Biodanza – the dance of life

Definition and theoretical model according to Rolando Toro

Before we learn to speak, we experience the world through movement. Dance is therefore more than an art form. It is an original way of being in the world. The Chilean psychologist and anthropologist **Rolando Toro Araneda** (1924–2010) developed this idea into a system of its own: Biodanza, the “dance of life”.

How Biodanza began

Rolando Toro taught at the Catholic University of Santiago de Chile and worked at the Centre for Anthropological Medicine at the University of Chile. From 1965 onwards, he studied how music and dance affect psychiatric patients. In doing so, he made an important observation:

- Slow, calm dances with closed eyes intensified hallucinations and confusion in severely ill people.
- Joyful, rhythmic dances, on the other hand, strengthened their contact with reality.

From these experiences, Toro gradually developed a model that was later extended to healthy people, children, families and older adults. He chose the name “Biodanza” – from the Greek *bios* (life) and the Spanish *danza* (dance) – in 1977.

What is Biodanza?

Toro describes Biodanza as a system that brings together three things:

- **Affective integration:** restoring, through our feelings, the lost unity between ourselves, other people and nature.
- **Organic renewal:** strengthening the body’s self-regulation and reducing stress.
- **Relearning the original functions of life:** living once again in harmony with the impulses that sustain and unfold life.

The path there leads through dance, music, singing and encounter in a group.

The heart of it all: the vivencia

The central concept of Biodanza is the **vivencia** – the intense experience of *being alive here and now*. A vivencia is not thought; it is felt: in movement, in the breath, in contact with others. According to Toro, it acts not through the intellect but directly through the emotional centres of the brain. People who experience certain vivencias again and again gradually change their attitude towards life.

Vivencias unfold along **five lines of human potential**:

- **Vitality:** life force, inner balance, joy in movement.
- **Sexuality:** pleasure, desire and joy in one’s own body.
- **Creativity:** expressing oneself, creating something new, shaping one’s own life.
- **Affectivity:** love, friendship, compassion and a sense of security.
- **Transcendence:** experiencing oneself as part of nature and the universe.

The five lines are interconnected and strengthen one another. In a Biodanza session, they are woven together.

The biocentric principle

Behind Biodanza lies an attitude that Toro called the **biocentric principle**: it is not the human being but life itself that is at the centre. What protects and nurtures life is good; what harms it or prevents it from unfolding is harmful. Toro builds on Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life" – with one difference: for him, this attitude is not only thought but experienced in dance and encounter.

How does Biodanza work?

A few core ideas shape the work:

- **Music as a bridge:** music connects feeling and movement without a detour through thinking. It is therefore carefully chosen for its emotional effect.
- **Music, movement and experience belong together:** a dance of joy to sad music would divide people inwardly instead of connecting them.
- **The group as a safe space:** the group offers security and permission to change. No one develops alone.
- **Tenderness and respect:** each person decides how much closeness they allow. Contact only happens when both sides are ready for it.
- **No interpretation:** Biodanza does not analyse or interpret. The focus is on the experience itself.

The theoretical model

Toro's model can be pictured as a coordinate system.

The vertical axis describes human development. Every person carries a unique potential – far more than they express in the course of their life. Whether this potential can unfold depends on the environment. Toro calls these influences **ecofactors**. They can be supportive or inhibiting: a loving word strengthens a child's creativity, while disparaging criticism can block it. According to Toro, a Biodanza session is a "bombardment" of positive ecofactors. The most powerful ecofactors are other people.

The horizontal axis describes a pulsation between two states:

- **Identity:** being alert, feeling oneself clearly, experiencing oneself as the centre of one's own world. Activating, powerful dances strengthen this pole.
- **Regression:** letting go, lowering one's vigilance, feeling held and merging with the whole. Slow, gently swaying dances lead into this state.

The two states complement each other. Health means being able to oscillate between them. Tense and stressed people benefit particularly from regression exercises, which calm and reduce anxiety. For people who feel little inner stability, identity exercises are important. People often emerge from letting go strengthened, with a feeling of renewal. Toro calls the step to a new level of development **transtasis**.

Biodanza and psychotherapy

Biodanza does not see itself as a substitute for psychotherapy, but as a complement to it. The difference lies in the starting point: psychotherapy begins with illness and conflict; Biodanza

begins with a person's healthy parts and potential. Biodanza therefore works above all preventively, educationally and in health promotion – and it can accompany the treatment of mental and psychosomatic illnesses.

Biodanza today and in research

Today, Biodanza is taught worldwide – in courses for adults, in schools and kindergartens, in clinics and in crisis work. Studies show, among other things, positive effects on stress hormones, the immune system and emotion recognition in children (Stueck et al., 2016; Stueck & Villegas, 2017). Some of Toro's assumptions, such as the idea that emotions can activate genes, should be understood as hypotheses and are the subject of ongoing research.

The **Relative Biocentric Health Theory (rbHT)** by Marcus Stueck takes up Toro's biocentric principle and develops it further – towards a comprehensive understanding of health for individuals, organisations and society (Stueck, 2026b).

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