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An Imposter Amongst Others

Imposter syndrome in dance is more prevalent than you think—is there a way to turn it around and enjoy what you do achieve?

by Anonymous

Success is one of the many liberating feelings an individual can have during the progression of their life. But how can success be measured for a person who holds themselves back? Truthfully, it's quite difficult to break the cycle that causes you to self-sabotage or doubt your abilities when a gracious opportunity presents itself. For someone who feels insecure or is accustomed to comparing themselves to others constantly, it's hard to feel like you belong or deserve the successes you have earned.

Imposter syndrome is a form of intellectual self-doubt that is typically felt amongst high-achieving individuals. These individuals may experience psychological effects, such as "anxiety, stress, and emotional exhaustion" (Gadsby 3). Feelings of uncertainty about ability can often overtake individuals, even if they showcase signs of success.

Some of the main characteristics of imposter syndrome include a fear of being discovered as an imposter and self-deception. Feeling as though you are an imposter refers to a sense of not belonging in whatever you are doing and not deserving of any accomplishments that come along. Self-deception is believing in one's own inadequacy and viewing achievement through a biased lens. It is not that the individual feels they lack ability, but more so that "they believe that they lack the ability that is crucial for succeeding in a greatly valued role" (Gadsby 6).

In dance, I commonly see these traits in dancers who are often high-achievers, perfectionists, and put pressure on themselves to be super-heroes—the need to be the best. I personally felt all these things during my time in college, and while they may seem like things that would fuel a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is not the case for many people, including myself. But, when good things come my way, I feel as though I am acting on abilities I don't actually have. Or, there's an overwhelming feeling of self-doubt, feeling that other dancers deserve praise or a role more than I do. I have developed a crippling fear of failure, which causes me to overthink, overwork, and feed into every little detail that could possibly go wrong.

I believe imposter syndrome really overtook me when I got accepted into college as a dance major. This would strike some as an immediate success and compliment all the hard work that led up to that moment. But for me, I truly believed I was not good enough, and I felt terrible for taking this opportunity that could have gone to someone else. As I began taking classes in college, my imposter syndrome worsened. I was not very well-versed in ballet or modern, which are two of the most emphasized techniques in my dance department. I felt like I had to work harder than all my peers to live up to the standards that were set, and I convinced myself that my previous training was not sufficient compared to my peers. Oddly, even receiving a letter grade A was not enough to persuade me that I was competent enough to be a dance major.

As more opportunities arose, I continued to find ways to deny my achievements and work to the point of burnout. Cast in a dance concert? It's because they have to give everyone a chance. Asked to choreograph something for a team? It's just because they had no other option. I

somehow managed to find a way to fuel my low self-esteem with every success that was presented to me.

The sad truth is that this is something a lot of people deal with, but it is rarely talked about because it is hard to find a reason to bring it up. Being a perfectionist does not always mean one has imposter syndrome and having low self-esteem can stem from anywhere. It's hard for someone to recognize that they are experiencing imposter syndrome and find ways to treat it. For me, it took me a while to come to terms with the fact that I was the only one hurting myself and that the toxic cycle was consuming me. Having imposter syndrome as a dancer can be exhausting, because the emphasis in performing arts is to consistently gain success through one's own talents. So, when it becomes hard to recognize success because there is a lack of belief in personal capability, it can be confusing and mentally draining for an individual.

My turning point was during my 3rd year, when I had experienced the full extent of being a dance major and being a director for a dance team. I intentionally started to change my negative mindset. I am still working to progress past these issues, but I have found several ways to combat my imposter syndrome as a dance major. I force myself to recognize my successes because the more I convince myself, the more I will believe it. I was fortunate enough to have a 3rd year full of dance opportunities, and I realized how much I discredited myself for achievements that should have been celebrated. Failure does not truly exist; everything serves a purpose in teaching someone a lesson and any type of rejection is simply just redirection. I try not to measure my capabilities based on where my peers are at in their college journey because we all progress at different paces and we are all here for the same purpose – to learn. A 1st year could outshine me exponentially in technique, but that is not to say that I do not have the same potential they do.

The greatest lesson I have gained from discovering myself through this process is that everything happens for a reason—and not a negative one. If I am cast in a piece, it is because I deserved it and I was the right fit. If I did not receive a dance opportunity that I really wanted, perhaps it was a sign that it wasn't meant to be. Changing my mindset to intentional believing has helped me gain more confidence and a sense of belonging as a dance major. While it is not a linear path to feeling satisfied with where I am, being able to recognize how I can deal with the issue is a big step in making a great change.

Anonymous is a university dance major who prefers not to be identified by name.

Works Cited

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