

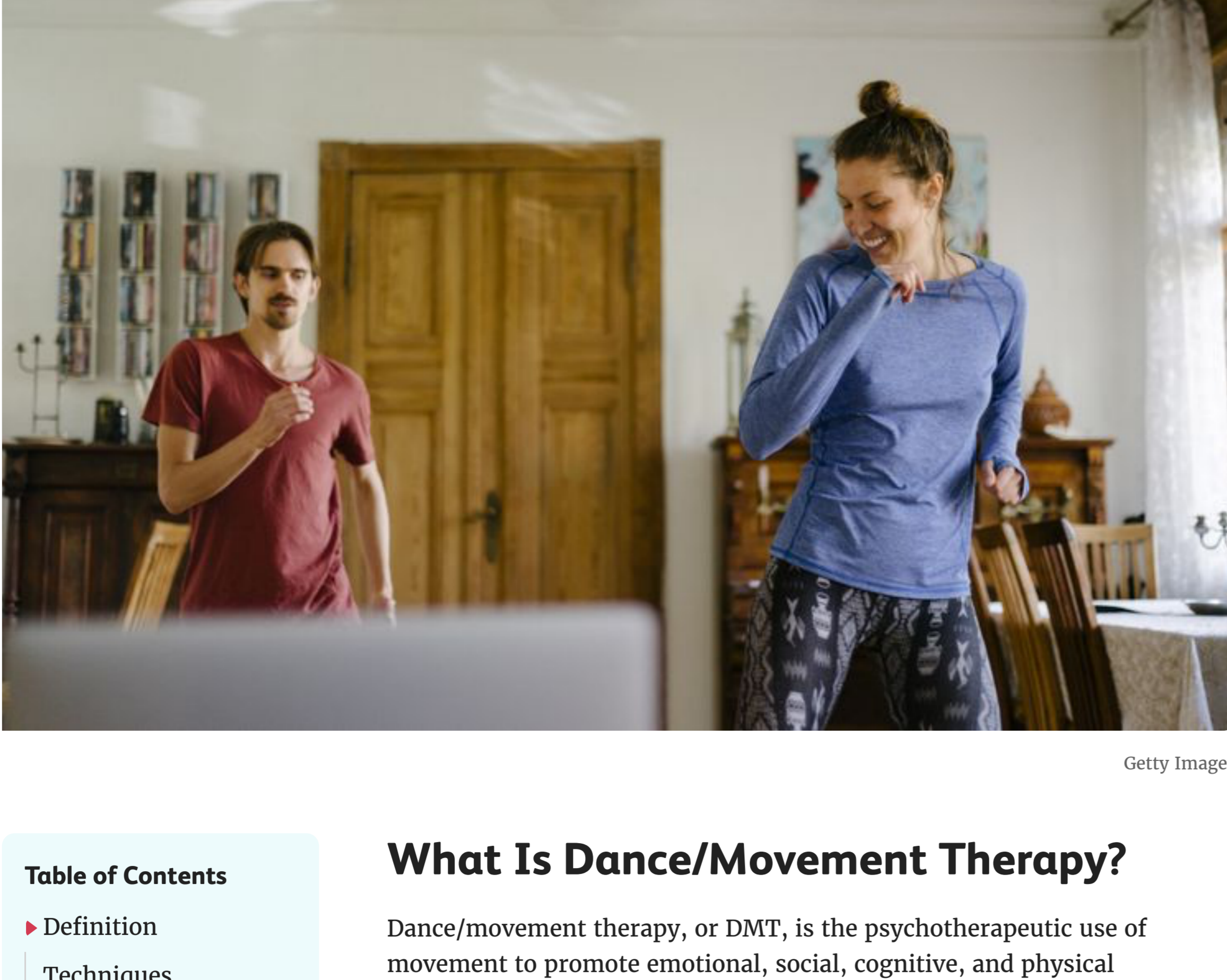
EATING DISORDERS > TREATMENT

What Is Dance Therapy?

By Sara Lindberg, M.Ed | Updated on November 22, 2023

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What Is Dance/Movement Therapy?

Dance/movement therapy, or DMT, is the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration.^[1] DMT can help people with physical health by increasing strength, improving flexibility, decreasing muscle tension, and boosting coordination. It can also offer important mental health benefits including stress reduction and even symptom relief from conditions such as anxiety and depression.

"DMT is a creative art psychotherapy that utilizes movement and dance to support the physical, intellectual, and emotional health of an individual," [Katie Bohn, LPC, BC-DMT, SEP, RYT](#), a board-certified dance/movement therapist.

According to board-certified dance therapist [Erica Hornthal, MA, LCPC, BC-DMT](#), dance therapy uses movement and nonverbal communication in addition to talk therapy to manage psychological and behavioral concerns that words alone do not address. "It's about finding the places inside that you might not know or have chosen to deny, and giving a voice to the experiences and emotions," Hornthal says.

Related: [Ecstatic Dance Can Boost Your Mood and Get You in Touch With Yourself](#)

Techniques

DMT looks different for everyone depending on a sense of safety, access to the body, and personal familiarity with an authentic expression of the body, explains [Caroline Kinsley, LPC intern, R-DMT](#), a dance/movement therapist. "The process may range from mostly verbal or speaking to mostly nonverbal or movement," she says.

In a dance therapy session, a therapist may:

- Help you explore and make meaning on the connection between movement and your [emotions](#)
- Encourage tracking of bodily sensations and breath
- Help guide you through self-expressive and improvisational movements
- Offer specific movement or verbal therapeutic interventions to promote healing
- Help you process the feelings evoked by the movement

Dance therapists may utilize a technique known as mirroring, which involves copying another person's movements. It can be a way to help people feel more connected to others and to build [feelings of empathy](#).

Dance/movement therapists provide the space for individuals to experience an invitation, a sense of choice, validation, and to tolerate internal sensations. They also offer compassionate and supportive ways to feel a sense of control and autonomy within your body.

What Dance/Movement Therapy Can Help With

Dance and movement therapy can be used to treat a number of physical and mental health issues. It can be helpful for improving self-esteem and can be useful for people who struggle with body image issues. Some conditions that it may help with include:

- Anxiety
- Arthritis
- Chronic pain
- Communication issues
- [Dementia](#)
- [Depression](#)
- Disordered eating
- [Low self-esteem](#)
- [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)

Related: [The Connection Between Body Image and Eating Disorders](#)

Benefits of Dance/Movement Therapy

Dance therapy has a number of benefits that can make it a helpful addition to other treatment approaches. Where many treatment modalities, such as [cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#), focus on cognitions or behaviors, dance/movement therapy incorporates body-based strategies.

- Promotes calm:** By using DMT, Kinsley says a therapist can provide body-based strategies to support down-regulating the system, which allows for an increased sense of calm.
- Self-awareness:** In the treatment of eating disorders, building [self-awareness](#) can help people feel more connected to their body's physical signals. "Emphasis on the body supports the client in developing the awareness needed to identify physical and emotional sensations of hunger and fullness."
- Coping skills:** DMT can also serve as a way to build [coping skills](#) to use outside of the therapy setting. "With the support of the therapist, you can use movement and understanding of your movement preferences to explore strengths and signals of stress, distress, and triggers," Kinsley says.

Building such skills allows you to recognize the change in your body-based experience outside of the therapeutic space and use it as insight if you are tending towards maladaptive beliefs or behaviors.

If you're struggling with an eating disorder or another issue that affects body image, Bohn says being able to reconnect with your body, change the relationship with your body, have access to self-expression, and experience embodied relationships is significant in sustaining eating disorder recovery. Dance/movement therapy is a unique modality that supports these goals.

Effectiveness

Research also suggests that dance/movement therapy can be helpful in the treatment of a number of different conditions. Some studies supporting its efficacy include:

- A 2019 review concluded that dance therapy was an effective intervention for the treatment of adults with depression.^[2]
- A 2019 review of studies concluded that dance movement therapy helped to reduce anxiety and depression. It also enhanced interpersonal skills, cognitive skills, and overall quality of life.^[3]
- A small 2020 pilot study published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* found that DMT can be used as a complementary treatment option for eating disorders. Researchers recruited 14 patients from a private clinic and assigned seven to a random group and the other seven to a DMT group. After 14 weeks of treatment, the DMT group significantly improved in body area satisfaction and appearance evaluation compared to the other group.^[4]

Things to Consider

While DMT can be an effective treatment option, there are some factors to consider before you decide if dance/movement therapy is right for you:

- Comfort and safety:** For people who have experienced trauma, creating a safe space and going slowly is critical. "An individual may not be able to access body-based experiences due to maintaining a sense of safety," Kinsley says.
- Health limitations:** Therapists must also observe a person's physical and health limitations. "An individual may be fragile and experience low energy levels and medical complications due to malnutrition. Therefore, the presentation or expression of dance or movement will vary, and it is the role of the therapist to meet the client where they are, and respond accordingly," Kinsley explains.
- Difficult feelings:** Bohn says individuals who struggle with conditions such as eating disorders often dislike, blame, or disconnect from their bodies. "DMT provides an opportunity to experience living in their body differently, an opportunity to externalize and express feelings, gain a deeper connection to self, and eventually develop a sense of appreciation on compassion towards one's self and body," she says.

It is also important to note that dance therapy should not be used on its own for some conditions. Eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder are serious mental health issues that require professional treatment from a therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist.

In addition to traditional treatment modalities like psychotherapy, experts may recommend DMT as an adjunct or add-on form of therapy when managing conditions such as eating disorders.

How to Get Started

Working with a trained, board-certified dance/movement therapist can help you focus on both the mind and the body processes as you gain insight and tools for managing daily life.

For more information on dance therapy and eating disorders check out the following websites, videos, and treatment centers:

- [American Dance Therapy Association \(ADTA\)](#): Offers information as well as a dance/movement therapist directory
- [Renfrew Center](#): Offers experiential therapies such as DMT
- [Video with Susan Kleinman, MA, BC-DMT, NCC, CEDS, a world renowned dance therapist](#)

Get Help Now

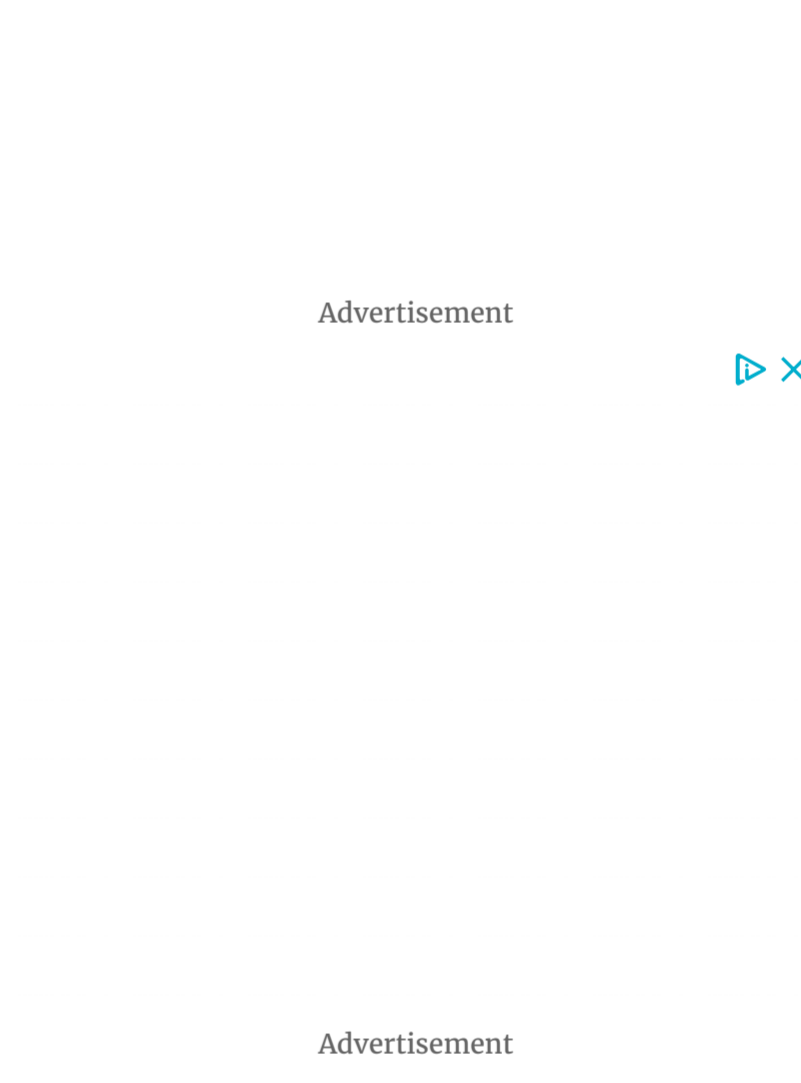
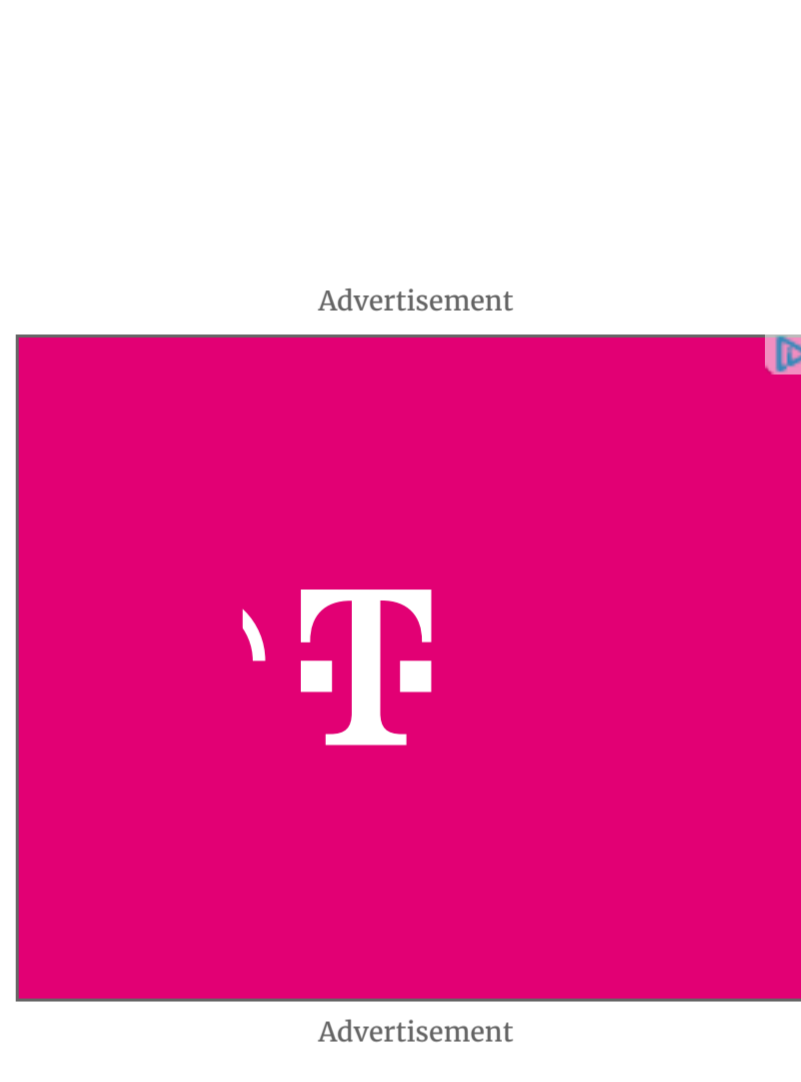
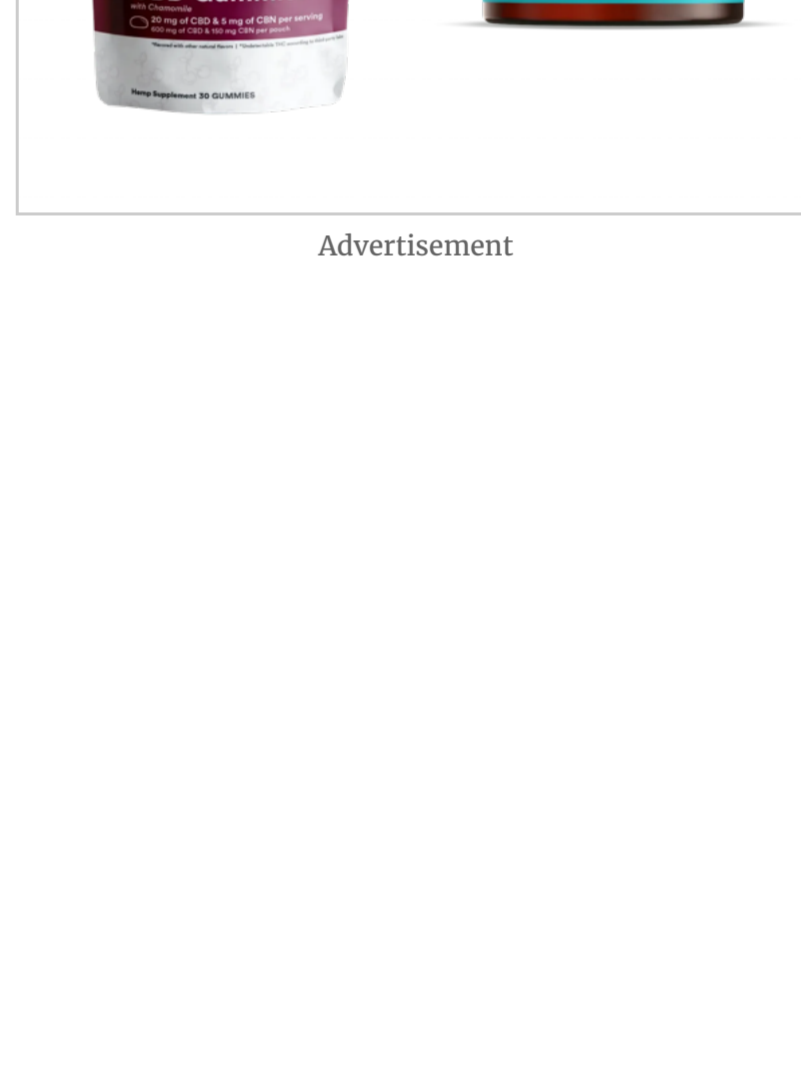
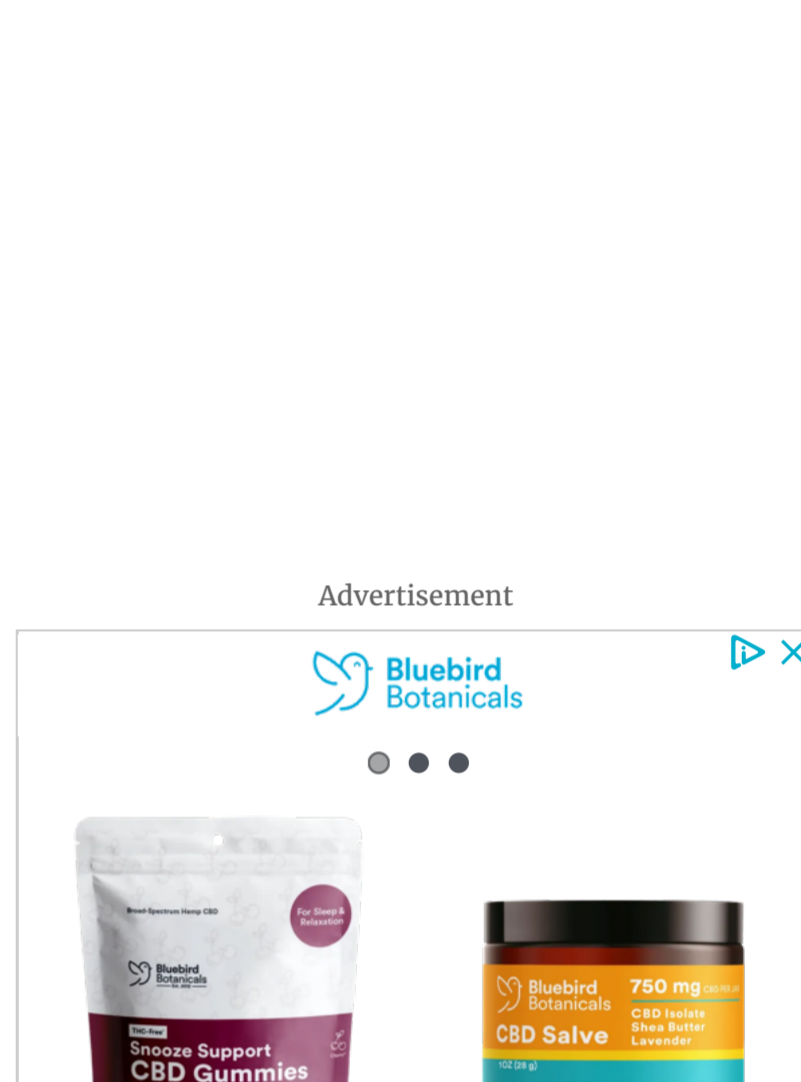
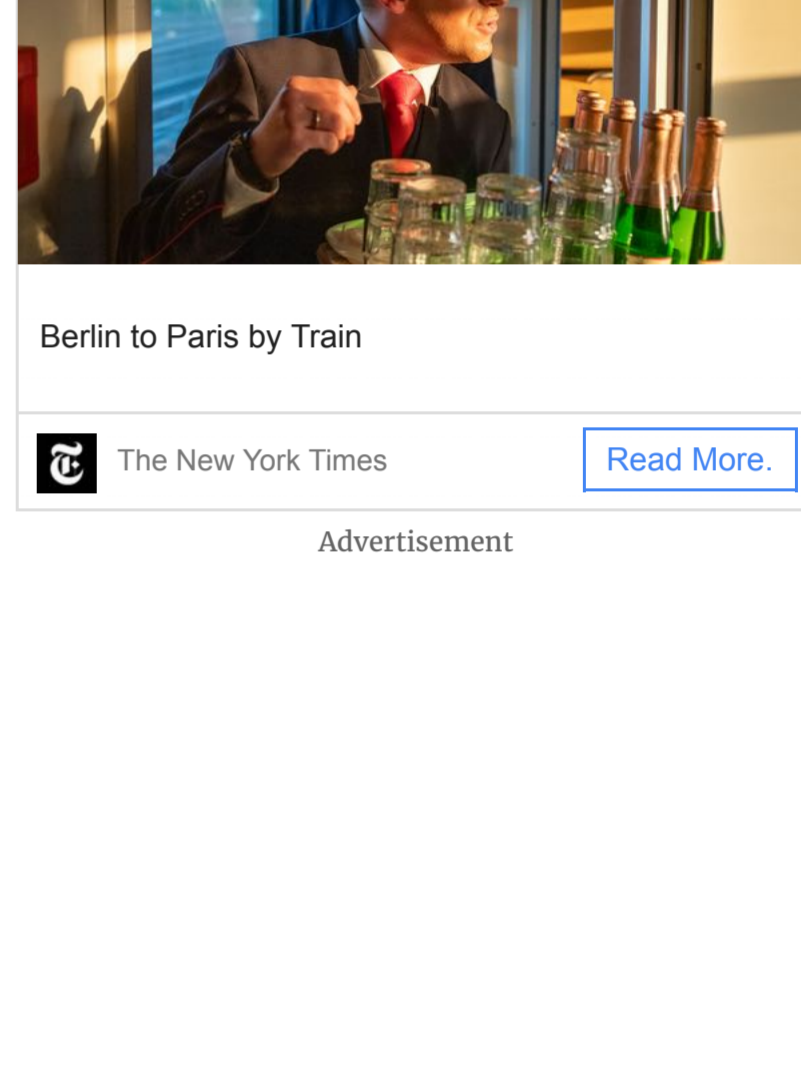
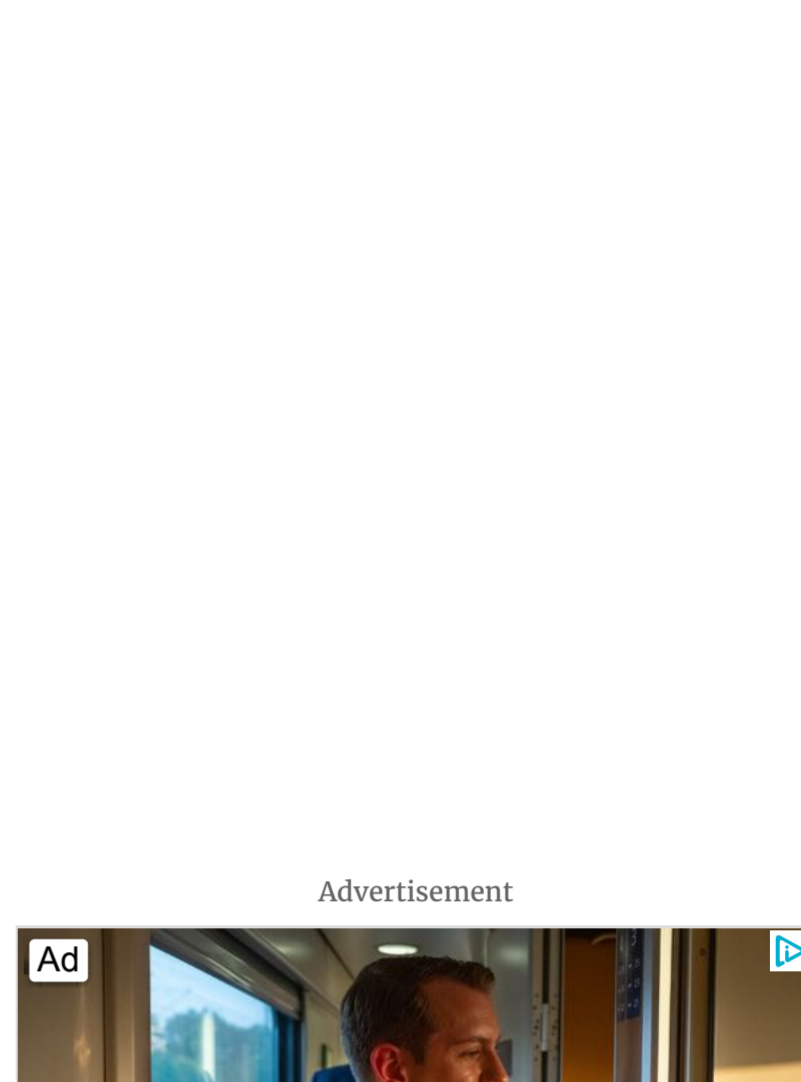
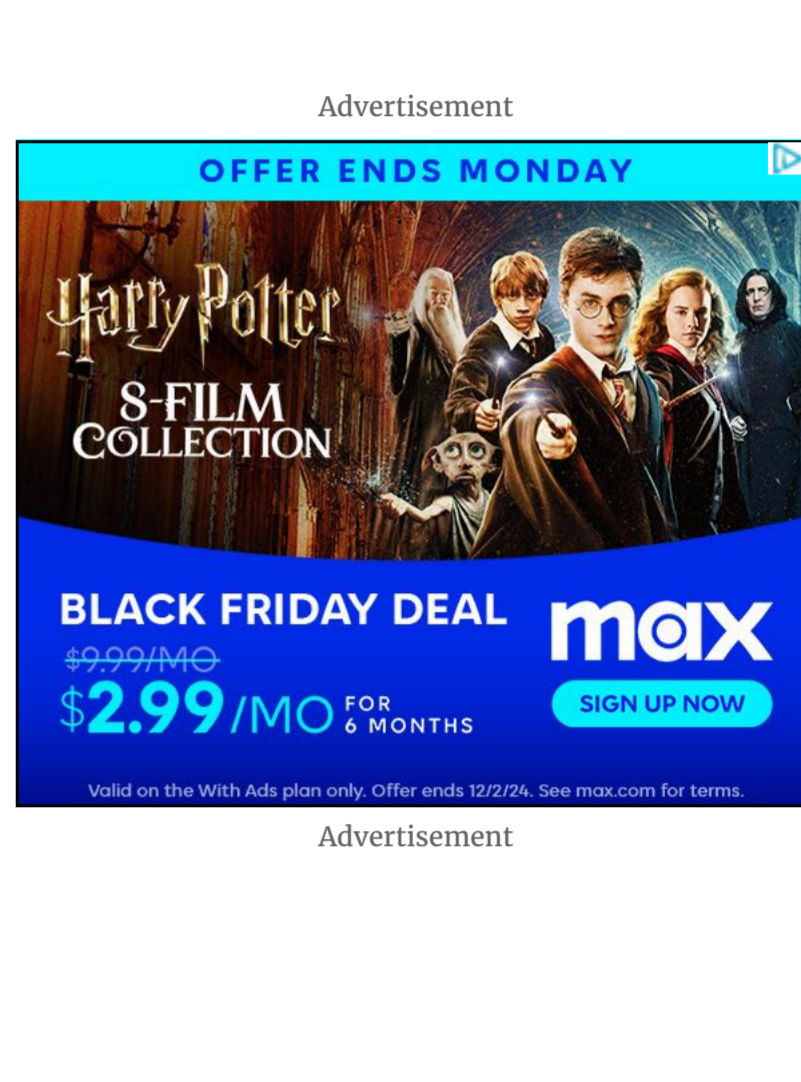
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Related: [How to Choose the Right Therapist for You](#)

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