

Just breathe—it's the key to better health and better dancing

Ever felt like your mind and body are somehow not speaking? Yoga and breath awareness can lead to more artistry and less stress

by Lily von Blanck

Dance is an art form that transforms the body into both a vessel and a voice, a medium through which emotion takes form, and movement becomes meaning. It should be the ultimate practice of embodiment—an intimate dialogue between mind and body, breath and motion. And yet, paradoxically, many dancers experience a profound disconnection from the very bodies they rely upon to create.

Body disconnection, as I've come to understand it, is the unsettling sense of living outside yourself—cut off from your body's signals, emotions, and rhythms. Somatic counselor Deidre Keating frames this as a rupture between the psyche and soma, a split that often stems from external pressures or trauma. Reginald Ray, a somatic spiritual teacher, calls it a detachment from our sense perceptions and even from the basic experience of being alive. However we choose to conceptualize it, the outcome is the same: when dancers are taught to prioritize appearance over sensation—to perform rather than to feel—disconnection from own's own body can become second nature.

I understand this paradox intimately: for as long as I can remember, I have identified as a dancer. I grew up immersed in the world of competition dance, performing in recitals and story ballets, dedicating myself to the pursuit of technical perfection. Yet, despite this deep involvement, I often felt a strange sense of disconnect from my body—movement never translated to true embodiment. My body felt like something I controlled rather than something I lived in. When peers spoke about how dance made them feel free or fully themselves, I couldn't relate. I envied that kind of connection, but I didn't know how to access it. For me, dancing often felt like performing at my body, not with it.

That disconnect didn't come from nowhere. It was shaped by the studio spaces I trained in, where mirrors lined every wall and correction was constant. Western dance pedagogy is deeply influenced by Cartesian dualism, in which the body is treated as an object to be shaped, refined, and corrected (Roche, 2016). From an early age, we're taught to prioritize aesthetics and performance over internal experience. Dancers often learn to analyze their bodies from a third-person perspective, which can weaken interoceptive awareness—the ability to notice and respond to internal bodily cues. Sociologist Aimie Purser (2019) argues that the mirror, though a valuable tool, can easily become a distraction from the dancer's lived experience, pushing them toward image and away from sensation.

My own disconnect deepened as I entered adolescence, a time when many dancers begin to internalize the industry's unspoken demands about body image. By seventh grade, I had developed anorexia nervosa, believing that a leaner frame would make me a better ballet dancer. Perfectionism and the need for control dictated my relationship with both my art and my body. I

pushed myself to maintain an aesthetic ideal, adhering to rigid discipline in both my technique and my eating habits. Yet, even as I reached the physical form I thought was necessary for success, I still felt unmoored, as if my body were an external entity rather than an integral part of me.

It's hardly surprising that I experienced such a profound sense of disconnection, given what research reveals about anorexia's impact on mind-body awareness. Anorexia intensifies body disconnection, making it even harder for dancers to build a healthy relationship with their bodies. Researchers have found that individuals with anorexia often struggle with interoceptive awareness—the ability to recognize internal bodily states—which blurs the line between physical sensations and emotional experiences (Tantillo et al, 2013). Starvation dulls these signals even further, severing the connection between mind and body and reinforcing a cycle of detachment. In dance, where internal cues are already devalued in favor of external form, this disconnection can feel like the norm.

When dancers lose the ability to trust their bodies, they also lose a vital source of movement's expressive and healing potential. And in the world of competitive dance, these dynamics don't exist in a vacuum. They're reinforced by the environment—by mirrors, costumes, coaching, and constant comparison. In a 2022 study looking at how teenage dancers in competitive environments, researchers found that young dancers are especially vulnerable to body image issues, shaped by the expectations of those around them (Doria and Numer). These ideals become so deeply ingrained that they stop feeling like external judgments. They start to sound like your own voice.

Even after I had technically "recovered" from my eating disorder, I found that the disconnect persisted—and, in some ways, grew worse. I developed chronic health conditions, including gut dysfunction and hormonal imbalances, that further alienated me from my body. Unlike an injury, where pain signals an immediate problem, these conditions were insidious, difficult to diagnose, and resistant to intervention. No matter how many specialists I saw, nothing seemed to help. It was as if my body was malfunctioning beyond my control, leaving me frustrated and detached from it entirely. Research suggests that major bodily changes—whether due to trauma, surgery, or prolonged illness—can force individuals to reevaluate their connection with their bodies, often leading to heightened awareness of its limitations (Ravn et al, 2016). For me, this shift made my body feel foreign, an unpredictable entity that I struggled to inhabit.

Breathwork became an essential tool in reclaiming my sense of embodiment. Breathing is often overlooked in favor of nutrition and exercise, yet it is crucial for energy production, movement stability, and overall well-being (Franklin, 2018). With humans taking roughly 20,000 breaths a day, breathwork can significantly impact athletic performance and mental clarity. Functional breathing exercises, such as those used in yoga, dance, and Pilates, cultivate adaptability and enhance movement efficiency.

Despite its significance, breath was never something I truly integrated into my movement. While breathwork was introduced in dance classes and emphasized at the collegiate level, particularly in modern dance courses, I spent years treating it as an afterthought rather than an active component of movement. The separation between breath and motion had been reinforced by

years of overlooking its importance, and though I understood its theoretical benefits, I failed to apply them in practice.

It wasn't until I began practicing heated yoga sculpt—where instructors consistently paired breath with movement, cueing inhales and exhales in sync with specific actions—that I fully grasped the power of breath. In those moments, breath became my anchor: it allowed me to withstand the intensity of the heat, commit to the final reps when my muscles burned, and stay grounded when my instinct was to give up. It reminded me of my intention—to grow, not just physically, but in discipline, presence, and self-trust—and brought me back to that purpose when my focus began to fray. Breath became the thread that pulled me through challenge and into clarity; it steadied my balance, fortified my strength, and communicated to my brain that my body was capable. What had once been a peripheral concept in dance classes became central; I realized that breath wasn't just an accompaniment to movement but a vital force supporting my balance, strength, and endurance.

As I grew more intentional with breathwork, I started to reconnect with my body in ways traditional training had never nurtured. Yoga created space to listen inward rather than perform outward, and that simple shift—pausing to ask “How do I feel?” instead of “How do I look?”—quietly transformed my relationship with movement. Brodie and Lobel (2004) affirm that breath is the first key to reconnecting mind and body, grounding dancers in sensation and presence. This shift echoes findings by Daubenmier et al. (2005), who observed that individuals who practice yoga report lower self-objectification, greater body satisfaction, and fewer disordered eating symptoms. James (2021) likewise notes that breath awareness and body responsiveness offer dancers a more expressive, nurturing alternative to rigid technique, fostering a kind of presence that supports rather than disciplines the body. Breath became more than a background function—it became a bridge back to embodiment.

Bringing this awareness into the studio allowed me to approach movement with a new sense of embodiment—one shaped by interoceptive awareness rather than external validation. For the first time, I felt truly connected to my body as a dancer. With this newfound intentionality, I no longer viewed movement as something to execute perfectly but as something to inhabit fully. Dance became more than a technical pursuit; it became an elite movement form—an intersection of artistry, physicality, and expression. And while aesthetic perfection is no longer my primary goal, I would argue that my dancing has become more compelling as a result. Breath, after all, is functional—it enhances movement efficiency, expands dynamic range, and allows for a deeper integration of strength and flow (Franklin, 2018). Rather than working against my body in pursuit of an ideal, I now move with it, which has elevated both the feeling and the form of my dancing.

Embodiment is not something that happens passively within the studio—it must be cultivated intentionally, both inside and outside of structured training. If connection to the body is contingent upon performance goals or external validation, then it remains fragile and conditional. My journey has shown me that true embodiment comes from engaging with movement beyond the studio—where breath, rather than correction, becomes the guide. Practicing movement in non-evaluative spaces allowed me to reconnect with my body in a way that traditional dance training never had. Once I tapped into my body's internal rhythms and sensations beyond

performance-based movement, I was able to bring that awareness back into the studio with me. Now, I realize how powerful dance can be in supporting body connection when the focus shifts from external aesthetics and validation to interoceptive awareness and presence.

Ironically, now that I am pursuing psychology rather than dance professionally, I feel more like a dancer than ever before. Though I still experience perplexing health challenges that at times distance me from fully understanding my body, I no longer wait for them to resolve before living fully. Instead, I support my body where it needs me most, continually tapping into it through breathwork and intentional movement both inside and outside the studio.

I am eager to see the dance community embrace these shifts, and I hope to contribute to this conversation as both a dancer and a future psychologist. Movement is no longer just performance—it is home. When dance prioritizes connection over control, more dancers can experience the embodiment that should have been theirs all along.

Lily von Blanck is graduating with a degree in Dance and Psychological Sciences and plans to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology with an emphasis on health psychology. She is highly interested in emerging research on multidimensional approaches to eating disorders, examining risk factors across systems and exploring how behavioral, cognitive, and movement-based interventions can work together to support recovery.

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