

Mental Health in Dance – It's Time to Break the Silence

by João Ducci

Have you ever felt you needed a break from dance, but there was nothing physically wrong with you that would justify missing class? Have you ever had a bad day, and simply thinking of standing in front of a mirror, half-naked, judging yourself and getting yelled at for everything you did wrong, only made you feel worse? Have you ever felt you had your feelings dismissed by a dance teacher or a choreographer and were told to “get over it?” I am positive all of us dancers have been in these situations at least once, but why do they seem so out of our control? Why are we not able to speak of these situations, which clearly have a negative impact on us, with the people who are supposed to be our mentors?

Mental health awareness has been a prominent topic of conversation in recent years. With the help of the internet, people's stories of struggle with mental health, awareness, prevention, and self-care have brought mental health to the forefront of people's health concerns for the first time ever. However, the dance world seems to be behind when it comes to mental health awareness, just as it is when it comes to race, gender, and sexuality issues. Both within the professional field and in academia, the topic of mental health is still taboo, most of the time avoided in its entirety.

It is clear dance educators are stuck in old ways of thinking when it comes to so many things—mental health is just another topic on that list. Depression, anxiety, self-doubt, substance abuse, several types of eating disorders, among other issues, are and have always been extremely prominent among dancers. The “get over it” attitude teachers and choreographers often have towards these, only intensifies the multitude of issues that come with the discipline and rigor of dance. Combining all of that with constant psychological (and sometimes physical) abuse by authoritarian teachers, the mental health of a dancer is constantly on edge.

Throughout time, especially in ballet training, teachers have used pedagogical methodologies and techniques that today would appall any person with minimal anatomical understanding and common sense. Today these “traditional” ways of teaching dance do not stand up against the significant amount of research in injury prevention, physical therapy, and dance science. It is common knowledge among dancers that dance often used to be taught with no regard to alignment, placement, proper anatomical consideration, and injury prevention, much less longevity. Ballet dancers' careers did not last as long as they do today, because their bodies did not withstand such harsh training much past the age of 30. I have heard countless stories of ballet teachers yelling at dancers to crank their turn-out, get their leg higher, go further back in their *port de bras*, and even sometimes physically forcing their students to do so. Today, however, teachers understand they cannot push the physical body carelessly, for the sake of the art form, without being aware of the dancers' physical health. Then why is it so different when it comes to their psychological health?

Teachers should be just as cautious with dancers' mental health as they are with their physical health. We are taught to bow, to listen without questioning, and to constantly pick out our flaws. We are shamed for our bodies, our inability to acquire certain skills, and even our emotions, which are often categorized as dramatic or over-sensitized. We are told to be better and a lot of times not told HOW to

become better. We are taught to be empty vessels, as Robin Lakes discusses in her essay on authoritarian dance pedagogy—blank bodies, subject to training, coaching, choreography, and another person's expression. We almost never hear “good job,” “you've done it,” “I am proud of you.” The responses to our successes are merely a “that's the idea,” or “okay, better...” but our failures are pointed out and scrutinized, most of the time in front of our peers.

And if the problematic treatment dancers receive from authoritarian teachers and choreographers is not enough to be detrimental to their mental health, the competitiveness within the dance world is another huge factor—the constant need to improve to keep up with the field, the lack of financial stability, the ceaseless dismissal of dance as “not a real major or profession,” the never ending cycle of auditioning and being rejected, and being relentlessly told “no matter how good you are, there will always be someone better,” all which continually have a negative impact on dancers.

Some dancers, of course, may have mental health issues that are not specifically related to dance. As much as dance can have such a negative impact on one's mental health, some may be dealing with external things, which are just as valid. The root problem is, dance teachers do not know how to deal with this issue. Whether the problem is dance-related or not, dance teachers seem unaware that mental health is something that affects our performance, focus and ability to learn and improve.

As someone who has dealt with depression and anxiety for years, I wish I had teachers who understood my situation or that I could talk to about things I have gone through. I wish I was at least able to explain to them when I was not feeling well and would have to take it easy in class, or just not dance at all. Poor mental health not only affects your mood, social skills, and cognitive abilities, it also affects the physical body, and being people who are hyper-aware of their bodies, dancers may be even more physically affected. I have struggled many times getting through dance classes when I had really severe anxiety or a depressive episode. It felt as if my body was shutting down. I could not spot turns properly because my vision would become blurry, my muscles ached and stiffened up; it was extremely hard to focus and picking up combinations was a nightmare—all of which was only intensified by the incessant cycle of feeling bad mentally. Which made me dance poorly, which made me feel worse about myself, which then affected me even more physically and so on...

Research has shown “depressed teens reported significantly more impairment in [academic, peer, and family functioning] and physical health-related quality of life, compared with a non-depressed group. Day-to-day functional impairment that accompanies depression is part of the definition of a depressive disorder. Many depressed teens also experience comorbid problems, such as anxiety, substance use disorders, inattention, and hyperactivity” (Lisa Jaycox, et al). Mental health affects all aspects of life, and if dancers are not taking care of it, they cannot possibly dance to the best of their ability, grow as much as they can, and be the artists they intend to be.

Some may argue that if one is not strong enough to handle the harshness and criticism of the dance world, they should just not be in it at all. Not only is this senseless argument hurtful, but it perpetuates the idea that people should not challenge abusive and insensitive teaching methods, and should instead remain complacent with how things are. Black dancers are still barely accepted in the concert dance world, and specifically in ballet, so does this mean all black ballet dancers should just give up trying to change the racist ideals of ballet? Dance is first and foremost a physical form. Should people with disabilities not challenge the ideas of what it means to be a dancer, just because their dancing is limited to what their bodies are able to do? Should every dancer who ever fell out of a pirouette simply stop trying to make those turns happen?

These arguments are similarly problematic to telling someone their mental strength and psychological health should dictate their path in life. We should be challenging people's perceptions of mental health and what it is like to live with mental illness. We should not be complacent and let the dismissal of our struggles shut down our passion for this art form. It may not be a teacher's job to be comforting and act as a counselor, but empathy and support go a long way. If teachers and choreographers were more aware of all aspects of a dancer's health, and were understanding of our limitations, dancers would be able to take better care of themselves without shame or guilt.

As Lakes suggests, we must re-educate our educators. We must dissect the root problems of their authoritarian practices and show them why they are problematic. We must also invest in mental health awareness workshops for dance teachers, coaches, and choreographers. We need a way of instructing these figures who are so essential to our growth as artists and humans on how to properly communicate and support students dealing with mental health problems. We must also address bigger systemic issues within dance companies, studios, universities and other institutions that allow for abusive behavior in the first place, and we must begin implementing counseling services for dancers. There is a lot of progress to make in order to reach a solution to this issue, and much of that change has to come from people in power.

For now, I invite you as fellow dancers to look out for one another and to hold teachers and choreographers accountable for their abusive pedagogical practices. This may seem like an overwhelming problem to tackle, but we can undo much of this by simply talking about it—and the conversation is just getting started.

Works Cited

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