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Dangerous Disordered Eating Patterns in Dance Need to Change

When toxic diet culture and pressures in the studio come together, it's a recipe for disaster. Is there enough awareness? Enough resources?

by Eleanor Simmons

It's no surprise that after long hours of standing in front of mirrors with high pressure to perform and maintain a low body weight—coupled with social media beauty standards that promote thinness as achievement—dancers are three times more likely to struggle with body dysmorphia and eating disorders (Arcelus et al, 2013). And while eating disorders, especially anorexia and bulimia, are common in the dance world, resources and services offered to help dancers recover remain limited and need serious consideration. Having a healthy body image does not come down to solely what you look like, and certainly, striving for a healthy body should not be physically or mentally damaging.

Growing up training primarily in ballet, I remember hearing comments from my teachers ranging from, “I can see your lunch!” to “You should be X pounds if you want to do ballet.” These comments are incredibly damaging to young, impressionable dancers and promote the idea that success in ballet, or dancing in general, is tied to the Balanchine aesthetic. Beauty and enjoyment of dancing radiates from other aspects, such as movement quality, emotion, expression, and much more. Over time, comments like these made me hyper-aware of how my body looked in the mirror, and I found myself caught in dangerous cycles of self-criticism, body dysmorphia, and motivation to control my appearance and eating habits through severe restriction of food intake.

While statistics vary, one study discovered that the prevalence of eating disorders for dancers overall is 12%, and 16.4% for ballet dancers (Arcelus et al). The most common types of eating disorders include: anorexia, which involves a fear of gaining weight, a tendency to view oneself as overweight even when the individual is extremely underweight, severe restriction and monitoring of food intake, and excessive exercise to maintain thinness; bulimia, where an individual will eat large amounts of food followed by purging the calories consumed; binge eating disorder, which is similar to bulimia without the purging; and EDNOS, which are non-specified eating disorders, usually when someone exhibits some but not all the symptoms of anorexia or bulimia (Petre).

During a short period of my life, I was restricting my food intake to the point of feeling exhausted all the time, on top of finding it difficult to concentrate in my dance classes and at school. These thought patterns were detrimental not only to my relationship with food, but also to my body image; physically, I felt fragile. Though eating disorders are not uncommon in dance, it's rare to find the consequences and recovery processes, physically and mentally, spoken about. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), eating disorders can affect every organ system in the body, and lead to life-threatening consequences, which is why it is crucial for individuals to have access to resources and professional help. When an individual

consumes fewer calories than they need, their body will begin breaking down its muscles and tissues for fuel, which can lead to heart failure, loss of menstrual cycles in women, and slowed metabolism and digestion. Hair can fall out and nails become brittle while the body fights to support itself. Purging in various forms can also lead to the loss of electrolytes, which are essential for muscle contraction and may also lead to heart failure. Binging may increase insulin resistance, a hormone that breaks down and extracts energy from carbohydrates, which may lead to Type 2 Diabetes. When deprived of proper nutrition, the body goes into survival mode – every part of the body is affected, which is why it is important for dancers specifically to receive proper care and support for recovery and in turn increase the longevity of their bodies and careers.

Eating disorders in dance are most commonly attributed to its culture, which idealizes thin bodies (even if they are not energetically efficient or sustainable), elements of being in control, perfectionism, and fear of judgement from others. And while the dance world subtly or directly indicates that we can control the way our bodies look (i.e., through exercise or diet), a lot of factors are influenced by genetics – such as how much our legs turn out, body proportions, the arches of the feet, and joint mobility. The environment in a dance classroom should make students feel safe and comfortable in their bodies as they are. Though I made a recovery after my own struggles, it was a long process that took extra care and consistent effort to undo harmful thinking patterns that had been drilled into my mind. It took time to recognize the importance of food being fuel that the body needs and should not fear; my goals were to find nourishment through positive self-talk, balance, enjoying meals, and coming back to my feelings and reasons for loving dance. Even so, I wish I had known that what I was going through was OK to be talked about. I still manage triggers in and out of the classroom today, which makes me question the responsibility of teachers, directors, or choreographers in creating a safe space for dancers to have a healthy relationship to their body.

The resources and services offered to dancers battling eating disorders remains limited – it is necessary for this to change to foster healthy learning and work environments, body image, and coping mechanisms for dancers to thrive physically and mentally. Prevention of eating disorders starts with change in language and culture in the classroom. Teachers carry a big responsibility in the way they speak to students, as they can have a high influence on dancers' mindsets, ideals, and values relating to their bodies. Imagery and sensation-based practices may offer a richer understanding of the body than aesthetic-only-based feedback. A few examples include the Gaga movement language created by Ohad Naharin, where teachers provide a space for researching various tasks and images to arrive at a specific outcome, and Countertechnique, a practice created by Anouk van Dijk where dancers are given tools and tasks to scan and better understand the functionality of their bodies to support, strengthen, and spatially expand their kinespheres. While both practices are different, they provide a dancer with a strong mind-body connection and awareness that extends beyond the way they look through sensory feedback, which is arguably more valuable than relying solely on visual feedback. Dancing should be a space where someone liberates themselves in the movement rather than fitting an arbitrary mold placed on them.

Another way to mitigate disordered eating behaviors is to incorporate nutrition education into curriculum, for both teachers or students in various programs and organizations, to highlight the importance of how nutrition highly influences the well-being of a dancer and steer away from the habit of using food as a (often negative) coping mechanism. In past summer programs I've attended, we had nutrition classes that taught us general ratios of structuring our plates of food to get proper macronutrients (carbs, proteins, fats, etc.), preparing and planning meals for performance days or long days of dancing, and we were given freedom to choose what foods we enjoyed and made us satisfied, so not everyone had the same way of eating. Nutrition education can foster the healthy development and mindset of dancers and allow them the freedom to make informed choices about the way they fuel their bodies.

Dancers should also receive access to counseling with Registered Dietitians (RD) and practitioners with credentials to receive one-on-one guidance on building healthier habits, having a space to feel supported and speak about struggles with their relationship to food, and receive tools to become more confident in food choices to maximize performance. One leader in the dance field is Rachel Fine, who is a Registered Dietitian, Certified Specialist in Sports Nutrition, and Certified Counselor of Intuitive Eating. As a former dancer, Rachel Fine's passion for nutrition and cultivating healthy dancers allows her to support many dancers' careers through quality care. One of her clients, a dancer with New York City Ballet, shares that her work with Rachel is not only "relatable and enjoyable," but she now has "insight into [her] body and its needs as a dancer" which allows her to "feel stronger in class and more confident on stage" (Fine).

The common thread of these preventative measures underscores the importance of speaking up about any struggles regarding mental and physical health to get the proper care and guidance to recover. Encouraging open and honest dialogue surrounding food and body image inside and outside dance classrooms allows for stronger individuals and thus stronger communities, instead of having dancers suffer alone in silence and fear of judgement. Being "healthy" is not one-size-fits-all; it won't look the same for everyone—and every body is worth receiving the respect and love it deserves.

If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, you are not alone. Call or text the NEDA Helpline for support at (800) 931-2237.

Rachel Fine, RDN, creator of The Healthy Dancer® program websites for more information:

<https://pointenutrition.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/tothepointenutrition/>

Eleanor Simmons graduated from University of California, Irvine in the spring of 2023 with a BFA Dance Performance Major. She hopes to dance in a contemporary dance company and engage in concert and commercial dance opportunities in the future.

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