

Dance/USA

Task Force on Dancer Health

Dancers and Food: A Relationship Worth Improving

A dancer's relationship with food is personal, unique, and requires work to keep it healthy, just like any relationship. This paper is written for those wondering if their diets or mindset around their diet may be such that it could lead to disordered eating. This paper emphasizes seeking support and guidance. If you find yourself noticing thoughts or practicing behaviors that include restricting food or that cause anxiety, shame, or guilt regarding how you are feeding and caring for yourself, gently read on. You can replace those thoughts and behaviors with a healthier set of actions that will support your hard-earned career and precious health and well-being.

UNDERSTAND YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

Everything you do requires that you make a choice. However, when those choices become a rigid habit or a "position" that you cannot veer from, this may cause problems in your food relationship. This inflexibility in dietary habits can lead to disordered eating that can disrupt your physical and mental health. Being open to a wide range of food choices can optimize your dance performance, may prevent illness or injury, and often improves your satisfaction with yourself and career.

Diet culture is everywhere! People diet for many reasons. No matter how well-intentioned, restrictive diets usually fail because in some way they omit or demonize foods or food groups without solid medical reasoning, except in the case of necessary restrictions such as allergies. These restrictive diets can cause issues with deprivation, guilt, and shame. They can also risk unbalanced nutrition. Dancers need to support healthy functioning bodies. It can be difficult to tell when the line between dieting and disordered eating is crossed. Disordered eating can include: severe restriction; debilitating beliefs and attitudes related to food; paralyzing fear of eating more, losing control, or gaining weight; isolation from family and friends; and an inability to participate in many aspects of life including school and career.

Here are some indications that you might benefit from improving your relationship with food:

- Feeling guilty about eating.
- Avoiding or restricting foods that are "bad" for you.
- Developing a long list of rules surrounding the foods you can and cannot eat.
- Feeling stress and anxiety when eating in social settings due to the fear of what others may think of your food choices.
- Not trusting your body to keep you in balance.

So, where do you start? The following are suggestions for an improved attitude towards food, health, and well-being.

IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

Here are some goals to get you started:

- Allow yourself to eat the food you enjoy, and enjoy the food you eat.
- Begin learning and practicing intuitive eating: this starts with listening to and respecting your body's natural hunger cues. Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full whenever possible.
- No foods are off-limits (unless you are allergic or it is medically necessary).
- Reduce how frequently you step on the scale, and try to view the number on the scale as neutral.
- Don't let other people's opinions dictate which foods you eat.
- Understand that you are not defined by the foods you eat.
- Enjoy all foods in moderation (again, not including allergies or medical necessity).
- Choose foods that make you feel your best both mentally and physically.
- Avoid fad diets and restrictive diets.
- Make food choices that are primarily based on satiety and nutritional balance, rather than a caloric limit.

It is one thing to hope for change, but it is another to try to make things happen. You have bodily autonomy and have your own history and preferences with food. You also deserve to have a relationship with food that is rewarding, healthy, and supportive. It comes down to incorporating choices and beliefs through a filter of self-love and body wellness that is balanced and not extreme. Surround yourself with supportive people. Get the facts on nutrition and health from reliable resources, such as the ones listed below. Begin to challenge your thoughts and behaviors if they are not serving you in a healthy way. This doesn't happen overnight, but it is worth the time and effort.

When looking for help in developing a better relationship with food and health, consider nutrition therapy with a registered and experienced dietitian and counseling with a licensed and experienced psychotherapist. Each person may be struggling with individual fears and beliefs and deserves individual attention. Below are some resources for more information and support.

REACH OUT FOR HELP

If you've identified that you could use some help developing and improving your relationship with food, there are many relevant professionals who can help you. Some professionals even specialize in treating dancers with disordered eating. These healthcare providers can help you navigate your relationship with food in ways that support your training load and prevent injuries while balancing and improving your mental health. Here are some examples of various professionals and how they can help:

- Athletic Trainers and Physical Therapists can help you locate a specialized professional relevant to you and help you coordinate and navigate your care.
- Registered Dietitians can help with nutrition education, meal planning, and relationships with food and how to incorporate these into your life.
- Psychiatrists are physicians specializing in psychiatry who can determine and prescribe medications as needed.
- Psychologists, Therapists, Counselors, and Social Workers can help you cope with anxiety and fear around food, exercise, and body image as well as other relevant mental health concerns through talk therapy, coping skills, and more.
- Support Groups are often facilitated by a relevant professional. They are a great way to get support from people going through similar difficulties and are often a free or low-cost option.
- Eating Disorder Specialists are multidisciplinary professionals who pursue additional educational opportunities and experience in treating disordered eating.

If you feel comfortable, you can ask for recommendations in your community or from your current healthcare providers. Additionally, or alternatively, you can use the resources below to search for professionals in your community who are listed on these databases as specialists. The support is out there if you feel you are in a position where you could benefit from it. Every dancer deserves to dance their best and feel their best, and having a healthy relationship with food is an important piece of this.

RESOURCES: DATABASES, EDUCATION, AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Help & Support/ National Eating Disorders Association
<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support>

The Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness
<https://findedhelp.com/>

Project HEAL
<https://www.theprojectheal.org/>

The American Dietetic Association/Find an Expert
<https://www.eatright.org/for-teen>

Association for Size Diversity and Health
<https://asdah.org/health-at-every-size-haes-approach/>

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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Disclaimer: The information on dancers' relationships with food 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. (Times New Roman 12)

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