

Need a Day Off? Who Decided Dancers Don't?

Allowing for a “mental health day” off can prevent burnout, so it's time for the dance community to pay attention

By Gianna Acciaccia

Transitioning from COVID protocols back to reality in my university dance department was refreshing after the monotony, but the gear shift was a shock to dance majors. Professional dancers must have felt the same, jumping from lockdown to being back in the studio with no gradual integration was an intense shift.

Coming back to school in a “COVID-free” world and hitting the ground running with dance was a shock to not only the dancer's bodies, but to our mental health as well. The quick onset of dancing sixteen plus hours a week threw me for a mental loop. Throughout my post-COVID undergraduate experience, I constantly wished for a full day to myself; a full reset. Dancers have an especially hard time with their commitments throughout the week. A realistic week of a dancer balances technique classes, rehearsal time, work schedule, and cross training; and for undergraduate dancers, it involves required courses for the dance major, potentially the courses of your second major or additional minor, homework time for academic courses, and club involvements on top of normal life things (like showering, eating, seeing family, sleeping, etc.). Unfortunately, most dancers have to maintain an additional job outside of their career just to keep paying rent. When you spend 12-to-15-hour days for five days of the week, then have weekends full of work and playing catch up, you quickly realize that it's just not sustainable.

Unfortunately for dance majors, their passion is their major, and for professional dancers, their passion is their career, so you surrender to the hustle. You could argue that dancers are masochistic, but my questions are: Do you really need to endure those long days for indefinite periods of time? Does it have to affect your grade or pay if you need a day off for your mental health? How could we make effective changes to help the mental health of dancers in the collegiate and professional spaces?

I suggest that dance organizations and honestly, every institution with employed workers or students, should allow a number of “mental health days” that come with no consequences. My university's dance program allows students one unexcused absence per quarter. This totals three days off over roughly two hundred and eighty days of school per year. Conditions for an “excused absence” include sickness with a doctor's note or family emergency. Reasonably, this is put in place because the course material is taught in-person, and missing one day can affect the benefits for the dancer and set back the class as a whole. However, this threat of a drop in grade for missing class not only puts a lot of stress on the dancers for an extended period of time (about 77% of the year), but also increases the risk of burnout and mental health issues.

Burnout can be defined as “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment among individuals” who overwork themselves in their sport or job (Eklund and DeFreese, 64). This was found in individuals who, unlike dancers, aren't physically embodying passionate emotions throughout the day and on top of physical labor, real-time problem solving, and perfecting every count in a piece. Burnout in dancers can be especially dangerous, because dance is our passion as our major, not just the major we chose to get a well-paid job and please our parents. Emotional exhaustion in something we adore and consider a large part of our identity is extremely detrimental to any

progression of our studies and eventual careers. Another destructive symptom of burnout is depersonalization, as dance innately shares the individual with the audience; their stories, their personality, their emotions. Personally, I have struggled a lot with burnout and know numerous colleagues that have experienced severe burnout to the point where they were stunted in their progression as a dancer or ceased to continue their careers at all.

One of the best solutions to burnout suggested to athletes is rest and time away from the sport. Although dancers do not compete like team-sport or individual-sport athletes, their training is similarly physical. Class is conditioning and practice, rehearsals are scrimmages, somatic practices are recovery techniques, and cross training works in both professions. The National Athletic Trainer's Association states:

Time away from sport is another method of preventing burnout. Being away from the demands of their sport, even for a short period several times a year, provides an athlete with an opportunity to attend to their schoolwork and relationships that are necessary to leading a more rounded life that leads to enhanced motivation once they return to sport" (Sitzler).

Importantly, the National Athletic Trainer's Association puts value on aspects of life outside the sport, like relationships (i.e. non-sport related activities). I hope to see organizations put a similar amount of value on dancers' social lives and personal time, as well as the installation of "mental health days." It would be a cultural shift, and a great step in the right direction.

While taking multiple days or weeks off may not be possible for undergraduate or professional dancers, singular mental health days could potentially help some dancers with progression in their training. I suggest that undergraduates are allotted two "mental health days" a quarter, in which they are excused from all of their courses for the day. This would be recorded with an email to all professors that day specifying that their absence is for a "mental health day" and could potentially involve some sort of evidence to ensure honesty. Proof of a restful day could include a journal entry of their day, a picture gallery of what they did, or even a discussion post. Although this qualifies as extra work given to the already busy dancer, it could be a good compromise for holding those dancers accountable.

For professional dancers, this might be harder to regulate, but ultimately this equates to the idea of vacation time or paid time off in the corporate world. As underfunded as the dance industry is, most dance jobs don't provide livable salaries, but the idea of no consequence for a mental health day could still be instilled in ways that are feasible for each company. These days could be approved ahead of time, like most companies that have paid time off, and chosen in collaboration with the director or choreographer at the time. Another way could be to have company-wide chosen days off for their dancers. Decisions like these, would be decided uniquely to each company.

The American Sociological Association found through quasi-experiments that "vacation alleviates feelings of exhaustion, reduces health complaints, and enhances life satisfaction, although effects seen during the vacation appear to fade out within two to four weeks after the vacation," and that "more frequent vacationing over multiple years of follow-up predicts lower risk of adverse outcomes" (Hartig, Catalano, Ong, Syme, 2002). This study indicates that even taking a single day off every few months or so could have a positive impact on the longevity of a dancer's progression.

My dad has had the same job since he came out of college, for nearly thirty-four years now, and has been able to sustain it with the help of paid vacation time. I admire how much my dad has enjoyed his job and am grateful for the ability to spend time with him on his days off. Our support systems are what allow us to remain human while trying to advance our careers. Most importantly, your support system needs to include yourself. What can you do to make your life the most successful and pleasurable? Would a day off help you in bettering yourself?

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