

The “ideal ballet body” myth has hurt so many dancers—can we break that mold?

At the studio level, teachers could bring in nutrition experts to produce healthy dancers with enough energy to perform and thrive

[Content Warning: This Essay Discusses Eating Disorders and Body Dysmorphia]

by Lauren Clarke

From the first moment that I stepped into the ballet studio, I knew this place was for me. I had hopes of thriving and growing in this newfound space. I was drawn to ballet’s beauty, rigor, and tradition. As I began to grow and get older my body began to change in the best way possible; I was becoming a woman. Yet at my studio that was seen as unacceptable, as if we had any ability to stop puberty.

I saw friends of mine starting to develop eating disorders. and they were being praised by teachers for their actions. I saw my friends actively changing the way their body looked, and I thought the only way I could catch my teachers’ attention was by starving myself. I would skip meals here and there, but my body wasn’t presenting the drastic changes that my friends were experiencing. However, my teachers noticed that I was getting “a little thinner,” as they would say, and encouraged the behavior by offering some other solutions for me to lose weight. They offered diet plans and workouts. I was even offered a contract to be a part of their elite junior company with a stipulation in the fine print: “you must lose at least 5 pounds in the next two weeks, and then we can have you be a part of our company.”

I wanted to sign the contract, but my parents read it and were not happy. I did not sign the contract that year. It was at this moment that my parents finally got a sense of what was going on behind the closed doors. I silently struggled with an eating disorder for almost two years and felt like I was stuck and couldn’t get help. Eventually, I found help and was taken care of. I tell this story not to scare you or for you to feel bad for me, but to show you that this is a real problem that needs to be talked about.

Here is the problem: there are underlying pressures that characterize the world of ballet, and one of them is the pressure to fit a certain body ideal at any cost. These ideals don’t just shape the way dancers look; they shape the way we see ourselves, what we eat, and the way we push our bodies beyond healthy boundaries. The ballet community has long supported a rigorous aesthetic ideal that fosters negative body image and eating disorders, leading many dancers, including myself, to strive to meet unrealistic expectations. By bringing in nutritional education, changing ballet’s beauty standards, and supporting mental health, we can create a future where dancers don't just survive but thrive.

I have watched throughout the years as dancers, including myself, have criticized ourselves for being the wrong size or the wrong aesthetic from the one the industry was looking for.

Overlooking eating disorders and the fear of weight gain are still prevalent. In a 2022 analysis of eating disorders among young dancers, Nicole Doria and Matthew Numer discuss the means by which ballet culture inscribes adverse body image assumptions, leading dancers to take up restrictive eating in fear of criticism or rejection. They state that “young girls believe that their bodies and their weight are easy to access and manipulate” (Doria, Numer, 3).

I witnessed my own friends struggle with eating disorders as it was something praised at my dance studio. My teachers believed that they had the ability to influence and manipulate these young girls, and having so much power in their hands, they abused that power. I know and understand firsthand the cost it extracts, not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well.

Sports dietician Monika Saigal emphasizes that dancers require a balanced diet to ensure that they have enough energy and can avoid getting injured, but despite such books of advice, most of us are not well informed on how to fuel our bodies. I have done it myself—dancing half the day with no food in my system, believing that my hunger was a sign of commitment and dedication. But depriving ourselves is not going to turn us into better dancers; it will leave us more susceptible to injury. I think that teachers could do a better job in implementing nutrition education into their curriculum. I am not expecting for teachers themselves to educate their students but advocating that they bring in specialists, such as a nutritionist or registered dietitian.

I believe that it is important to have professionals and a third party educating students. Many times, my dance teachers would offer “nutritional advice,” but it often all sounded the same; limit how many calories you take in, no sugar, and eat only two meals a day. So not only were they offering this advice without sufficient expertise, but they were creating a cycle of unhealthy eating habits for all of their students. If we want to dance at our best, we have to start making modifications and implement nutritional changes into our routines; that starts with educating yourself and finding what works for you and your body.

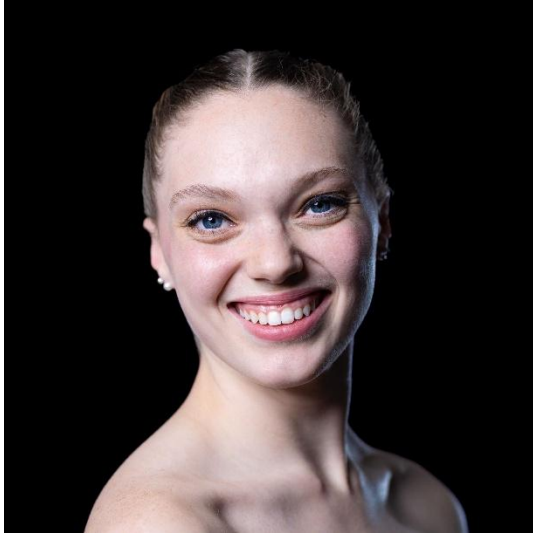
As a teacher and dancer, I am committed to contributing to a healthier dance culture. In my own classroom, I try to open conversations with my students about self-care and body positivity. I strive to create an environment where dancers are admired for their strength and artistry, rather than their appearance. My corrections in class never revolve around the way a dancer’s body looks. If I do give feedback, I am careful to present anatomically correct corrections. I never pull my students aside to have a “little chat” with them about how they “have been looking the last couple of days.” My classes are supportive and focused on technique, not comparing bodies to an impossible “ideal.”

And when the opportunity arises, I plan on bringing in a trained professional to talk to my students about nutrition advice and to educate them. As a teacher, I have a small responsibility to teach my students how to be a human being and to teach them how to care for themselves. Parents entrust me with their children in hopes that I teach them well, not just in technique but also as young people. I hold that responsibility to the highest degree because that's what I was called to do as an educator.

The impossible ballet body ideal has hurt so many dancers, but we can break that mold. I believe that if we could get studios and teachers to use some of these approaches, we might begin to undo the hurtful stereotypes that have crept into ballet throughout the years. By placing the mental

health of dancers, body image issues, and healthy eating first, we can make ballet a healthier and more inclusive art form. As dancer and teacher, I am committing myself to institute these reforms in my own practice—so the next generation of dancers will be empowered, not diminished.

We must begin to shed the outdated notions that are holding us back and begin to create a culture in which all dancers, regardless of body type, can truly thrive. It's our turn to break these harmful traditions and foster a more inclusive, health-conscious dance culture. The future of ballet is at stake and it is up to us to help change the mold.



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Works Cited

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