



Tension

All dancers have their go-to tension area: shoulders that creep up towards the ears, a hand that becomes a claw, or feet and ankles that grip. Yet “Just relax” can be the hardest correction to apply. We spoke with four teachers for their tips on releasing tension throughout the body—and how it’s all connected.

The Face

A dancer’s face is a frequent tension trouble spot, as eyebrows lift or furrow, jaws clench and tongues peek out. Hilary Cartwright, international guest teacher and creator of Yoga Narada, notices that, for many students, “all the tension goes into the face in their effort to achieve and please their teacher.” Similarly, Seattle-based ballet instructor Stephanie Saland observes that dancers “demonstrate” their focus with their face instead of actually being attentive. “Does ‘focus’ mean bug your eyes and shove your chin forward to show interest, enthusiasm, volition?” she asks. “Or can you just be present and take the information in?”

Cartwright recommends taking a moment to “turn it around” and find your inner smile. “When you’re feeling tense, think of something—a smiley face, your dog or cat—that brings back reality a little bit. Remember the good things in the rest of your life.” If your inner smile turns into an outward one, even better. Smiling is a simple way to alleviate tension in your face and convey your joy of dancing.

Saland suggests visualizing a mask that’s painted onto your face dripping off “almost in puddles down the front of your body.” This relaxes facial tension and sends your focus inward. Remember that in class, sometimes, you can just make the effort without feeling that you have to project out.

Tamers

By Natalia Boesch

Neck and Shoulders

Whether you hunch, hike or just seize up, a tense neck and shoulders can really get in the way: You won't be able to spot freely or bend fully, limiting your expressive possibilities. Saland believes that inflexibility in the upper spine often results in tension in the neck and shoulders. "Emotions get expressed through the arms and shoulders rather than through the midline," she says.

Finis Jhung, longtime ballet teacher at the Ailey Extension in New York City, adds that our smartphone obsession isn't helping: "People are so used to being caved in, they have this hunch."



"The best thing to do," says Saland, "is go to the side of the room and actually *increase* the tension." Scrunch up your face, pull up your shoulders, ball your hands into fists. After a moment, relax. You should feel a new freedom in your neck, upper back and shoulders.

Anna Greenberg of ABT's
Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School,
photographed by Jayme Thornton

To deal with smartphone-related posture and tension, Jhung gives the following exercise: Interlace your fingers and place your hands at the back of your head. Push forward, and then press your head back into your hands. The muscles in your upper back will engage as your head finds its place atop your spine.

Jhung encourages dancers to literally dance from their heart: "If movement is not coming from the center of your body, it looks shallow." Saland agrees, adding that "not everybody is ready to have their heart open." To help her dancers address both issues, she gives a special reverence. While breathing into your back, imagine pulling a golden thread forward, offering something precious "from the back of the bottom of your heart."

Arms and Hands

"There's a fine line between being engaged and being tense, and how much leeway the hands have between being overly flowery and overly stiff," says Susan Jaffe, dean of dance at University of North Carolina School of the Arts.



"Do barre with energy coming out of your whole body," says Jhung, reminding dancers that barre is about more than just the positions. "Reach your arms out in second, then put your hand on the barre, fingers over. Press down strongly, so you feel your shoulder, your lats."

Jaffe stresses the arms' and hands' connection to the back. "Port de bras requires pliancy." She has her students imagine they are holding a big helium balloon during pirouettes. "There's pressure out towards the walls, and you have to press slightly in. It's an expansive, buoyant feeling."

To reshape a clawed hand, Jaffe suggests holding a straw across the top of your middle finger with the two neighboring fingers. But it can be more helpful to think of how your hands are integrated into a bigger picture. "Your core is pulling *in* and your limbs are reaching *out*. Your energy extends past your fingers, drawing long lines through space."

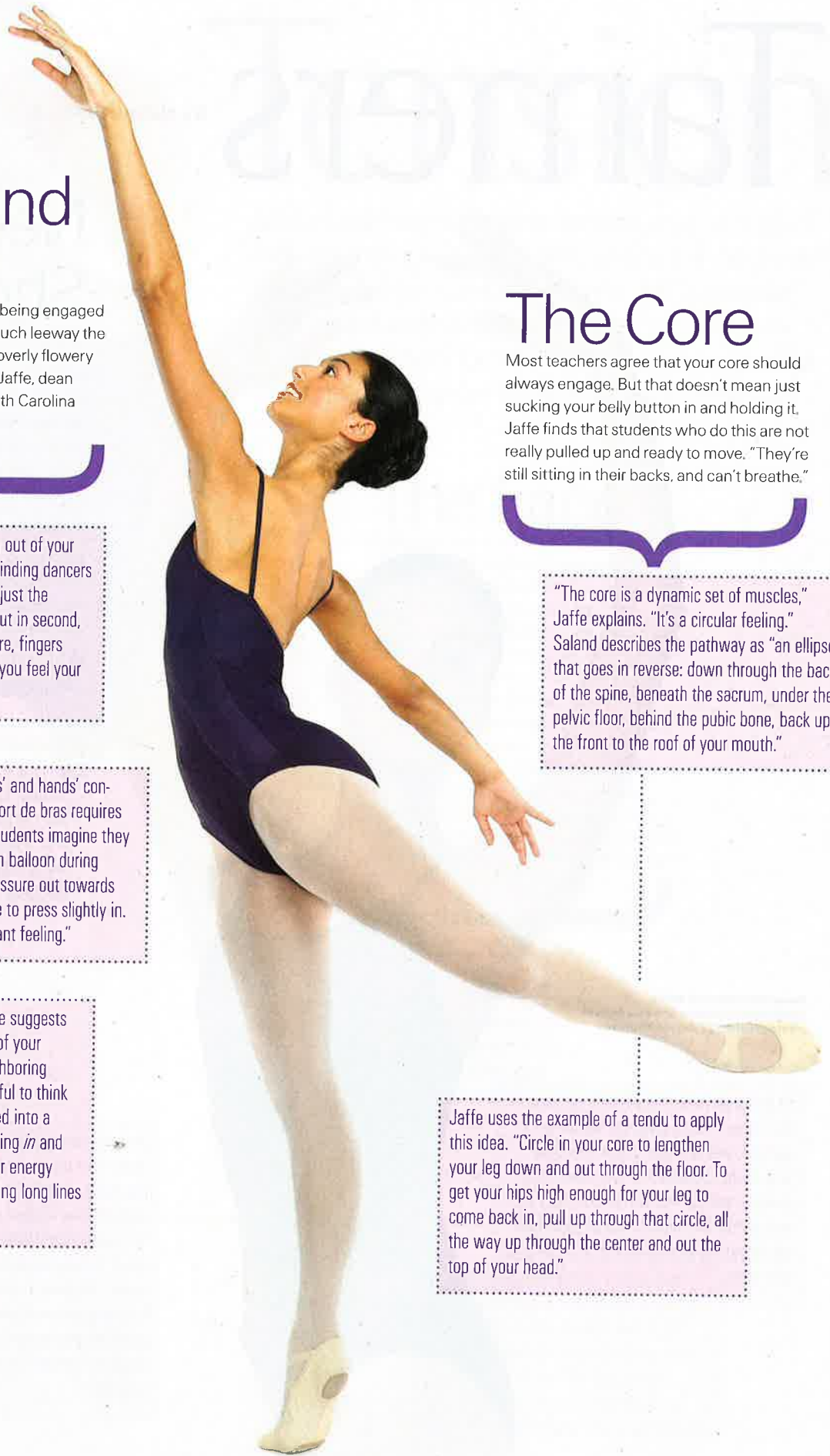
The Core

Most teachers agree that your core should always engage. But that doesn't mean just sucking your belly button in and holding it. Jaffe finds that students who do this are not really pulled up and ready to move. "They're still sitting in their backs, and can't breathe."



"The core is a dynamic set of muscles," Jaffe explains. "It's a circular feeling." Saland describes the pathway as "an ellipse that goes in reverse: down through the back of the spine, beneath the sacrum, under the pelvic floor, behind the pubic bone, back up the front to the roof of your mouth."

Jaffe uses the example of a tendu to apply this idea. "Circle in your core to lengthen your leg down and out through the floor. To get your hips high enough for your leg to come back in, pull up through that circle, all the way up through the center and out the top of your head."



Gripped Glutes and Hip Flexors

Cartwright notices that many dancers are “squeezing the butt, tucked under and trying to hold it.” This can cause a chain reaction of problems, including hip-flexor pain.



“Lift the carriage of the back,” says Jaffe, “breathe, and put the energy in the core and hamstrings.” To help students find their hamstrings, Cartwright has them relevé in first and try to make their heels meet on the way down. “That makes you engage the back of your leg, and not tuck. It’s a natural shape.”

To avoid overworking the hip flexor in extensions to the front and side, focus on lengthening the standing leg. “By pushing down through the floor, you’re engaging the lower abdominals and the psoas, which is going to let the other leg unfold,” says Cartwright.

Feet and Ankles

The problem begins with the misconception that a huge, deep plié is desirable or even necessary onstage. “If you make a deep plié, it’s passive,” says Jung. He advocates for what he calls an “active plié”: It’s smaller, with the core engaged, and begins and ends with the toes.



“Put your brains in your feet,” says Jung. “If you push off the floor, if you work your foot, it points.” But, he specifies, before a relevé or a pirouette, “you have to flatten the toes and release the foot.”

Cartwright has an image to help with that release. “Feel that your heels are lengthening towards each other (or past each other, in fifth position) as you plié.” This will fire your hamstrings, and allow gripped toes, knees and ankles to effortlessly relax. “It spreads the foot along the ground, almost like a frog’s foot—and a frog has wonderful elevation!” P

Natalia Boesch, a former dancer, is a ballet teacher and writer in New York City.