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Notes from a Recovering Perfectionist

Striving for excellence and being overly self-critical are not the same thing

by Ariel Scott

Has a reminder to be kind to yourself ever brought you to tears? It certainly has for me. “You need to offer yourself some grace.” Those were the words, offered by one of my professors at community college, that nearly made me cry as I sat in her office and realized my tendency to be hyper self-critical was perhaps not as well hidden as I’d thought. Her reminder called out something I’d been struggling with for a long time (and continue to struggle with if I’m being honest), which is unproductive perfectionist tendencies. In my experience, the road to hell is paved with perfectionism.

You’d think that perfectionism would be a useful trait for a dancer; after all, don’t we need high standards to make great art and be successful? The answer is yes, but only up to a point. Striving for excellence and being a perfectionist is not the same thing. High standards for oneself can be useful, but taken too far perfectionism does more harm than good. According to research professor, author, and self-proclaimed “recovering perfectionist” Brené Brown, “Perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it’s often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life-paralysis” (*The Gifts of Imperfection*, p. 75).

Perfectionism is always a problem, and dancers have a high rate of perfectionism compared to the general public (Jaque et al., 2014). So do college students (Adams, 2018). Are you starting to see the problem for college dance majors? As part of these susceptible groups, we should know the pitfalls of perfectionism, and learn strategies to mitigate them. What exactly is perfectionism? It involves having unrealistically high standards for yourself and being overly critical of your mistakes. Two overarching dimensions of perfectionism are *personal standards* the expectations we have of ourselves, and *evaluative concerns*, the worries we have about how we’re seen by others (Nordin-Bates et al., 2017).

How is perfectionism different from striving for excellence? It has to do with motivation and attitude. Perfectionist thinking ties self-worth to achievement. Sport and exercise psychologists Howard Hall and Andrew Hill explain that while striving for excellence is motivated by valuing the high standard itself, perfectionist personalities are driven by the social acceptance and sense of worth that meeting those standards will bring. According to an article about perfectionism and shame in dancers, perfectionists also tend to fear failure more than they desire success (Jaque et al., 2014). To me, perfectionism is the voice that sees my reflection in the dance studio mirror and says “you don’t measure up, you won’t amount to anything, so why are you trying?” It’s the constant replay of mistakes I’ve made. It’s the desire to avoid failure at all costs, even if that means not fully going after success.

Harsh self-critical evaluation is a defining characteristic of perfectionism and a large part of what makes it detrimental. Because self-worth becomes tied up in accomplishments, perfectionists can display “hyper-vigilance about avoiding mistakes and become so sensitive to evaluation from others that any perception of failure or criticism may be overgeneralized to the extent that it

erodes self-esteem” (Hall and Hill, 2012, p. 220). Fear of mistakes and sensitivity to criticism... not so good in a field where getting corrected is a daily (more like hourly) norm.

This fear of messing up is commonly accompanied by the desire to gain the approval of others (especially teachers) to feel accomplished and therefore worthy as a person. Haven't we all been there? Scraping for crumbs of validation from our dance teachers, not because we're truly concerned about the technique but because we desperately need to be approved of to feel worthy as people? Or is that just me? This outsourcing of self-esteem and self-worth is a bad idea, and attaching our sense of self to the comments made about our technique and creativity hurts both our psychological well-being and our artistic progress.

Clearly, perfectionist thinking puts strain on our well-being and our performance. It can negatively affect our sense of self, push us towards all-or-nothing thinking, and allow avoiding mistakes and criticism to take precedence over actually learning and improving. In the long-term, perfectionism is also associated with burnout and other ill effects, including anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and even suicidal ideation (Jaque et al., 2014; Hall and Hill, 2012). Perfectionism, left unchecked, is no small deal. Dancers need to be especially aware of the dangers of perfectionism since perfectionist thinking is seen more in dancers compared to the general population.

We should also be aware that our dance environment plays an important role in our habits of perfectionist thinking. Environments perceived as highly critical, promoting social-comparison, and valuing achievement above all else reinforce detrimental perfectionist thinking. In contrast, “an environment that is perceived to promote task involvement, the development of competence, cooperative learning and a view that mistakes contribute to learning, produces positive affective states and less worry” (Hall and Hill, 2012, p. 223). The environments created by our teachers, choreographers, and larger institutions make a big difference in the development and management of perfectionist thinking. My experience with perfectionism definitely differs based on the setting I'm in and the culture promoted by the professor or choreographer. As students, we don't have control over how our classes are taught or how our choreographers conduct their rehearsals. However, we do have the ability to shape our environments as student choreographers, cast members, classmates, and future teachers.

Considering the fact that we don't have complete control over our environment, is there anything we can do as individuals to protect against perfectionism? According to an article about the link between perfectionism and depression, the answer is self-compassion (Ferrari et al. 2018). Self-compassion is defined by psychologist Kristin Neff as taking a kind and caring attitude towards oneself, not being judgmental about one's flaws or failures, and recognizing that our experiences are simply part of being human. Shifting away from self-criticism and towards self-compassion is easier said than done. There isn't a switch we can flip and suddenly be rid of perfectionism, but there are strategies we can employ to find more self-compassion. The following strategies stem largely from my own experience battling perfectionism.

First off, we have to be willing to change. Some may feel that perfectionism is the only way to be high achieving, and therefore they are reluctant to let go of it (Hall and Hill, 2012). This is false. Perfectionism hurts more than it helps, and we can strive for excellence without the damaging beliefs that underlie perfectionist thinking. The next step is recognizing perfectionist

thoughts. Self-criticism can become so habitual that we might not notice we're responding to our mistakes and shortcomings with immediate self-condemnation. We need to be aware that it's happening before changing it. Once we're aware of what's happening we can reshape negative self-talk into something more neutral. For instance, if you make a mistake and immediately think to yourself "ugh, that was awful, I can't do this," consciously remake that statement into something less judgmental and more specific, such as, "I lost balance; next time I'll focus on the pelvis placement over the standing leg." Beating ourselves up does nothing for our improvement, but a neutral appraisal of what we did wrong and what to try next can actually help us.

Journaling is another helpful practice, which can promote mindfulness and help us break habitual thought patterns and attitudes towards self (Hall and Hill, 2012). Here's a helpful journaling exercise: first write down any mean, internal comments, or outlandish concerns unedited, then read through them and respond to each of them rationally. Our fears and internally directed scorn often sound silly once we've gotten them out of our heads, and going back and responding with logic to each issue helps us move away from hopelessness and into agency.

As with anything, practice is the name of the game. Perfectionist thinking won't disappear entirely just because you decide to be self-compassionate, or from journaling once. Moving away from harsh self-criticism is a lengthy process that requires practice, patience, perseverance, and a willingness to embrace imperfection.



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