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Slow Dancing in a Burning Room

Is dancer burnout inevitable? One day in the life of a dance major and some major reflections suggest ways to avoid collapsing

by Natalia Pinpin

Monday, March 5th, 2019

7:09 AM

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The third alarm of the morning echoes in my ear. Half-awake, I reach for my phone, imagining myself burying my head back into my warm, welcoming pillow—NO. I turn off the alarm and groggily drag myself out of bed, shivering from the morning chill and wondering how my three hours of sleep will power me through two technique classes, a couple lectures, rehearsal, and my part-time job. I guiltily glance at the open laptop on my desk. I didn't finish all of my homework last night.

It's Winter quarter and I'm a sophomore, just getting my grounding as a double major in college. I love being busy, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to choose what I want to study. But I'm tired.

Burnout in college students is a shared, yet isolating experience. One study describes it as “low personal accomplishment, depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and negative learning emotion.” School is a fulltime job; in fact, this study claims that student burnout is comparable to that of professionals in human services. The pressure to maintain high academic standing, define a career path, manage relationships with peers and professors, and develop a personal identity results in stress that directly relates to burnout for students (Lin and Huang, 78). Despite the widespread occurrence of burnout, relatively few preventative measures have been established to help college students, so we must generate a more active dialog about our experiences.

12:49 PM

I've made it to ballet. Woo. I can't remember the combination and have to watch someone else out of the corner of my eye. I am acutely aware of every ounce of pain in my body. The stiffness in my back and the pain in my feet is because I haven't had time to stretch or cross-train outside of technique class. I feel bloated and despise the mirror plastered across the studio wall, broadcasting every imperfection to me. My feet won't point, and I keep falling out of my pirouettes. I wonder when was the last time I was able to do consistent double pirouettes...ugh—

my mind wandered again and I missed learning the next combination. Nothing seems to be going my way today.

I think burnout is especially hard on us dance majors. We can't skip or sleep through a lecture when midterm week hits or half-ass a few assignments to catch up; we are expected to be present both physically and mentally, all the time. We are never cut slack, even if we are emotionally depleted.

Hard work, long hours of dedication, sacrificing normal activities—these values have been instilled in us as dancers since we were five years old. In reality, some days it simply isn't possible to work at 100 percent. Positive self-talk can help, especially motivational and instructional, with beneficial effects on cognition and performance, according to multiple studies (Tod et al., 675- 677). We are encouraged to relearn our relationship with our thoughts, but in reality, it is easier said than done. As a very pragmatic person, I like to think about setting different goals for myself; maybe fixing my technique isn't in the books for today but letting go and enjoying the rush of movement can be.

3:52 PM

The lecture was pretty dull, but at least I have rehearsal next. My calves burn as I trek across campus through Aldrich Park during my 10-minute passing period, eating a protein bar as I weave past other students. I look ridiculous with my over-sized backpack, mix-matched dancer attire, and sweat-plastered hair, but I don't care. I've been on the go since 8 a.m., but I think I have the energy left to survive the rest of the day.

Just because there's an empty hour in your calendar doesn't mean that you have the time to add another activity to your schedule. For the longest time, I didn't realize how important it is to allot time in my day to stare at my phone for half an hour or sit down to eat a meal. Downtime is not synonymous to wasting time.

Dancers are ambitious, and many of us are double majors or have an extra minor tacked on. Sometimes, it is inevitable to have three back-to-back classes, but we must learn how to manage what is in our power to change. Before college, we had a much more restricted schedule between school, dance, and whatever other extracurriculars we had. Devising a realistic schedule with unprecedented levels of freedom is tricky and takes practice—I honestly still struggle with it. However, with each passing quarter, all you can do is reflect and learn something about your habits and needs, and use that knowledge to inform your scheduling decisions.

Now, let me tell you, I can't emphasize enough how much the quarantine distorted my ability to maintain a schedule. In addition to the previous scheduling challenges, I encountered a new obstacle: stillness. I'd fall into a slump where I'd lose all motivation to do anything productive and test the limits of my deadlines. I was burnt out from doing *nothing*. In this past year, we all experienced so many things out of our control. But your approach to your schedule can remain in your control if you don't let uncertainty take the power out of your hands.

8:29 PM

I'm finally back home from work, eating my first sit-down meal of the day. I'm exhausted, but all I can think about is the homework I should complete. I still need to catch up on the unfinished homework from yesterday. Why didn't I do some of the assignments on Saturday when I had the time? I want to catch up with my friends, but I've pushed them away in favor of catching up on schoolwork that somehow still isn't done. I feel like I could take a week off from dancing.

Honestly, I just want to sleep.

It's normal to have sluggish off-days, but when this becomes the norm, something might need to change. Although the quarter system can seem like a rush, it allows us the opportunity to change our schedule every few months and try something new.

The fear of missing out is a real phenomenon, especially with the abounding opportunities that accompany the freedom of being a college student. I wanted to take advantage of the full dance major experience, but I eventually had to take a step back and examine my priorities as a double major. It's okay to take a quarter off from performing. It's okay to take two—or one—technique classes instead of three. This is why I've allowed myself to take the past two summers off from dance. Yes, the whole three months, and that still sounds terrifying to me. Along with easing the burnout, the breaks allowed me to pursue other interests and develop as a person outside of my dancer identity. You shouldn't let the fear of distancing yourself from dance prevent you from growing in other dimensions.

Zoom classes might have added to the feeling of missing out and becoming burnt out from committing so much time to something that seemed less fulfilling. Maybe it didn't feel physically rigorous enough or the social aspect was absolutely lacking. While those are completely legitimate concerns, a change in perspective can turn the situation around—it was a chance to work on basic technique, to reflect on yourself, or to heal an injury.

There's no right way to be a dance major. I'd argue, though, that perpetual burnout is the wrong way to be a dance major. Remember that you haven't failed as a dance major if your relationship with dance has changed or you want to dedicate some of your time to other passions. Sometimes, a change in mindset is all that is needed to propel you back on the right track. I have no single solution to navigating this tumultuous relationship with dance. But I do know that the course requirements are simply the scaffolding of the dance major—the rest of the experience is up to you to define.



Natalia Pinpin pursued both of her passions at University of California, Irvine as an undergraduate double major in Dance and Computer Science. After graduating in Fall 2021, she wants to pursue the tech field career path and aspires to continue applying her knowledge of dance and movement to areas of computer science.

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