Mirror, Mirror on the Wall…
Reflections on Dancer Body Image and Self-Esteem
Part 2: Risk Factors and Warning Signs

As mentioned in Part One, body image and self-esteem are intricate parts of your identity as a person and a dancer, forever evolving throughout life. For better or for worse, how you feel about yourself and your looks at any given moment in time may often fluctuate, depending on the delicate interplay of several social and personal factors. The following paper describes risk-factors that may weaken your body image and self-esteem and may eventually lead you to develop signs of distress that will impair your well-being.

RISK-FACTORS FOR POOR BODY IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM

1. Socio-cultural pressures
Body dissatisfaction stems from Western social pressures to be beautiful, thin, and look eternally young! Images of the "perfect" body, viewed as a machine, are literally displayed everywhere: in fashion magazines, publicity, social media, movies and TV shows. Most teenagers and preteens criticize their physical appearance and perceive their weight in a distorted way. At puberty, some are likely to overestimate their body size, due to the normal weight gain and tremendous body changes that occur.

Deeply embedded in the *Selfie* and *Influencer* culture, many people compare themselves negatively to peers and social media idols displaying "perfect" bodies and a high degree of self-confidence. Youths are especially prone to self-invalidating comparisons to edited or even manufactured images posted by social media figures who seek profitable media presence. The lure of becoming rich and famous through social media adds extra pressure to look perfect in the eyes of Western beauty standards. Body dissatisfaction makes people and dancers alike highly vulnerable to disordered eating, eating disorders, and questionable surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures and surgeries, seen as gateways to surreal thinness and beauty.

2. Dance aesthetics and performance ideals
Body ideals have been deeply entrenched in the dance culture for generations continuing to the present day. The "ideal dancer body" has shifted and evolved with cultural trends, from the hourglass ballerina of the 17th Century to the waif-like Balanchine dancers of the 1980s, to the

slender and graceful yet powerful aesthetics of the last couple decades. These shifting and often near-impossible aesthetic ideals and expectations leave vulnerable dancers with the impression of never being and looking good enough. These ideals can trigger disordered eating, restrictive eating disorders, negative body image, and other related mental health conditions. Since the turn of the century, dance science has linked insufficient food intake to high injury risk and low performance. In combination with the demands placed on dancers' physical appearance, choreographers require increasingly masterful feats of physical strength, flexibility, and power.

These aesthetic and performance ideals may influence your expectations and create added stress on daily training. You may experience silent (and sometimes not-so-silent) pressures to conform to a certain thin and "perfect" looking body ideal, especially when certain body types seem so often rewarded. Recently, online dance competitions around the world and short clips with high viewership on social media showing prowess done with apparent ease have raised the barre of performance ideals to an extreme level!

3. Dance training practices and unconstructive remarks
Many dance training practices take a toll on body image and self-esteem. Studies show that tight-fitting dance attire and the extensive use of mirrors in studios can lead dancers to become over-conscious of looks, body size and shape. Furthermore, dance pedagogy mainly focused on visual cues (observation and reproduction of perfect models) reinforces body objectification: dancers may criticize excessively their external body image, instead of attending to internal sensations and proprioception. This external focus may challenge their ability to build a positive body image, healthy self-esteem and self-confidence.

Hierarchy inevitably exists between dancers and mentors (e.g. regarding dance status, promotions, role attributions). Dancers depend highly on teachers'/directors' positive feedback to build self-confidence and to pursue your efforts to succeed. Desiring social approval, dancers are particularly vulnerable to negative comments about their bodies. Even one hurtful remark can remain painful and negatively affect body image into the distant future. When combined with other risk-factors such as anxiety, depression or poor self-esteem, body shaming (whether inflicted by oneself or another person) can trigger disordered eating and other disordered and disruptive thinking and behaviors, which may include obsessive thoughts and behaviors, intrusive or ruminating thoughts, and feelings of shame and guilt.

4. Maladaptive perfectionism
Like many other performing artists, after years of intensive training, dancers' personal identity merges with the art form, which in turn influences their body image and self-esteem. On good performance days, dancers feel vibrant and elated and tend to judge themselves in a positive way. Unfortunately, the opposite applies when they have a less satisfying day! Whether you are a dancer, an athlete, or a plumber, you may falsely believe that one poor outcome dents your track record forever and begin anticipating the next mistake or disappointment.

Maladaptive perfectionism may set in if you worry terribly about making mistakes and seek to achieve flawless performances. The higher your expectations, the more critical you may be about your appearance and accomplishments. Regardless of the amount of time and effort spent to excel, you may feel not at par with stellar dance demands. This attitude may lead to obsessive thinking, negative self-talk, and invalidating comparisons with other performers and dance models you admire, which get worse when teachers or directors are also perfectionists.

5. Negative self-talk

Maladaptive perfectionism goes hand in hand with unrealistic expectations (e.g. making quick and constant progress) and destructive self-talk. Self-talk relates to the inner dialogue about oneself. While positive self-talk is motivating, helps raise dancers' self-confidence, and enhances performance ability in the face of challenges, negativity is stressful and self-defeating. If you harbor rigid demands to perform well or if you praise yourself only when you have achieved something flawlessly, you may become very harsh with yourself, regardless of objective success. Inevitable disappointments and setbacks are viewed as shameful failures. This creates negative thoughts and emotions, and self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., predicting failure) that may hamper your ability to dance!

WARNING SIGNS ABOUT BODY IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM ISSUES

Everyone has "bad body image days" or struggles with self-esteem from time to time, so how does one know when they become problematic? It is common and even healthy to experience occasional highs and lows about our bodies and personal abilities, but when the lows become unceasing and disruptive to daily life, it's important to cultivate coping mechanisms and skills and seek help as needed. The first crucial step is to identify your own signals of distress.

Potential warning signs that you may be struggling with body image and self-esteem may include (not an exhaustive list):

- Feeling depressed or anxious on a weekly basis. Not feeling up to par with outside demands, due to body or personal dissatisfaction
- Hyper-fixating on isolated parts of your body that you judge negatively (body checking)
- Frequently scrutinizing your perceived body flaws in the mirror, or alternatively, avoiding mirrors
- Viewing perceived flaws about your body or yourself as objective truths
- Frequently comparing your physique to others
- Obsessive thoughts and behaviors in an attempt to control your appearance (e.g. counting calories, concealing your body shape with clothing)
- Frequently participating in diet fads and restrictive eating, especially in an attempt to control your appearance
- Obsessing over exercising, especially in an attempt to control your appearance or cope with negative thoughts and feelings
- Experiencing fullness despite objective and sufficient food intake

- Hypersensitivity to neutral or positive comments from others
- Difficulty staying in the present moment due to negative self-talk (e.g anticipating catastrophes, past regrets)
- "Mind-reading" when you believe others are negatively judging your body
- Equating perceived body or dance performance flaws with failure
- Viewing the appearance of your body as an indicator of success or failure
- Holding very high self-expectations to the point of being intensely upset by small setbacks, such as minor injuries, illnesses, disappointing performances
- "All or Nothing" type of thinking, leading to self-depreciation and self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g, "I will never be able to do this…")
- Blowing imperfect situations or minor setbacks out of proportion
- Social withdrawal

Some or many of the above warning signals may sound familiar to you, and can be considered normal to a certain degree. However, when they become chronic, these signs of distress can eventually affect your physical and mental health if left untreated. If you notice any of the above symptoms, we recommend journaling their frequency and the effect of these thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on your daily living. Often, by the time you notice them becoming overwhelming, frequent, or disruptive, these negative spirals can be difficult to interrupt and may even temporarily take over your headspace and performance abilities.

Learning and practicing coping strategies and identifying when you need professional help are key to breaking free from negative spirals and developing resilience. Part 3 of this series discusses useful coping skills to reinforce your body image and self-esteem, and guidelines for seeking help, to dance your way back to physical and mental wellness!

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Educational Links

www.WeAreMindingTheGap.org

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

Part 3 of this series will discuss coping strategies and skills as well as when and how to seek help.

Disclaimer: The information on 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. (Times New Roman 12)

Written by: Jo-Anne La Flèche, MA, MSC, and Lauren Dean, LAT, ATC (2023)