



MANUAL

TRANSILIENCE

Physical Resilience

Mauro Kerckhof
Olu Vandenbussche
(University Hospital
Ghent)



Jana Verguchten
(VIVES University College)



Funded by
the European Union



INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by physical resilience?

Within this module, we strive for a healthy mind in a healthy body. This can be achieved by focusing on exercise, good sleep and healthy eating. Within TRANSILIENCE, we have focused on movement.

Increased physical resilience allows you to have more energy, be more productive, focus better and feel good about yourself. This allows you to cope better with stress and setbacks.



Why focus on physical resilience in our target population?

Trans persons experience a lot of barriers when doing sports. Here we distinguish between internal and external thresholds.

Examples of **internal thresholds** are gender dysphoria (where external body characteristics do not correspond with gender identity and therefore cause discomfort), or a negative body experience for another reason (for example, dissatisfaction with body weight). For example, for a trans man, the sensation of breasts moving when walking may be disturbing. He may wear a binder (a top that makes the breasts appear flatter), but this in turn may cause other discomforts, such as breathing problems while doing sports.

Seeing yourself in a mirror, being confronted with other people's bodies, or having to focus on body parts that do not fit within the desired body image can also reinforce feelings of dysphoria. Other internal barriers include fear of, or expectations around, negative feedback and exclusion by others. Or fear of being misgendered, or outed by others.

External barriers are environmental factors that make sports more difficult. For example, the lack of gender-neutral locker rooms and restrooms can be a significant barrier. Especially trans individuals who are often misgendered may experience additional stress as a result. In addition, the sports world is still highly gendered (with separate facilities, dress codes and competitions for men and women in many sports). Often (competitive) sports also lack a clear policy around the participation of transgender and non-binary persons. Also heteronormative expectations around typical male and female behavior still appear to be strongly present. These cause feelings of fear, alienation, aversion and exclusion among trans and especially non-binary people.

In our physical resilience module, our participants shared personal experiences related to these thresholds. Among other things, they told us that they adapted far and wide when going to sports facilities in order to feel safe. This by, for example, changing clothes beforehand, showering at home, or avoiding tight-fitting clothing.... Many reported feeling uncomfortable with the macho culture that often prevails in sports facilities.

Because of all these barriers, we see that trans individuals enjoy sports less and derive fewer benefits for both their mental and physical health. However, adequate exercise is important in the context of a healthy transition. For example, exercise can provide a good balance between fat tissue and muscle mass. Certainly individuals taking feminizing hormone therapy benefit from exercise. This is because suppressing the hormone testosterone interferes with both muscle production and maintenance.

We ourselves tried to remove some barriers beforehand by, for example, not working with dress codes and organizing the Bodyflow sessions at Queer Gym, an inclusive gym in Ghent. This has gender-neutral facilities and the focus there is not on competition, but on a healthy lifestyle, respect for each other and sports fun. One of the participants said:

‘You feel that there’s a completely different atmosphere here. An openness. That you can focus completely on sports and don’t have to think about how you look or who’s watching you...’ (transgender man, Bodyflow participant)

That safe context also meant that young people could choose their own comfort without fear of negative reactions from others:

‘Sweat was dripping from my hair. I thought: ‘Fuck it, I’m among my peers here, they’ll understand. I feel good, I just want to take that wig off.’ (trans woman, Bodyflow participant)

Approach module

In developing this module, we started from the input of trans youth, obtained during a co-creation session. In it we asked them what they wanted to learn within the physical resilience module. This yielded the following answers:

How can I ensure that
I feel safer on the street?

How can I learn to cope
with gender dysphoria?

How can I move more in line with my
gender identity?

How can I, through sports
prepare for
my physical transition?

How can I work on a more
confident posture?

How can I do strength training?

Conclusion

Based on this input and a literature review, we developed the physical resilience module. In track 1, participants could choose between a “dance and movement therapy” module and a “Bodyflow” module. In addition, they could also follow a self-defense initiation. In trajectory 2 we offered only Bodyflow and self-defense because the modules Bodyflow and dance therapy had a lot of overlap in approach and objectives.



SESSION OVERVIEW

Dance and movement therapy module

Session 1: Installing safety

Session 2: Engaging with each other in a playful way

Module Bodyflow

Session 1: 'The core issue'

Session 2: Your body in space

Session 3: Unleashing the wild self

Session 4: Powertraining

ADDITIONAL OPTION: Self-defense initiation

General objectives

- to overcome internal and external barriers to doing sports
- to motivate participants to exercise more as part of a healthy transition
- to reduce the negative effects of minority stress (anxiety, chronic stress...) by focusing on increased exercise and healthy movement patterns

Before you start...

What follows is a description of the sessions we conducted. We called on professional coaches who received training in transsensitive working from us for this purpose. This script is for inspiration. Feel free to adapt things to the context in which you work and the questions and needs of your participants.

Be sure to read our guidelines for health care workers and those related to autism-friendly work that we have developed based on our experiences within TRANSILIENCE. You can find these via the following link:

<https://www.uzgent.be/educatief-materiaal-van-transilience>

MODULE DANCE AND MOVEMENT THERAPY

Relevance for trans youth

As we saw in the introduction, feeling connected to a group can help trans individuals cope with minority stress and its consequences. Since movement therapy encourages “community connectedness” by celebrating milestones together, installing rituals and mirroring each other's movements, it could help combat minority stress, according to a 2022 study by Jackman. Through movement therapy, one can also discover new ways of moving that are more in line with one's gender identity and thus help with gender dysphoria.

General objectives within this module

- introduce participants to dance and movement therapy in an approachable way
- installing safety in the group and stimulating contact with others through dance instead of words
- allowing participants to (re)experience one's own body as a source of pleasure, strength and playfulness
- ‘inhabiting’ one's own body more (embodiment)
- increasing one's own movement repertoire
- introducing participants to an element of play by using materials (e.g. ribbons)
- stimulating self-confidence by creating success experiences

SESSION 1: INSTALLING SAFETY

Material

- Music installation
- Ball (1 per 2 participants)
- Dance ribbon

Program overview

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Safety rules
- 3) Workshop outline
- 4) Warm up
- 5) Exercises based on the Chase method
- 6) Exercises to get out of the circle and make contact with each other
- 7) Exercise with dance ribbon
- 8) Evaluation

1) Introduction

The participants stand in a circle. They introduce themselves and talk a little about their experience with dance.

2) Safety rules

- An exercise may always be changed if something doesn't feel right. For example, if something hurts, or if it feels unsafe to move a certain body part the participant may move another body part.
- Participants may always say "no" or "stop". Also stepping out of an exercise and returning when it feels better is allowed.
- There is no right or wrong. We do not judge, a movement does not have to look 'beautiful'.
- Participants have a say in the exercises and the music. The coach responds to what is going on in the group.

3) Workshop outline

We speak of an outline because the workshop is adapted to what the group needs, such as more social contact, or just dancing more on their own, being more “in the here and now”...

- *Increasing challenge: from moving to dancing (gradualness principle)*
- *Space for break and feedback (where feedback sharing is not mandatory)*

4) Warming up

Soft music plays in the background.

The warm-up consists of exercises to shake the body loose, stretching exercises, an exercise to “ground”.... This involves focusing on breathing.

5) Exercise based on the Chase methodology

The Chase methodology is a form of dancing together (usually in a circle) where everyone follows the movements of the facilitator, but is allowed to put their own spin on them. Impulses, new movements or accents of participants (i.e. individuality) are “picked up” by the facilitator and translated into movement. This method creates a sense of belonging and is an accessible and pleasant way to get a group to move. It also requires no verbal communication.

6) Exercises to break away from the circle and interact with each other

- Different ways of greeting each other (high five, tapping each other's feet or shoulders, giving a fist, hooking arms...)
- Passing a ball around while everyone keeps moving
- When you have thrown the ball, “freeze” until someone taps you back to life
- The ball takes on different connotations and is thrown and received that way. For example: the ball is a bomb/hot/a nice surprise/a disappointment/very heavy/fragile/sticky/stinks.... The goal here is to provide handholds for engaging with others, to provide first interactions with others in a playful way.

7) Exercise with dance ribbon

The coach shows possible movements with the dance ribbon: moving the dance ribbon from the wrist, the arm, the shoulders..., then using the whole body and finally also making movements in space.

The coach promotes playful interactions with the other participants and guides this verbally with instructions such as small, big, high, low...

After that, a group choreography is attempted (encouraging interaction, cooperation). In between, attention is paid to breathing and bringing attention back to one's own body and limits.

8) Evaluation

Participants write down their feedback, they may choose whether to hand it off or not.

Guiding questions for evaluation:

How has it been for you so far? What did you like, what did you dislike?

How did you feel in the group (try to give concrete examples) and where did you feel it in your body?

SESSION 2: ENGAGING WITH EACH OTHER IN A PLAYFUL WAY

Material

- Music installation

Program Overview

- 1) Warm up
- 2) Visualize dishes
- 3) Assignment in pairs
- 4) Evaluation
- 5) Closing

1) Warm up

Active body scan: a mindfulness exercise where you go over all your body parts in your mind. Through a body scan you can also check whether a body part is tense or hurting. This is how you learn to better sense your own limits and practice self-care. For some people, this can also help them learn to relax their bodies.

2) Visualize dishes

The goal is for participants to learn to cooperate and take initiative. Participants portray dishes in group. One person, who leaves the room while the others are preparing, tries to guess what they are portraying when coming back in the room.

Possible dishes to visualize:

- Popcorn
- A bunch of bananas
- Fried eggs
- A packet of French fries

3) Assignment in pairs

One participant leads, the other follows. The pairs move around the room while dancing, keeping in touch via a stick, the ends of which they both hold. Halfway through the song, they switch roles on the coach's cue.

At the second song, the participants silently change roles. The participant who follows keeps their eyes closed, or looks at the ground if that feels safer.

4) Evaluation

Questions:

- *What did you do well, what are you proud of? Encourage positive feedback by giving examples from your own observations as a coach.*
- *Which role did you take during the portrayal of the dishes, the task in duo?*
- *Which role did you do best? (make it clear that this is an observation and not a judgment, that both roles are equally valid).*

5) Closing

What does the group need now? How do you want to conclude?

The choice was made to move quietly to soft music (possibly with dance ribbon) and focus on breathing. Then participants sat in a circle and there was still the opportunity to share something with the group.

REFLECTIONS OF THE DANS COACH

The group was very diverse in terms of how they “inhabited” their bodies and in terms of verbal reflection. This worried me a bit beforehand. Perhaps I would have focused a little more on reflection had the group been uniformly 'verbally strong'.

A mixed group is not necessarily a problem. As a facilitator, it does require a bit more attention to the individual within the group. For example, at one point I chose to do an assignment with a participant because I estimated that it would be too difficult for her alone.

However, when I focused on body awareness (and less on interaction and fun), I did notice the disadvantage of a mixed group. One participant just needed to slow down, unlike the rest of the group. As a result, I could not work with her as 'intensively' on 'inhabiting the body'. I also learned that I should have taken into account any surgical procedures such as scars that still hurt after top surgery, for example. As a dance therapist, I find self-care and attention to personal boundaries and bodily signals important. Therefore, I always mention that assignments should not be performed if it hurts. In the future, I would pay even more attention to the possibility of physical limitations or pain one may have after certain medical steps in a transition.

MODULE BODYFLOW

Relevance for trans youth

The Bodyflow workshops took place at Queer Gym, an inclusive fitness and safe space in Ghent for anyone who does not feel at home in the mainstream, heteronormative fitness world.

The idea behind Bodyflow is that humans originally lived an active lifestyle and had a wide repertoire of movements, but gradually became more sedentary with certain ways of moving and muscles falling into disuse.

The exercises provided in Bodyflow sessions help participants reconnect with their inner selves. Techniques are also taught to improve the most common muscle dysfunctions, such as postural correction. Indeed, Queer Gym trainers note that many of their participants tend to hide: their shoulders are forward, they look down, they make themselves as small as possible.... Faced with LGBT and transphobia, they have learned to make themselves invisible. So working on their posture has a positive impact both physically and mentally.

In Bodyflow sessions, participants learn the basics of natural movement: correct breathing, thinking, posture.... The exercises are diverse: from stretching, strengthening hands and feet, to releasing tension and trauma through somatic shaking.... There is also a focus on increased self-awareness and better balance....

Participants are also introduced to the pillars of human movement, namely locomotion, changing position, push-pull and rotation.

Each session lasts 90 minutes and is structured in the same way: after the warm-up, some exercises that are framed within a particular theme follow. This is followed by the cooling down. We limit ourselves to describing the main activities.

SESSION 1: 'THE CORE ISSUE'

In this session, participants practice various techniques to reduce stress such as abdominal breathing, body scan and somatic movement. In addition, they discover how to integrate movement into your daily routine in an approachable way.

Material

- 1 yoga mat per participant
- 1 stick per participant
- 2 tennis balls per participant (for stabilization)
- Music installation

Program overview

- 1) Diaphragmatic breathing
- 2) Body scan
- 3) Somatic exercise
- 4) Movement snacks

1) Diaphragmatic breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing, or abdominal breathing, involves using your diaphragm to take (deeper) breaths. This has numerous health benefits such as stress reduction, better concentration and more energy.

Procedure

Participants lie on their backs on a yoga mat and find a position that is comfortable for them. They place one hand on their chest and their other hand on their abdomen. Then they inhale for 5 counts, then hold their breath for 5 counts and finally exhale for 5 counts. This exercise is repeated for 5 minutes.

2) Bodyscan

The body scan is a mindfulness meditation that helps you stop overthinking (lots of fretting can cause stress and anxiety) and puts you more in touch with your body. You focus on what you are experiencing and feeling right now. It is therefore an ideal exercise to do at the beginning of a session, as it helps you 'land' in the workshop and forget your daily worries for a while.

Because the beginning is similar to diaphragmatic breathing, you can blend the two together perfectly.

Procedure

- Lie on the yoga mat with your legs extended and your arms by your side. Let your feet and hands fall open outwards.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. You don't have to adjust, or force anything. Just notice your breathing, without judgement.
- Now first notice where you feel the breath in your body.
- Feel your chest or belly rising as you inhale, and feel how the air leaves your body again through your nose or mouth.
- Do you notice your thoughts wandering? It is quite normal for this to happen. Don't judge yourself, but calmly bring your attention back to the rhythm of your breathing.
- Bring your attention to your body. Feel how you are lying here now, how your body makes contact with the surface.
- Start the body scan: go over all your body parts with attention. Start with your toes. How do they feel? Do you have cold toes, or are they just nice and warm? Do you feel the socks you have on, or do you have bare feet?
- Slowly move on to the next body part. In your mind, move slowly upwards, through your foot to your calf, knee and thighs. Continue through the groin area to the lower abdomen, lower back and chest. Pass all parts of your body up to the tip of your crown. Don't forget the muscles in your face. Take your time everywhere to feel if there is tension there. If there is, try to stay with that tension with your attention for a moment without judging.
- Afterwards, reflect on what the body scan has done to you. Do you feel different from before the exercise?
- Move your fingers and toes, then your hands and feet, then your arms and legs. Slowly bring your body back into motion.
- Slowly sit up straight, then stand and complete the exercise.

3) Somatic movement

A somatic movement is a movement that is performed consciously. Here, the focus is on what you feel inside, rather than on the end result, or how it looks on the outside. It is not about how often you perform a particular exercise, or with what intensity, but about the quality of the inner experience.

Close your eyes so you are not distracted by all kinds of visual stimuli. Somatic movements are also best performed slowly because our nervous system learns slowly.

What we want to achieve with these exercises is to break existing unhealthy movement patterns. This helps relieve muscle tension and chronic pain and improve our posture and movements.

It is an empowering method because you learn techniques that you can perform independently at home to engage in self-care, relax or relieve pain.

Below we describe one somatic exercise by way of illustration. You can find more on the internet.

Exercise: Roll over and curl up

- Lie on your back on the floor. Bend your knees, place your feet spread out (same width as your hips) flat on the floor.
- Inhale and push your tailbone (tailbone) against the ground. Your lower back bends upwards and you feel your back muscles tighten. This is hollowing out.
- Then, as you exhale, push your pelvis against the ground. While doing so, you feel your abdominal muscles tighten slightly. This is bulging.
- Alternate hollowing and bulging to the rhythm of gentle breathing.

4) Movement snacks

These are short exercises that you can easily integrate into your daily routine like brushing your teeth on one leg.

SESSION 2: YOUR BODY IN SPACE

In this session, participants will learn how to improve their posture and work on strength, stability, coordination and mobility.

Material

- Short stick (possibly broomstick) per participant.
- Yoga mats

Programme overview

- 1) Postural correction
- 2) Core-stability
- 3) Animal flow

1) Postural correction

Each participant is given a broomstick. They should hold this against the back of their back and use it to align their spine. If they can put their hand between the stick and their back, their back is too hollow. In addition, they should imagine they have a tail and press their tailbone slightly inwards. The intention is that participants learn to judge and correct their posture themselves which is empowering. The method with the broomstick is very tangible and therefore accessible.

2) Core stability

A strong 'core' helps to optimise your sports performance and prevent injuries. It also ensures good posture. Roughly speaking, core stability refers to the function of the deep muscles of the torso (abdominal and back muscles, diaphragm and pelvic floor), but actually it concerns the entire torso including the internal organs.

Movement science assumes that all muscles and joints of the body influence each other. The muscles in your torso play an important role in this, as they make the movements of your arms and legs possible through stabilisation and power transmission (the forces that come to your lower body, you absorb with your upper body and vice versa. As a result, you maintain your stability).

Besides stabilising movements, your 'core' also has other tasks: protecting the central nervous system and internal organs, supporting the organs and blood circulation. A non-functioning 'core' can cause all kinds of health problems.

Below we describe one exercise on core-stability, on the internet you can find numerous others like 'the bear hold', 'the elbow plank', 'the glute bridge' etc.

Stretch exercise with stick

Participants lie down on the yoga mat. In their hands they hold a stick. They stretch their arms and legs at the same time, lifting them slightly off the ground while holding the stick out in front of them.

3) Animal flow

In this exercise, participants imitate movement patterns of different animals. This increases their movement repertoire, makes them move more consciously, works on coordination, mobility and stability, etc. This exercise also caused hilarity and contributed to group cohesion.

Examples of animal flow exercises are: the 'beast crawl', the 'crab reach', 'loaded beast', 'beast taps' and 'travelling ape'. Descriptions can be found on the internet. Below, we describe the beast crawl by way of example.

Beast crawl

Sit on the floor, support yourself on your hands and knees and keep your back straight. Now lift your knees slightly off the ground and move yourself by crawling on all fours. While doing this, stay as close to the ground as possible. This exercise activates the core and improves your coordination.

SESSION 3: UNLEASHING YOUR WILD SELF

As a species, humans have evolved from an active to a sedentary life, and in the process we have lost a large part of our movement repertoire. In this session, participants learned about unhealthy movement patterns and how to break them. It also tried to change the mindset around sports and ensure that exercise was associated with fun again. To this end, a circuit with different exercise stations was set up.

Material

- Monkey bars
- Climbing frame
- Yoga mats
- Rope
- Balls
- ...

Circuit

Circuit games appeal to different muscle groups and improve cardio-vascular fitness. You can adapt them to different fitness levels and perform them in pairs which helps group cohesion.

The coach demonstrates different exercises included in the circuit (e.g. jumping jacks, push-ups, squats, lunges, burpees, mountain climbers, planks). Afterwards, participants perform them in pairs within a time set by the coach. They move from one training station to another without a break; the circuit should run smoothly. The full circuit is repeated 2–3 times, with a short rest break after each round. There is an end with a cool-down.



SESSION 4: POWER TRAINING

In this session, participants are introduced to power training. They discover the benefits, how to build muscle and adopt proper posture. They also learn the distinction between calisthenics and weightlifting.

Material

- Dumbbells
- Fitness equipment with weights

Programme overview

- 1) Group discussion on strength training: calisthenics versus weightlifting.
- 2) Learn different techniques such as overhead press, squat, dead lifts.
- 3) Perform the exercise in pairs, supporting and encouraging each other.

WHAT IS CALISTHENICS?

- **Different type of exercises:** in calisthenics you use your own body weight to exercise, in weightlifting you use external weights such as dumbbells or dumbbells.
- **Muscle use:** in calisthenics, you use several muscle groups at the same time, since you use your own body weight. With weightlifting, you can train specific muscle groups in a more targeted way.
- **Location:** calisthenics can be done anywhere as you don't need external weights. You can train outside in the park, or on the street, or at home in your living room. For weightlifting, you usually have to go to the gym or gym where the necessary equipment is available. Calisthenics is therefore a good way to start strength training for our target group who experience barriers to exercising in groups, or in public places.

EXTRA: INITIATION SELF-DEFENCE

Transgender people do not always feel safe in public places and therefore avoid certain social occasions. In addition, they are much more likely to face all kinds of violence (physical, sexual, material, verbal...) than the cisgender population. The aim of this session was therefore to teach them in a safe environment how to assess unsafe situations and defend themselves or others in case of an attack or threat. For this, we worked with the police. This initially met with resistance by certain participants, but the fact that one of the trainers came out openly about his own experiences with gay bashing (also within the police) created the necessary trust between coaches and participants. We chose this collaboration because we think it is important to lower the threshold to counselling and to tackle prejudice on both sides. The coaches were also able to give interesting tips from their professional experience regarding, among other things, the right to self-defence.

Material

- punching bags

Programme overview

- 1) Sharing personal experiences of gender-based violence
- 2) Warming up and introduction
- 3) Self-defence: the basics

1) Sharing personal experiences

2) Warm-up and introduction

- The importance of being aware of your surroundings and picking up signals of insecurity in time.
- Using verbal self-defence to de-escalate a potentially dangerous situation.
- If verbal self-defence does not help, you can switch to physical self-defence.

3) Zelfverdediging: the basics

- Escape techniques for common holds. For example, when someone grabs your wrist, you can use your other hand to turn around and break free.
- How do you break free from a choke hold?

- Defending yourself by focusing on vulnerable body parts. Participants learned to strike a pad vigorously with their palm. This creates distance and disorients the attacker. They also learned to aim a forward kick at the groin area and to perform several techniques in succession.
- Participants were encouraged to make noise while defending themselves. This was to attract the attention of bystanders. Witnesses are important when falling victim to hate crimes.
- After the physical part, there was room to ask questions.

