

Big little secrets: Traumatic Experiences in the Dance World

The current *#MeToo* Movement has shed light on the sadly widespread phenomenon of sexual harassment and assault, that women and men from all walks of life generally experience in silence and in shame. A nationwide online study conducted in 2018 shows that 81% of women and 43% of men report having been victims of some form of sexual harassment and/or assault (verbal, physically aggressive, cyber) in their lifetime. Women with disabilities and men coming from socially marginalized groups (disabled, gay, bisexual) are more likely to report experiencing harassment and assault. Women are five times more at risk than men. Half of these women range in age from 15 to 24 years and 80% know their attacker. Most assaults remain unreported because the victim either denies the aggression, blames herself, or fears negative consequences of disclosure (i.e. losing her job, creating a family crisis; facing justice procedures). Sexually harassed males also feel humiliated and suffer in silence. In their effort to soothe the pain, many will develop alcohol and drug abuse, and risk-taking behavior.

In the USA, approximately 5 of every 10 women and 6 of every 10 men go through at least one trauma in their lives. Males are more likely to experience physical assaults and accidents while females tend to be victims of child abuse and sexual assaults. Depending on the gravity and nature of the traumatic event (i.e. threat to one's life or physical integrity; sexual violence; repeated physical, verbal and/or sexual abuse; child abuse; accidents; natural disasters), victims will later experience various degrees of depression and anxiety that may subside over time, if they are able to adapt to the situation. However, 20% to 25% of trauma victims will develop a *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD). Symptoms include racing heartbeat; exaggerated startle responses; insomnia and nightmares, loss of concentration, memory blanks; trauma flashbacks; negative thoughts about oneself and the world; feelings of shame and guilt; bursts of anger and/or tears; numbness, panic attacks, loss of joy.

According to research, 7 to 8% of the population will suffer from PTSD symptoms, once during their lifetime. Women are twice at risk than men. Furthermore, intentional relational trauma (i.e. sexual or nonsexual assault) seems more psychologically difficult to manage than nonintentional events (i.e. accidents, natural disasters). A recent American study shows that the percentage of PTSD symptoms climbs up to 25% for dancers and 13% for athletes. The main types of traumatic events reported by dancers during their practice are often governed by *The Law of Silence* (the tradition of not revealing physical or emotional pain to others).

Dancers' main sources of trauma

1. Self-abuse: Normalization of discomfort, pain and injury

Early in their training, dancers learn to repress bodily feelings (i.e. hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain), in passionate pursuit of art excellence. Warning signs of physical imbalance are ignored, being falsely considered as *par for the course*, because above all, *the show must go on*. In the long run, unattended needs lead to injuries, often viewed by the dancers themselves as *war trophies*. The desire to meet aesthetic ideals and high performance standards and the tough competitiveness of the dance world may lead to a misuse of the dancing body, by oneself or by someone else. Since women outnumber men, a woman competes even more to get scarce dance roles and may fear losing her job, if she isn't perfect. Many dancers feel insecure, so most of them won't ask for a overdue break, during a rehearsal; won't express their pain nor take a day off, when needed. Many report dancing injured, developing eating disorders or over-rehearsing, to the point of exhaustion, which may lead to PTSD symptoms and other similar reactions.

2. Director/teacher's verbal abuse

Many professional dancers report that company directors are often difficult to deal with and prone to verbal abuse (i.e. constant comparisons, criticism and correction toward a dancer, in the presence of others; general sexual remarks; comments on one's artistic ability or physicality). They feel compelled to endure any verbal maltreatment encountered, due to a power imbalance with dance directors and teachers: dancers are so easily replaceable, because the offer exceeds the demand. In order to maintain company position or job status *among the chosen few*, a dancer may become vulnerable to abuse. As a result of repeated verbal attacks, one may develop an overcritical inner voice and feel *never good enough*, despite objective success. Many harsh words of authoritarian dance figures stay ingrained in dancers' psyche for years, to the point of breaking their souls and their careers, if they fail to develop counter measures. Having experienced child abuse/neglect or been raised by intrusive parents (i.e. stage moms), puts one more at risk.

3. Sexual abuse: The dancing body as an object

Sexual harassment and misconduct is unfortunately common place in dancers' experience : inappropriate touch in the dance studio, leading to sexual behavior; covert hotel visits to minor dancers, from older male instructors during tours; unpleasant sexual encounters with company members who occupy a position of authority; even sexual assaults have been reported by several female dancers. Despite lack of scientific studies on the subject, it seems quite likely that many young men also suffer from sexual abuse in the dance community. Most sexual transgressions remain unreported at the time, because the dancer is often promoted afterwards to a lead role, in exchange of sexual favors. Victims are also reduced to silence out of shame and fear, either of being punished by aggressors who have the power to *make or to break* their career, or fear of being labeled as « hotel dancers ». Finally, like victims of domestic or family violence, a sexually abused dancer may get caught in the emotional web of an intimate love/hate relationship with the aggressor, which can lead to toxic guilt feelings if she or he speaks up.

4. Secondhand trauma: Portraying roles that involve extreme violence, sexuality and/or emotional distress

Violation and injury (physical, sexual and psychological), for better or worse, are aspects of life and therefore figure significantly in much dramatic storytelling. However, in performances of such violence, little attention is paid to potential indirect traumatization of performers, and even audiences. Such elements of performances are deemed merely fictions, and are therefore not considered harmful. However, experts in trauma have found that the body does not distinguish between the fiction and the bodily experience. Therefore, greater attention is needed is to prepare those participating in performances of violence, to find ways to healthily ‘take on’ and ‘shake off’ such experiences, which could leave them otherwise feeling uncomfortable, overwhelmed or disconnected.

In conclusion, it isn’t unusual for dancers to experience abuse and trauma, thus increasing the risk of developing PTSD symptoms. The *Law of Silence* in the dance community and the willingness to put everything on the line, in the hope of gaining artistic advancement can lead to the loss of mental and physical well-being, satisfying social relationships and other personal dreams.

What measures can be taken to prevent abuse?

- Learn to recognize abusive situations, for oneself and for fellow dancers (i.e. name calling, harsh looks).
- Develop self-awareness and self-acceptance of bodily feelings, personal qualities and difficulties.
- Identify personal traps that make you more vulnerable to abuse (i.e. need for approval, excess ambition) and warn others of potentially dangerous situations.
- Set firm and clear boundaries with oneself and with others, in order to respect your personal limits (i.e. don’t accept to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable).
- Have constructive discussions with fellow dancers and teachers, concerning abuse and victimization.
- Build positive and trusting relationships, in and out of the dance world, to prevent isolation.

How to cope with trauma?

- Talk about your traumatic experience and feelings: with loving people you trust (i.e. family, friends).
- Seek professional counseling: especially if you have PTSD symptoms, have been a victim of child abuse and/or have experienced unhealthy family situations.
- Speak up: to trusted authority figures in the dance community, in order to get support and intervention (i.e. health care provider, dance teacher, company director).
- Act upon the abusive situation : make it cease (i.e. verbal intimidation). Do not continue to endure violence, in the hope that *it will somehow go away*. All forms of violence usually escalate.
- Engage in expressive art forms (dance improvisation, creative drawing, play therapy) and favorite activities (sport, music): enhances pleasure and self-empowerment; helps buffer emotional suffering; creates a sense of meaning and engagement, in self and the world.

Additional information

<http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Full-Report-2018-National-Study-on-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault.pdf>

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/women/women-trauma-and-ptsd.asp>

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/women/sexual-assault-females.asp>

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/types/violence/men-sexual-trauma.asp>

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Thompson, Paula & Jacque, Victoria (2015). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Psychopathology. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists- PAMA Journal*, September, 158-162.

Youth Protection Advocates in Dance : www.ypad4change.org

Disclaimer: *The information presented here is to help guide and inform the dancer and training staff, it is not meant to take the place of the advice of a medical professional. This information is provided by Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.*

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