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Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4fj071qm>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/D59154706

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What to do When You Lose Your Joy...

The intense and unforgiving training that ballet requires can lead to broken spirits. Is this process really inevitable, or can we do something about it?

by Karli Padilla

How do you define joy? Maybe it's something like a happiness that simply can't be contained. What pursuit or passion brings you the utmost pleasure? Now, imagine for a moment that while enjoying that particular thing that brings your spirit alive, you begin to experience anxiety or question your skills and hard work. You experience that bitter taste of not-enoughness, the doubt that wipes the smile off your face and drains your confidence. What happens now? What do you do when you lose your joy for the thing that gives you your spark?

Ballet just so happens to be one of my passions, but it was also the source of much inner turmoil and judgment as a teenager. It is common knowledge that dancers overall and especially ballet dancers are prone to experience low self-esteem and body-image issues at some point in their training. Not only have I lived this, but I've watched countless peers beat themselves up over falling out of pirouettes or messing up the combination. Teenage angst isn't the only culprit since many adult ballet students fall into this trap as well. It seems almost inevitable that at some point in the journey, no matter how optimistically we look at it, joy and confidence are bound to take a blow.

My first and favorite ballet teacher Ms. Lauren always told us to stand proud, with chins up, shoulder blades back, and open chests to show off our diamond necklaces. We all stood tall like soldiers, but even though our bodies replicated the movement, we couldn't fully commit with our eyes or our hearts. The truth is we were wounded. How could we be proud when we were thinking about how big our thighs looked in the mirror or our dumb mistakes? We consistently received criticism after criticism with only an occasional praise.

Even with encouraging teachers like Ms Lauren, the repetitive nature of ballet took its toll as it steadily trained the joy out of us. Meanwhile, the younger class absolutely exuded natural confidence, their eyes reaching for the heavens as they chasséd with child-like carefree exuberance. In Ms Lauren's eyes, this phenomenon was backwards, how could her older students, who possessed more skills and experience, be increasingly self-conscious?

Other than the obvious answer of the painful process of puberty and growing in self-awareness, it does seem counterintuitive that more advanced students lose their confidence in their abilities as they gain more knowledge. This phenomenon is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, which is a cognitive bias that leads people to believe they are more skilled than they actually are in an area of study or expertise. For example, low-level devotees do not have enough knowledge yet to recognize their own incompetence and so they end up overestimating their abilities. In short, you don't know what you don't know. Once more details are introduced, we develop a sharp critical eye, which is a double-edged sword that holds the power to both help and hinder us. The process

of maturing as a dancer is a humbling journey because the more hours we spend, the more we find out how much we have yet to learn.

Of course, it isn't simply self-consciousness that can negatively impact students. In the repetitive and unforgiving nature of ballet class, dancers will often hyper-fixate on the same things that steal anyone's joy in daily life. Just to mention a few: perfectionism, jealousy, unrealistic expectations, people pleasing, fear of failure, basing worth on performance, focusing on the destination not the journey, the list goes on... Quite frankly, everything and anything is a contest in ballet, the fight for attention, the highest développés, the most pirouettes, and the best leotard collection. Even putting yourself down is a competition. It's not uncommon to hear dancers swap negative comments back and forth, either that they feel fat or they're having a bad turning day. The toxic culture that ballet can promote doesn't exactly nurture the spirit of joy. But our initial passion and love for this art form is worth fighting for—why continue pursuing ballet if it's slowly killing our soul?

This is why both students and teachers must be intentional about creating a healthy mindset and approach when it comes to class and performing. It turns out that our view of ourselves has the power to make or break how we direct our lives and even to what extent we achieve our goals. Psychologist Carol Dweck researched the mindsets we hold and separated them into two major categories. Having a “fixed-mindset” means we view our intelligence level, creativity, and personality as static traits, ones that can't be significantly changed. Under this mindset, we fear failure because it threatens our self-esteem and confirms our perceived lack of ability. Our success is predetermined and serves as a measure of our built-in skill level and intelligence. Having a “growth- mindset” is completely opposite: failure is seen as an opportunity and a way to improve rather than a sentence of worthlessness. The crucial difference here is the belief that values like character, aptitude, and emotional intelligence can be developed through effort and experience.

Many of the qualities that ballet develops, like discipline, artistry, and a strong work ethic, can be attributed to a growth-mindset. We're already used to holding ourselves to high expectations, but we have to reframe how we view failure, and if we're being honest, that means most of us. The core principle of the growth-mindset is to “create a passion for learning rather than a hunger for approval,” meaning we need to get back to our roots as eager sponges. So what does it look like to practically apply this in class as a teacher? Instead of praising students' performance as a final product, a teacher can focus on their students' effort and hard work. Dance educators have a responsibility to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages trial and error, where students can develop a healthy relationship with success and failure. In her studies, Dweck found that kids who were praised for their efforts improved their performance, and as the difficulty level increased, they actually had more fun facing challenges. If a particular skill still causes trouble, teachers can remind students that there is always tomorrow.

Students have an equal role to play in fostering a growth-mindset. As dancers we tend to focus mainly on the physical aspect of improving, which is an important part of our training to be sure. But we miss out on tapping into our full potential when we neglect our mental training. This

intentional work on the mind-body connection is the missing link for many dancers who can't seem to find harmony between their physical, mental, and emotional health. Creating a positive internal monologue for yourself involves the practice of visualization and setting goals, as well as a willingness to get things wrong. That means changing our perception of success from simply being smart to *becoming* smart. An example of this is the difference between not raising your hand to answer a question in class for fear of being seen as dumb, and the act of asking the question in order to use it as an opportunity to learn and increase your intelligence. The point isn't really to get the answer right or wrong, it's to grow your current understanding and abilities. This brings us back to our search for joy, when we are no longer afraid of failure, we can enjoy the classroom environment freely and allow ourselves infinite chances to grow.

Another idea that dancers can utilize is the practice of reflection as a tool to build a deep investment in the learning process, along with self-confidence. Like most formal ways of instruction, teaching in the ballet studio is transmissive, meaning the student is a passive receiver of information. But most learning is actually transitional, meaning that individuals come to understandings through experience and self-reflection. Under this mode of education, students also gain agency in the learning process. In her article on reflective writing and practice in ballet, Betsy Cooper examines the need for a shift in the traditional teacher and student roles and an open exchange of ideas. Teachers can acknowledge that they can learn from the students, and they can invite students into the teaching role to promote engagement and a sense of self-directed learning. "Students become more involved in their learning when the teacher hat gets passed around, for example: students are invited to offer feedback and corrections to one another, to remember and demonstrate a combination from a previous class..."

Writing is also a powerful tool to facilitate the practice of self-reflection and is especially useful for goal setting and honest self-assessment. Cooper found that writing encouraged her students to work through their emotions throughout the learning process. This translated to a state of embracing wherever they were at in their journey while still inspiring a desire for growth. When students have the chance to have responsibility in their learning, they begin to take ownership of their successes along with their failures and struggles. They will start to realize that their learning abilities aren't fixed and enjoy the process of self-discovery. I remember Ms Lauren had us write down five things we believed we excelled at in ballet. In Ms Lauren's words, "I think deep down you all know you have something to offer to the dance world, or else why would you be here?" She forced us to look at ourselves honestly and to be specific. It took us so long to get anything out on paper, we needed to take it home to finish. That was the first time I had ever sincerely asked myself what my strengths were, and it led me to question why I danced. As challenging as this exercise was, it made me realize that I owed it to myself to be proud of my strengths and to recognize my talent.

Our need to fight for joy in ballet and life has only been highlighted in the pandemic. The topic of joy cannot be taken lightly, and just as there are many layers to why we dance, there is no one solution for when the passion falters. Something that really hit home in quarantine is that teach day and even each moment is so different. You can be having the best day ever and the next feels like you're just barely able to get through it. That's real life. The importance of

accepting wherever you are in the process and taking it one day at a time cannot be overstated.

At the end of the day, you're on a journey and tomorrow is on its way. Instead of focusing on what you don't have, meditate on all that you do have. The practice of gratitude has been the most impactful for me in my journey with finding joy, and there really is always something to be grateful for, believe me. Remember, it is a gift to experience this rich world of dance, to taste the fullness of joy, and to search for greater depths.



Karli Padilla will graduate from University of California, Irvine in 2021 with a degree in Dance Performance. She is a certified Pilates instructor and she loves working with dancers on gaining strength and appreciation for their bodies. Her dream is to join a professional ballet or contemporary company.

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