

Dance/USA

Task Force on Dancer Health

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

Part One: Reflections on Dancer Body Image and Self-Esteem

When looking at your reflection in the mirror of the dance studio, what do you usually look at? What do you say to yourself about your own body? According to research, chances are you will focus on what you perceive as your imperfect body parts, weight, size, shapes or lines and compare them unfavorably to your dance hero or to other dancers in the studio. Furthermore, you may not be aware that your dance buddies are experiencing the exact same thing, and may even be comparing themselves to you!

Many dancers report being unsatisfied with themselves, regardless of dance genres or artistic success. Dancers want to look better, to do better. Body and personal dissatisfaction may hinder performers' joy, passion, and mental and physical wellness. The following three-part series of papers aims to help you reflect on dancer body image and self-esteem issues. Part One defines and explains the concepts of body image and self-esteem. Part Two discusses risk factors and warning signs to be aware of. Part Three provides coping tools and helpful resources.

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

Body image is defined many ways across psychology and dance/sport literature. For the purpose of this paper, body image relates both to your bodily experience and to the way you feel about your body. Internal body image is made of sensations such as proprioception (e.g., feeling your body moving in space) and bodily states (e.g. fatigue). External body image is based on perceptions, attitudes, and feelings concerning your physical appearance reflected in the mirror. It is intimately associated with beliefs about how that body is perceived and judged by others. This image is shaped by cultural ideals regarding physical abilities and body attractiveness. In other words, body image is a complex network of images that combines what you feel in your body and how you perceive and evaluate your physical attributes (e.g., looks, height, weight, extension, turnout, hypermobility).

Body image plays a vital role in the voluntary control of posture and movement, motor learning, and coping abilities in relation to outside demands. It also contributes to the formation of personal identity (feeling unique and whole as an individual). Body image begins to develop early in childhood and continues to evolve positively or negatively throughout teenage years and

even adulthood, depending on the nurturing of significant adults and peers, social and cultural factors and life experiences. Puberty, in particular, creates great physical and psychological turmoil because of rapid changes and increasing awareness of social pressures that may temporarily alter body image. During this period, some growing dancers may feel empowered in being eligible to adult dance roles, while others may feel insecure and uncoordinated in their new adult-sized body and will need some time to adjust.

Body image is especially important to dancers, given that your body is the instrument that expresses this moving art form, to be viewed and appreciated by the audience. During years of intense training, you condition your body and learn to perfect complex moves, and even gymnastic moves, in the hopes of mastering your craft and succeeding as a performer. According to research, dancers develop two body images during training: an awareness of the physical body based on ongoing proprioception, and the ideal body forged by aesthetic ideals. Internal body images such as back tension merge with external body images (e.g. turnout, height of arabesque), and self-comparisons to other dancing bodies and to dance ideals. Over time, dancers will perceive their bodies according to physical sensations and appearance, artistic goals and demands placed on them, and level of ability compared to their peers.

Many experienced artists consider the joy of dancing well worth all the time and effort invested, despite the added pressures they may perceive to perform perfectly or to look a certain way. To progress in this athletic art, dancers develop a sharp eye for detail, often scrutinizing their physical appearance and technical accomplishments to detect flaws they can further work on toward an image or movement they perceive as perfect. In the eyes of the beholder, perceived flaws can sometimes falsely be considered failures rather than personal attributes or challenges. Eventually, the high demands of the profession merge with dancers' identity and views of the body-instrument. This potentially creates a heavy toll on body image and self-esteem, while possibly heightening injury risk and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem may be defined as your overall subjective sense of personal value regardless of life circumstances. How much you appreciate yourself largely depends on maintaining a delicate balance between feeling competent in the face of life challenges, and worthy as a human being according to your personal values. Self-esteem relates to judgment calls of your inner critic, and not necessarily to your objective success as a person or an artist.

Self-esteem fluctuates all the time, depending on the context, the sector involved (e.g., dance, social circle), the moment in life, and the nurturing of family and social ties (e.g. parents, dance directors, academic and dance teachers). Typically, your opinion about yourself heightens during childhood but becomes unstable through adolescence, due to the onset of puberty and the many challenges to be faced. Social acceptance and successful experiences become

crucial at that time, to help young dancers develop a sense of personal worth and competence. Self-esteem continues to evolve over a lifetime according to personal choices, experiences of being genuine with oneself and others, and personal and social success.

Furthermore, body-esteem and self-esteem may depend on the social context you are in. A study conducted by Van Zelst (2004) with ballet and contemporary dancers (mostly females) showed that dancers judge their bodies more negatively during a technique class than on stage or in a social event. This may be due to training practices that reinforce body objectification and self-criticism. Ballet dancers scored lower on self-esteem than did their contemporary dancer counterparts. According to the researchers, ballet's strict ideals can contribute to feelings of inadequacy.

Regardless of objective success and dance genre, many artists tend to feel dissatisfied with their physique and dance performances and compare themselves negatively to dance idols and dancers they admire. A recent self-report survey conducted by *Minding The Gap*, showed that 44% of college dancers had self-esteem issues also linked to feelings of depression, anxiety, and social physique anxiety (feeling over-conscious of how others judge your body).

CONCLUSION

Most dancers experience occasional emotional highs and lows, due to the high demands of training and performance. Regardless of your successes or setbacks, it may be helpful to consider yourself as much more than your dancing, no matter how passionate you are about your art! In your daily efforts to strive for excellence, keep in mind that you are a valuable asset as a person within and outside the dance world. You are a skilled artist and dancer, but you also have many other strengths, qualities, and talents. Your body is capable of incredible and beautiful feats, and you are also more than a body. Embracing your unique richness as a human being and dancing while being more attuned to body sensations and sheer joy rather than trying to look perfect, will enhance your body image and self-esteem. Feeling better about yourself in general acts as a protective factor that enhances personal wellness, and alleviates harsh self-judgements and feelings of depression or anxiety on bad days.

This being said, we encourage you to be mindful of repeated feelings of self-depreciation and negative thoughts about your body that may eventually lead to mental health struggles and unconstructive life habits. Part Two of this series may help you pinpoint risk factors that often weaken dancers' body image, self-esteem and create signs of distress to watch out for.

Part 2 of the Mirror, Mirror on the Wall series will discuss risk factors and warning signs. Part 3 will address coping strategies and how to seek help when needed or desired.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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EDUCATIONAL LINKS

www.WeAreMindingTheGap.org

www.verywellmind.com/what-is-self-esteem-2795868

Disclaimer: The information on dancer body image and self-esteem contained in this paper is intended to help guide and inform the dancer. 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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