

No Time to Eat?

Think twice before taking shortcuts with your health, or your dancing will suffer

by Isaac Lai

Lather, rinse, and repeat. Life as a dancer in a college setting ties you onto to a constantly cycling schedule, forcing you to keep moving with it or fall off. When do you eat? Daily schedules of dancers follow the typical pattern of multiple technique classes back to back, rehearsals, academic classes and coursework tossed into the mix, more rehearsals, and, if there's time, extracurricular activities. These elements were all present in Kristyn Brady's recent *Dance Magazine* article about the schedules of dance students in three college institutions: Juilliard, Indiana University, and Harvard.

If you're in a setting where heavy involvement in performance projects and classes are stressed, there's always pressure to stay busy and active. In fact, when students are not involved in projects, they may develop a sense of disconnect from their department. Performance and studio opportunities provide exposure to life in the professional dance world and offer incredible learning opportunities. However, a major side effect of this scheduling overload is the effect it can have on shaping dietary habits.

As a fourth-year dance major at UCI, I find that when day is fraught with nonstop movement and there's always somewhere to be, some things get pushed back on the list of priorities. Food consumption becomes one of them. Picture this: You wake up to shrill beeping of the alarm penetrating the brief moment of peace you had achieved in sleep. Reaching over to put an end to the annoying intrusion, you feel the ache of your muscles gained from yesterday's technique class. Glancing briefly at the clock through squinted eyes, you notice you have 45

minutes before you have to start the commute to class. Through mental calculation you determine the latest time in which you must get out of bed in order to maximize the last precious moments of sleep possible, forgoing luxuries such as breakfast and lunch preparation. Finally, you set a snooze alarm and return to the tranquil haven from which you were disturbed.

A scene like the one described above is all too familiar among college students, where food preparation is dismissed as a luxury. Students who do not prepare food for the day must resort to buying food on campus, but that becomes impossible at times, given the brief 10 minutes of time before rushing to the next class. This sets up a day where dance students must wait until the late afternoon before a larger gap between classes opens up in order to grab a bite or occasionally “mooch” food off their peers.

In interviews with four UCI dance students, I asked how often prepackaged foods (chips, crackers, protein bars etc.) were used instead of a meal. One student commented that she consumed prepackaged foods with a piece of fruit instead of a meal for the majority of the week. Two students said that they would often skip the meal altogether until late in the day for the majority of the week. All four students noted that their involvements and classes interfered with their normal eating time at least three days out of the week and often more. With mealtimes often pushed off till late in the day, dance students frequently go about their day on near empty stomachs.

Research by Sarah Beck et. al characterized dance as having a “high/heavy” level of intensity. When dance students average about six hours of dancing each day in technique classes and rehearsals, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that their high energy output may not be met calorically by their diets. And, when the body needs more energy without sufficient fuel, physiological symptoms begin to take effect. Most common is the general feeling of fatigue and

decreased muscle power. In an art form where a high level of energy is needed, the effects can be quite noticeable in dancers. Decreased performance due to lack of caloric intake can occasionally be mistranslated as lack of effort or motivation, causing unnecessary criticism directed toward the dancer from the choreographer or professor.

In extreme cases, according to Ashley Doyle-Lucas, female dancers can exhibit Female Athlete Triad (FT), characterized by bone loss, low energy availability, and amenorrhea. The brain utilizes a great deal of energy as well in processing and thinking. The lack of adequate supply with reserves drained from hours spent in technique class prior to arriving in a lecture carries over into performance in academic classes as well. Although sleeping in class is a common stereotype associated with college students, it is also a sign of drained energy reserves in dancers as they sit in academic classes.

Though common and thought to be unavoidable, these negative effects can be combated from the start by taking certain measures. Scheduling is a key aspect in need of modification. Dancers need time during the day to take care of their bodies. For choreographers and faculty working with dance students, awareness and allocating transition time for students between classes to refuel themselves physically and mentally would bring about significant rises in overall performance. Getting food could be easier, too. College athletes, such as those who play basketball, are offered facilitated access to food by means of refrigerator storage in their study hall. Making this accommodation for dance students would help to shape the dietary patterns of those who have to remain on campus throughout the day due to classes, rehearsals, and performances.

In most dance programs, technical and performance skills are emphasized, but there should also be an equal emphasis on proper dietary habits and dancer's health maintenance,

beyond the one or two health lecture courses usually offered. Meanwhile, here are some suggested practices that can help dance students with survival in the current regime of physical activity:

1. Prepare lunch and snacks for the following day the night before.
2. Invest in these protein rich foods requires 0-5 min of prep time: Greek Yogurt: high protein, Egg+avocado: healthy omega3-6 fat, protein, Peanut butter+banana/celery/apple: monosaturated fat, vitamins, Almonds/macadamia nut/pumpkin seeds+grapefruit: monosaturated fat, vitamins, Sweet potato with sea salt+honey: beta-carotene, vitamins
3. Pedialyte as a source of electrolytes instead of water during 4+hour dance days where the body is losing much of those electrolytes by sweat.

Ultimately, prioritizing yourself and wellbeing is the most critical thing you can do. Your body is the vessel by which dance comes to life, and by starting with its care and maintenance, all else will follow.

References

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