification, it was less restrictive, and she had achieved a healthy weight. The whole family did park runs together on weekends. This reminded me of the last scene of Frozen where Elsa returns to the unfrozen Kingdom with green leaves growing rapidly.

If this work had continued longer, I wonder if the Bue Princess would have invited me to be in her den. I would have gladly learned her language so as to not require the translation machine. Perhaps, outside the therapeutic relationship, she has opened a new chapter of her school life and acquired a language of self-esteem and self-awareness by being on stage with other adolescents.

Conclusion

This case illustrates how a self-psychology framework can deepen Dance Movement Psychotherapy when the therapist remains experience-near to a young person's embodied nonverbal expressions. Chloe's frozen, hidden, and later playful body expressed needs for safety, mirroring, and twinship before these could be fully articulated in words. Through shared movement, play, and attuned bodily presence, the therapeutic relationship offered a selfobject experience in which Chloe could feel seen, accompanied, and increasingly able to express herself. Rather than understanding her play as regression, I came to view it as an embodied communication of unmet needs and emerging vitality. In this way, Chloe's movement from hiding to dancing suggests how nonverbal, experience-near attunement can support the development of a more cohesive and enlivened sense of self in a warm, supportive empathetic environment with the presence of another.

Although Chloe showed meaningful improvements, the ending of therapy did not represent a complete recovery. At termination, vulnerabilities remained in her dietary restrictions, her struggles with her friendships and uncertainty about how her emerging sense of self would be sustained beyond the therapeutic relationship. These unfinished aspects highlight the limits of a self-psychology framework in DMP interventions, and a further exploration of embodied therapeutic work would strengthen the understanding and practice of selfobject functions.

Acknowledgements
I acknowledge the generous understanding and permission of Chloe and her family for me to write this case. I immensely thank my long-term clinical supervisor, Sue Curtis from London, for supervising my clinical work from the beginning of my career till now. I also acknowledge Sandra Kay Lauffenburger from Canberra, who has been tirelessly supporting my work with the training of self-psychology, and for constant support in the Australian context.

Declaration of Interest Statement
I declare that this writing has no conflict of interest with anybody or any organisation.

Declaration of AI Use
The author used the Claude Sonnet 5 to improve spelling, grammar, clarity, and readability during manuscript preparation. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed and edited the text and takes full responsibility for the final content.

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