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Walking the Tightrope

Why Dancer “Burnout” Requires a Balance of Both Physical and Mental Treatment Practices

by AJ Dirickson

We have all been there before: three technique classes in a row, a three-hour lecture after that, all rounding off with a two-hour rehearsal at the end of the day, thereby leaving us with a meager few hours to eat, catch up on homework, and have some semblance of a social life. Toss in a part time job to supplement the cost of books, food, and other living expenses, and what little free time we do have suddenly disappears in a puff of metaphorical smoke. In many a dancer, such stresses contribute to the development of “burnout,” the symptoms of which often lead to more lasting effects or even injury. In an article called, “‘Burnout’ in Dance: The Physiological Viewpoint,” Dr. Yiannis Koutedakis identifies burnout as a “Condition...with symptoms ranging from: reduced physical performances, prolonged fatigue, and an array of behavioral and emotional changes” (Koutedakis, 122). She also presents ways to physically recover but does not delve as much into the equally important mental recovery process. Given the external nature of many of the stressors associated with burnout, my concern is to find the optimal balance point between mental and physical burnout recovery processes.

The causes of burnout surge during times of massive commitment and are, “Often product of practices that produce an imbalance between physical activity and recovery” (Koutedakis, 122). Such an imbalance places the dancer in an inopportune position as they continue to dance on fatigued muscles, effectively taking two steps back for every one step forward over the course of training. Koutedakis also notes how some of the symptoms can range from lack of sleep to increased recovery time from minor cuts and bruises; this adds a cyclical effect to burnout, rendering it an even harder hole to get out of once you are entrenched in its clutches. The cyclical nature of fatigue and deterioration has the obvious physical implications of increased recovery time and increased injury potential, but it also has a psychological effect on the dancer.

To me, the psychological aspect of burnout is by far the more sinister aspect of the condition in its ability to snowball inside the mind of a dancer. Questions like, “Am I even good enough,” and, “What is the point of doing all this if I don’t ever see any results,” often abound in the mind of physically and mentally stressed dancers. Indeed, Koutedakis recognizes burnout as having the ability to, “affect their enthusiasm for dance and/or causing an array a behavioral and emotional changes,” (Koutedakis, 123). The internality of this aspect of burnout is what makes it harder to track for outsiders—teachers, choreographers, or colleagues. Symptoms such as fatigue or overwork have an outward appearance and thus translate more clearly on a moving body; however, the effects of the emotional side of burnout present in a less visible manner, often wreaking havoc on the dancer’s confidence or causing them to question their intentions about dance, in some cases even causing depression. It is precisely this aspect of burnout that makes a mental recovery necessary in addition to the standard 3-5 week rest period suggested for cases of burnout (Koutedakis, 123). Practices to address the emotional toll include, but are not limited to, development of a self-awareness practice (a newly adopted nomenclature for meditation), and somatic practices like yoga or Pilates, all of which seek to promote a harmonic union between mental and physical states of being.

Somatic practices such as yoga and Pilates focus on centering the body in order to combat the confusion and anxiety brought on by stresses that contribute to burnout. In fact, according to a published clinical review of yoga as a form of therapy, Dr. Jane Hart says, “The use of yoga as a therapeutic technique in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) has become increasingly popular in the United States as Americans have increasingly sought holistic and noninvasive means of addressing ailments” (Hart, 29). Pilates has also recently enjoyed a surge of popularity like yoga, but it has long been a cross training tool for many dancers, dating back to Martha Graham, who worked closely with Joseph Pilates himself. Speaking from my own experience, both yoga and Pilates center around the breath, which works in tandem with the physical body – thus suggesting a sort of harmony that emanates from the inside out. It may sound very abstract, and the truth is, there’s no all-clear moment in which the clouded skies part and throngs of angels sing down from above; however, such a harmony between body and mind centers a person and, as such, provides a new perspective on an otherwise old scene. Such holistic methods promote an understanding of balance between body and mind, which counteracts the imbalance that causes burnout in the first place.

The balancing act between mental and physical recovery processes has proved to be a process rather than a singular point in time. In a *Dance Magazine* article, Shaw Bronner, the director of physical therapy for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater suggests, “As soon as [you] wake up, spend some time meditating and setting a goal for the day,” (Peters, 42). Like yoga and, to a lesser extent, Pilates, meditation works to center the practicing individual; yoga is in fact understood as a movement meditation, comparable to other movement forms like Tai Chi. I’m not suggesting that you have to give a specific number of days or hours per week to these practices, which might add to the ever-increasing list of things that we, as collegiate dancers, have to do. But it’s possible to take small intervals throughout the day to reflect back on those first moments of goal setting when you woke up. You don’t want yoga or meditation to become a chore rather than part of the healing process. The truth is, however, that even as little as two minutes out of your day can be devoted to re-centering the mind, thus preventing it from going in a thousand different directions at once. Furthermore, development of self-awareness through practices like meditation and yoga affords dancers the ability to recognize patterns of behavior that lead to burnout before they take too strong a hold. The goal in these moments is to remind yourself of the passing nature of the stresses of college, both academic as well as technical/rehearsal related, rather than dwelling on what seems to be a never ending onslaught of tasks and deadlines.

Given the abundance of commitments in collegiate dancers’ lives – between academia, technique/rehearsal schedules, and any extra-curricular commitments – it isn’t surprising when Koutedakis writes that, “The cases of burnout have been steadily increasing in recent years,” (Koutedakis, 123). Given that increase, many university programs have already taken steps to providing on-site stress management programs in their schools, and such resources should never be overlooked. In addition, implementing centering practices like the ones discussed here can help us begin the healing process from within and on our own terms as we navigate the stresses of the circus balancing act that is college life.

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