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WHEN DID I GET FAT?

And other nonsensical questions dancers ask after growing up in the dance world



by Keira Whitaker

I refuse to believe that we walk into the studio at four years old hating our bodies. I have worked with many different kinds of kids, and never once have I meant a toddler who thinks that they're too fat for their leotard or that they need to diet for the sake of "looking the part." In other words, we do not begin our dance journey with disdain for our own bodies. We start out like everyone else, chubby-legged, moving with abandon. We wave our scarves in the studio and freestyle to the latest Disney soundtrack without a care in the world. But at some point, we lose it. We lose that oblivious sense of joy that comforts us as young dancers, the kind of joy that makes us fall in love with the art form in the first place. It's the joy of not caring what you look like but enjoying who you are and how your body can move in incredible ways. I can personally confirm this sense of loss, and I

have been asking myself, at what point did my adolescent joy for dance turn into a love-hate relationship?

Some days I can walk into a studio feeling on top of the world, ready to conquer the barre and triumph over the center. Other days I can walk into the studio feeling fat, flabby, and useless. It's not that I am always a negative Nancy, but fifty percent of the time I am not content with the way I look in class. According to a study on "Body image in female professional and amateur dancers," by Elisana Pollatou, "the tendency of female dancers to suffer from disordered eating and negative body image may be due to the fact that female dancers are subject to enormous pressure regarding their body shape."

As dancers, we are constantly forced to look at ourselves in the mirror and analyze our bodies; all the while asking ourselves, "Am I turned out? How are my feet? Is my stomach in?" We are asked to be hyper-critical of ourselves in order to grow as dancers and become an effortless vision of beauty. But at what point in our journey does our search for perfection become harmful to our bodies and our overall wellbeing? To find out, I interviewed a couple of dancers who were able to share their personal experiences in regards to body image.

I have talked to a lot of different dancers about the subject of body image before, but to properly research the topic, I chose to interview two undergraduate dance majors who like me study at the University of California Irvine. Molly Gray, a second year at UCI, just recently created a piece for Physical Graffiti, our undergraduate dance concert, which commented on the issues of body image and self-discovery. Gray said, "I wanted to create a piece with two worlds. In the first, the dancers are blindfolded and free from societal pressures, so that they can see themselves for who they really are. And in the second, the blindfolds come off, but they are still blinded by their own false insecurities." In this way she was able to create a piece that showed how the world is convoluted when it comes to bodily expectations. I was curious to know if Molly's piece was inspired by personal experience, to which she replied, "I do struggle with body image issues, and I think that one moment I can distinctly remember is going to my first summer intensive in high school and noticing how all of the girls were twigs. They were so long, and so flexible, and they had a

facility that I just wasn't born with."

When I asked how this may have affected the way she saw herself, Gray said "It gave me a lot of bad ideas about my body and about my self-worth. And I remember coming

"Female dancers are subject to enormous pressure regarding their body shape."

-ELISANA POLLATOU

back and thinking if only I was thin, then I would be good at dance."

This comment struck me and made me





step back from the interview, because I was immediately able to relate to this situation. I also attended summer intensives in high school, three to be exact, and they were such wonderful times of growth and change, but like Molly I also struggled with the demon of comparison. Here you are at twelve, thirteen, or fourteen, surrounded by other girls who may or may not have gone through puberty yet, and you have to take class among them every day, for eight hours a day. And when the teachers are giving the girls who are distinctly petite an excess amount of attention, you can't help but feel like you must be too big to be considered a potential professional. Because it is no secret that skinny dancers get hired. According to Pollatou, "It has been shown that the necessity for such an ideal dancing body and the fear of losing their jobs drives professional dancers towards excessive concerns about body image." Staying thin and fit is now a part of the job; if you want to pay rent, you have to lose the chicken nuggets. The culture of dance is instilled in us at a young age, and makes it seem like you have to conform to unrealistic body expectations in order to succeed.

After my interview with Molly, I knew I had discovered where my personal struggle with weight began. The summer intensives that I had attended most definitely made me insecure about my naturally curvy shape. But at twenty-two, why am I still struggling with body image? It's possible that my educational dance experiences as a young teen still affect me today, but after interviewing Chiaki Takebayashi, I have some other theories on why body expectations follow us throughout our dancing journey.

Takebayashi is a third year dance major at UC Irvine, and she has also participated in summer programs along with many other educational opportunities. However, unlike Gray and me, she did not feel the same kind of bodily pressures at summer intensives, but rather in social media. Takebayashi informed me that, "On social media you see these girls from around the world posing for Ballet Zaida and the Ballerina Project, and you see these girls who are so skinny with long limbs, and it makes you think differently about the dance world." I was definitely able to relate to this statement, because I am familiar with these photography projects that post photos of rail-thin ballerinas in various positions. They are all over Instagram and Facebook, and act as an unavoidable presence of so-called perfection. Nine times out of ten your phone is probably in reaching distance, which means that the "perfect" dance body haunts all of us in our day to day activities. We carry societal constructs in our pockets, making us our own tormentors.

Alyssa Pitura, author of the article "Idealism: Factors Affecting the Body Image of College Students," reports that, "The mass media has been argued to be the most powerful and influential sociocultural factor contributing to body dissatisfaction in Western society by being the strongest proponent of the thin standard of beauty." It is important to note that Pitura's findings are based on the standard college population; so imagine the effects of social media on dancers who begin to struggle with body image at an early age. As a college student I am surrounded by media that is pressuring me to be thin, and on top of that I am in a studio for four to six hours a day, standing in front of a mirror. It's a recipe for an unhealthy body image.

In addition to social media, there are other societal pressures that make us feel like we need to conform to a certain body standard. In my experience, your teachers, family, and friends have a huge part to play in developing a positive self-image. I once took ballet from a teacher who told the class to have a "pretty waist, as if you were wearing a corset." That comment hurt my technique and my emotional wellbeing, because for a long time I thought that I needed to suck in my stomach in order to

look “pretty.” Now I am sure that’s not what the teacher meant, but these small comments from our role models play a huge part in our development. For example, the smallest comment from a family member, such as “You look smaller, good for you,” or “Wow it seems like you lost some weight,” can have a huge effect on us as well. These comments of affirmation reassure us that being as thin as you can be is a good thing. But oh wait... you can’t be too thin, because then you will receive the, “Are you sure you’re eating?” question, and the, “Honey it seems like you’ve lost a lot of weight, is something wrong?” comment. It’s like we can’t win. We are either too fat or borderline bulimic, and it’s just not fair.

So here we are, wrongly convinced that we are too big to be a ballerina and too fat to fouetté, and yet we have to keep going. Our dance journey continues, and we have to find a way to cope with the societal pressures that surround us. So what can we do? One coping method that I have heard of is called positive self-talk. It’s basically the idea of talking to yourself in a positive manner, and while it may seem a little unconventional, I believe it works. I asked Molly Gray at the end of our interview to try positive self-talk every day for one week. I specifically asked her to use an exercise called words of affirmation, which requires you to list ten positive attributes about yourself. For example, you might list confident, organized, or talented, along with seven other uplifting words. After Molly had tried this exercise for a week she reported that, “Positive self-talk was helpful in calming myself down when I was frustrated in dance. I realized though that it is really hard to believe what I’m telling myself. Trying to compliment myself while ignoring my biggest self-doubts was really difficult and definitely something I need to work on.”

I have also tried positive self-talk and I had similar results to Gray’s, but I believe that it makes a difference. With so many different voices of negativity surrounding us, it’s very helpful to have a voice inside telling you that you are beautiful and lovely the way you are. It feels like you are fighting the pressure to be thin from the inside out, and it makes the struggle a gratifying battle to win. I recommend this practice for anyone who is struggling with a negative body image, and especially for dancers who are constantly surrounded by the pressure to be perfect. If self-talk isn’t your style, I recommend putting your phone down, practicing yoga, and looking into meditation. Pretty much anything that will remove you from the circle of judgement that we call the dance studio. Take a hiatus from social media, step away from negative individuals, and tune out the harmful comments, including your own. You have to be your own advocate for a healthy body image. Because the truth is, you *never* became fat—it’s just all in your head.

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