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Can Body Positivity and Dance Coexist?

Here are a few ways to cultivate empathy and understanding in a field where bodies are on display and constantly scrutinized

by Ari Pulido



When I dance, I feel free to move my body in space and time with other bodies sharing that same passion and agency. However, there have been moments I was not able to focus on moving, improving, learning dances, combinations, or to feel free within my own body. This was all because I was distracted by my own perception of my body and was unable to fit into the mold presented by my dance professors, whether that was my stomach sticking out, or my chest moving up and down “distracting others.” During my undergrad studies as a dance major, experiencing these intrusive thoughts was not helpful to my dance training or my overall mental health.

The more I would hear that I had lost weight as a positive statement, the more I felt pressured to maintain my figure, to focus on being thin, and not my dancing. Even though someone may mean this comment as a compliment, we never truly know

whether a dancer is comfortable with such comments, because of what they may be experiencing. It is in fact possible for a teacher to encourage, motivate, and compliment someone’s appearance without commenting on their body. Because of my life experiences and therapy, I am thankful that I have grown to understand that it’s not dance as an art form that has disliked or shamed my body. As a dancer and a teacher, I still have much growing, learning, and undoing to accomplish.

Even though I have come a long way since finishing my undergrad dance degree almost a decade ago, these thoughts can still come up any day, from even the most innocent comments. The difference now is that I have the tools and resources to communicate and educate others on body positivity and remind myself that we are all beautiful inside and out. Even though we are supposed to be living in a body progressive time, we still never know if dancers in our community are struggling with eating disorders, disordered eating, unhealthy dieting, negative self-image, and bulimia.

Our bodies are our instrument; we endure the possibilities of injury, and dancers put their bodies out there every day in a vulnerable place each time we step foot into the studio or onstage. So, a criticism of our body not fitting into a mold can dig into our self-esteem and identity. As a dance community, how can we help strengthen those who may struggle with their self-image? Early steps to take towards progression include eliminating comments about someone's appearance, outfit choices, and unsolicited dieting advice. When it comes to the appearance of a dancer's body, it's best to follow the motto, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." We can start to acknowledge someone's beauty and presence by admiring their movement, uniqueness, or originality. This can include compliments of how they made themselves appear for a day, rather than the identity a dancer was born with.

As dance therapist-in-training Michelle Gallagher-Escobar states in her article, "Everybody should feel welcome and valued in the dance studio," for the dance community to progress, we must make sure that everyone dancing feels valued and seen. It means that body positivity and mental health resources should be offered to everyone, not just the ones we feel like deserve it, because everyone deserves empathy. Gallagher-Escobar advises her readers to reduce "body checking" by not commenting on a dancer's body as an everyday practice in dance spaces, to increase affirmations by cultivating self-assurance in dancers. Gallagher-Escobar pushes a "mind, body, and spirit" kind of methodology and advises instructors to cover mirrors with curtains when they can to further promote the notion of moving from within. Covering mirrors is still a practice I am getting used to myself, because I know that mirrors can be useful when it comes to learning choreography, but while teaching modern dance, not having a mirror seems useful.

Ballet social media influencer Kathryn Morgan discusses many related issues, reassuring her followers that they are worth more than their dancing and their bodies, advising body compassion, which she emphasizes is not the same as less training, or taking it easy. She encourages dancers to believe in their own worth and seek top-notch training where they don't hear unsolicited body advice and body shaming. As both Gallagher-Escobar and Morgan have said, we never know who may be struggling, and dance is already a vulnerable art form, so why not spread appreciation for one another's beautiful bodies in dance spaces?

My work as a dancer and familiarity with body positivity prior to grad school included dancing with Borne Dance Company, a bicoastal dance contemporary company in Sacramento and New York City, run by artistic director Katie Kilbourne. At Borne, there is a focus on body positivity and mental health awareness surrounding eating disorders. They hold free mental health workshops, open to the public, using affirmation while staying clear of jargon that could potentially be triggering to an individual.

As a dancer, I value empathy in dance settings and find strength in motivating other dancers around me. It's important to note that neither I nor Borne Dance Company are health care professionals in any way, but we believe in a progressive future based on our own experiences.

Anyone who is struggling should seek a therapist when they feel ready to talk to an expert in the field. It may not be possible to cure a negative experience another dancer may be having in class, but what all dancers and teachers can do is to spread empathy and love for one another.



Ari Pulido is a second-year MFA candidate in Dance at the University of California, Irvine. The topic of her thesis is “The Bleeding Dancer: dance and periods.”

SOURCES:

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