

Dance/USA

Task Force on Dancer Health

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL...

Reflections on Dancer Body Image and Self-Esteem

Part 3: Coping Skills and Helpful Resources

As we have seen in Part 2 of this series, many social and personal factors may be involved at any given time, to influence how you feel about your physical appearance and abilities as a dancer. Being mindful of the impact of these factors is key to taking a healthy step back when your inner tyrant wakes up on a gloomy day or after a challenging situation. This reminds you to not always believe your thoughts, especially the self-defeating ones!

Practicing daily self-care is helpful for strengthening your body image and self-esteem. It also helps build resilience and coping skills for the normal challenges of life as well as the demands of dance. Below, you will find a list of helpful coping skills and self-care practices you may want to implement in your daily routine. These skills can help you stay attuned to your inner self and personal values. The more you practice them, the more you will cherish who you are and what you experience in dance and in life, in good times and in bad times.

Coping Skills and Self-Care

- Build self-awareness to help you discover and appreciate who you are as a person, not just as a dancer. Practice listening without judgment to immediate sensations, thoughts, feelings, or behaviors.
- Let go of the mirror, especially while dancing! Focus on your breathing and body sensations to raise moment-to-moment awareness of your body (somatic awareness). Feel the moves from the inside as you glide through space with joy.
- View yourself as a whole person rather than hyper-fixating or criticizing specific body parts or attributes. Learn to embrace the unique beauty of your body, at every stage of your life. Learn about body positivity and body neutrality, and determine what makes the most sense for you.
- Make a list of 10 non-physical things you like about yourself and refer back to them often (e.g., sense of humor, generosity).

- Identify toxic thought patterns such as all-or-nothing thinking, generalizations, and “should”-ing (e.g. Instead of saying to yourself “I should eat this salad”, try “I choose to eat this salad that looks yummy and contains the nutrients I need”).
- Develop positive self-talk: pinpoint harsh self-judgments and rigid thinking. Replace negative thoughts with constructive and realistic affirmations (e.g., I can learn to do this move better. I can only do my best for today).
- Identify self-defeating comparisons to unrealistic standards or other dancers, and release them through positive self-talk and reframing (e.g. My body is unique).
- To stay balanced and motivated in your dance, maintain helpful life habits, such as sufficient sleep (including both active and total rest), adequate nutrition, relaxation and slow breathing, grounding techniques, and mindful meditation.
- Connect with your support networks, such as friends, family, and mental health professionals if needed. Curate your social media feeds. Follow accounts that bring you joy and a sense of genuineness and eliminate the unconstructive ones.
- Build a positive and realistic self-image by reflecting without judgment on your strengths, inevitable flaws, and disappointments.
- Identify your personal values and take steps to bring yourself closer to them. For example, if one of your values is learning, sign up for a master class or take a free course online.
- Cultivate compassion for yourself and others. Learn to accept your own experience in a clear and kind manner, without condemning or judging.
- Try to avoid internalizing constructive criticism and view it as an opportunity to improve, rather than a harsh criticism of character, body, or skill.
- See yourself as an artist-in-progress. Accept victories and mistakes as they are. Learn from them and go on dancing with confidence. Self-compassion alleviates stress and strengthens connection and collaboration with other artists.
- Practice gratitude. Cherish your successes, no matter how small they may seem at the time.
- Lower your self-expectations without compromising on artistic excellence. Learn to concentrate on the joys and challenges of your dancing journey, not always on the final outcome.

- Set personal dance goals that are specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, and time-framed (SMART planning).
- Enhance your spiritual wellness: connecting to what is greater than yourself (universe, physical, and social environment) may augment feelings of self-worth and purpose in life and in dance. Acting upon your values and beliefs, and finding meaning in what you do, fosters great satisfaction and joy in good times, and provides emotional support when things get tough.

When to seek professional help

Feeling good about yourself acts as a protective factor against harsh self-judgments about your body and feelings of depression or anxiety on bad days. We encourage you to be mindful of repeated feelings of self-depreciation and negative thoughts that may eventually lead to mental health issues and unconstructive life habits. In this case, it may be helpful to ask for an objective reality check from trusted mentors and peers, in order to reframe negative thoughts about yourself. Professional counseling may be needed if symptoms persist. It is advised to consult dance-informed health professionals such as counselors, psychologists, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists, who specialize in body image, self-esteem, stress management, and/or eating disorders.

How to Seek Help

Once you've identified your need for psychological support, the search for appropriate help can feel a bit overwhelming, due to the large number of resources at your disposal. They range from self-help readings to workshops on mental health, drop-in counseling groups, and individual or group psychotherapy. Furthermore, mental health consultations may be ideal, but there can be some barriers to finding an available health practitioner who will see you regularly. Keep in mind that self-help advice is ample and accessible, but may not always be helpful or applicable to your personal situation, and that some sources are filled with misinformation. Here are some ideas to get started.

- Seek out a registered mental health professional. Many professionals offer sliding-scale payments for various groups of individuals. Non-profit groups and artist healthcare centers such as the Entertainment Community Fund and the Harkness Centre (New York), offer funding and scholarships for performing artists who need psychotherapy and other mental health services.
- Utilize mental health services offered by your employer (e.g. dance company), university, or local community.

- Look for group counseling sessions in your community or online. These groups are often low or no cost, and many offer sessions catering to different topics and identities. For example, body image groups as well as body image groups that support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- Begin learning coping skills and practice them often.

Helpful resources

To help you strengthen/restore your mental health and wellness, in particular when body image and self-esteem issues arise, please refer to Dance/USA's Informational Paper on Mental Health Resources for a comprehensive list of support that can be accessed with a wide-ranging budget, including free care.

To guide your search, the topics listed below are relevant to this Mirror, Mirror on the Wall Trilogy. In your review of the Mental Health Resources Informational Paper, you will find resources aimed at supporting people struggling with eating disorders, which often result from body image concerns and low self-esteem. The resources often provide great guidance and information regardless of whether or not you have any disordered eating concerns.

- Finding a mental health professional
- Support Groups either locally or virtually
- Mental Healthcare Financial Assistance and Funding
- Support Specifically for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
- LGBTQIA+ Specific Support
- Educational Resources

Conclusion

This section concludes our three-part series on dancer body image and self-esteem. After defining these concepts and examining risk factors and warning signs of distress, we discussed the importance of self-care and developing coping skills to nourish your appreciation of your physicality and who you are as a person. By using these skills daily, especially in low moments of body image and self-esteem, you may become better equipped to challenge self-defeating thoughts and feelings and work through them, to be more in tune with your personal values,

skills, abilities, and goals. Consequently, your physical and mental health may flourish both within and outside of dance.

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 the Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.

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