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Is Ballet Abusive? The Dark Side Of A Beloved Sport

By Kelly Mullen-McWilliams
Nov 7 2017

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For many kids, dancing is a powerful way to find confidence in themselves. For parents, it's a presumed safe space for kids. I love ballet. I attended an arts high school, where dancers of incredible grace and artistry shone onstage, transcendent. But many dancers also counted calories, or spooned mustard and cucumbers onto their trays for lunch. In the dorm room I'd inherited, I could make out the scratchings of a tormented soul — *found another rib today. So happy.* Next door, a dancer wept over her feet. She knew that without surgery to remove the imperfect arch, she'd never make it professionally. To my astonishment, she elected for surgery, and smiled on crutches.

At the gym, I watch little girls march off to class next door like porcelain soldiers, hair pulled tight enough to ache, pink tights accentuating sinew, and wonder if ballet class will make them stronger or weaker. If it will build them up, or tear them down. What I love about the art form — the discipline, the athleticism, the centuries-old techniques brought to life — often comes with a cost. When is art worth the price, and when should you pull your daughter out of class? Just how abusive is ballet, really? Romper took a deep dive into the world en pointe.

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"Anything that has a competitive element — dance, gymnastics, even sports — if you have a coach who's not being loving and supportive, it's very easy to internalize it, and think there's something wrong with you. That you're not good enough," Kimberly Hershenson, LMSW, a former dancer who now treats body image issues at RevitaLife Therapy, tells Romper.

It takes ten years to make a dancer, explains Noelle Rose Andressen, director of Rubans Rouges Dance, and while her experiences were mostly positive, she didn't come through entirely unscathed. "I'd see my instructor's face wrinkle up with scorn," she tells Romper, and often teachers implied that losing weight would lead to better roles (no matter that she was thin already). Such experiences inform her teaching today.

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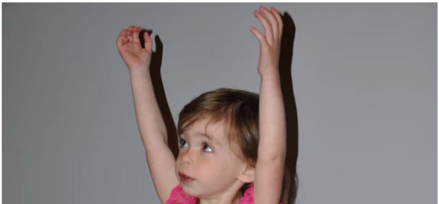
> BALLET IS AN ART AT WHICH YOU WILL FAIL EVERY DAY.

"You don't put somebody down," Andressen says sternly. "You don't drop the hint that a dancer has to lose weight, otherwise she's no good. I was fortunate. I had a grandmother who took me to my classes when I was young, and she made sure that I was treated well, the best she could."



Courtesy of Chicago Dance Therapy

When I ask her about the recent gymnastics scandal, in which a coach was fired after video became public of him forcing 13-year-old gymnast into the splits while she cried out, Andressen hisses with dismay. "That will never happen on my watch or in my company," she says. At Rubans Rouges Dance, she follows a "two-finger policy," using only two fingers to adjust a dancer. "You should be gentle, never applying pressure, because you can injure a person, and not even realize it," she explains. "And then we have a no-touch zone, which we let parents know about. It's very important with what's going on in gymnastics."

Andressen believes parents have a responsibility to vet any studio before they enroll. She also recommends asking teachers about their personal philosophy, and the school's philosophy, too. If they have a handbook, be sure to read it. If they don't — well, that might be a red flag, she explains.

Ballet — a discipline which straddles the aesthetic and the athletic — attracts girls in large numbers. As such, instructors, parents, and coaches must take care that their emotional and physical development is looked after. The right teacher will never manipulates a dancer like a marionette.

"Being forced into anything when you're not ready, physically or emotionally, is traumatizing," explains dance therapist Erica Hornthal, of Chicago Dance Therapy. "When I was younger, I wasn't a great gymnast," she tells me. "I remember sitting in splits, and they would push on our hips to increase the stretch. I was never injured. It wasn't debilitating. But there's this resistance.

Something didn't feel right ... It can be scary for a child. She can suddenly realize, 'this person has more power over me than I do.'"

Courtesy of Chicago Dance Therapy

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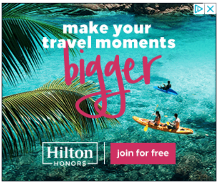
Additionally, too much focus on the body when a dancer is very young can leave psychological scars, according to therapist Samantha Drazin, LMHC. "You teach them that their self-worth is bound in the shape of their shoulder-blades, or how much fat you can pinch on their back ... It extends beyond just the abuse in the studio. It has lifelong consequences."

The Hunger

"I danced so much I had very low body fat. I looked very young when I was 20. I remember one girl who developed breasts, and the teacher said, you're the wrong body for ballet," Hershenson tells Romper.



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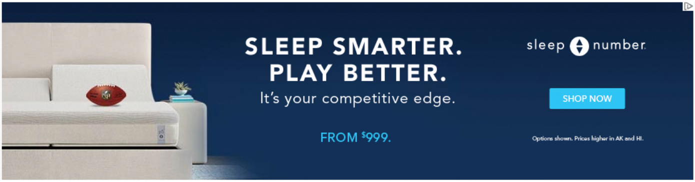
Here are the facts: 16.4 percent of female ballet dancers develop some form of eating disorder, according to an article in the *European Eating Disorders Review*. That's nearly five times the rate of the general population. Nevertheless, Hershenson doesn't blame ballet: "This is the thing. For somebody to really develop a full-blown eating disorder, it's genetics plus environment." She tells me that dancers turn to cigarettes or cocaine to avoid feeling hunger. That warning signs may be a young girl in baggy clothes, withdrawing from her friends.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"Ballet wasn't the reason," explains Johanna Kandel, also a former dancer and the founder of Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness. "There were many factors that caused the perfect storm. But I will tell you that the trigger pull was prepping to audition for a company production of *The Nutcracker*. The director came in and basically said we all needed to lose weight."

Ironically, many of the traits that make a good dancer — constant striving, an all-or-nothing attitude, people pleasing, perfectionism — are also conducive to an eating disorder for those with an underlying susceptibility, notes Kandel. After a decade of struggle, she finally got the treatment she needed, but she couldn't continue with ballet. "That was probably the biggest loss of my life," she says. "I remember being 8 and telling my mother that if I can't dance, I don't want to live."

Kandel has been an activist for 17 years. Today, the ballet studio is her favorite place to speak. "It was the norm for dancers to live on coffee and cigarettes. I tell them that to be successful, you need to nourish your body."

Johanna Kandel speaks about the dangers of eating disorders. Photo courtesy of The Alliance For Eating Disorders Awareness

For very young dancers, there's a grace period, "a unique and non-affected place," for dietician Justine Roth, MS, RD, CDN. Her 3-year-old, enrolled in ballet, comes home proud because her belly is the biggest. For her and many tiny ballerinas like her, it's just fun, especially if they get healthy messages from adults around them.

"But then, somewhere along the way, things get sticky," Roth tells Romper. "I see it as early as 8. Girls heavily comparing themselves to other dancers, counting carbs ... the highest spike in eating disorder behavior is actually right before puberty."

Malnutrition at these ages can delay puberty and therefore stunt growth, she explains. Lack of menstruation is a major problem that may compromise bone health and future fertility. She's heard some horrific stories of dance teachers promoting starvation.

"I had someone tell me once that the director of her company opened up her fridge, and it was empty. He said to the class, that's what all your refrigerators should look like. They were only 11. Actually," Roth pauses. "There was a death in that company."

Ballet didn't always fetishize the anorexic ideal. For Dr. Jennifer Fisher, a ballet historian at UC Irvine, Claire Trevor School of the Arts, the emaciated look is a phenomenon of the last 30 or 40 years. She tells me ballet dancers in the 19th century — of whom there are only sketches — were flattered to be called "plump."

"Ballet has its roots in royal courts, as a display of manners, grace, and power," Fisher explains. "It developed as an art form, and then required athleticism, which started to dictate a body type ... I'm not talking about the thinness we see today. They're underweight today, and I don't like it."

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> ALL DANCE REFLECTS THE CULTURE IN WHICH IT DEVELOPS. IT'S ALSO CAPABLE OF EMBODYING AND SUGGESTING NEW IDEAS.

Ballet is a conservative art form, according to Fisher, and slow to change. A certain body type, a certain skin tone. Such ideals are protected by institutions that believe an elite art has nothing to do with politics or social justice movements. Just three weeks ago, Fisher attended a performance of the Mariinsky Ballet in Orange County. The curtain was emblazoned with a character in blackface.

"All dance reflects the culture in which it develops," explains Fisher. "It's also capable of embodying and suggesting new ideas."

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The Mirror

"I teach dance majors, and I see the looks on their face when I say, ballet is an art at which you will fail every day. They say, yeah. Nobody says that, but yeah. We fail every day," says Fisher. She goes on to say that if you train with that understanding, and if you have a strong, positive home life that helps you feel worthwhile as a human being, you can stand up to ballet's demands:

"Every day in the mirror, you have your little failures, but you also succeed every day. You develop the ability to understand you'll never be perfect, but this art form, if you love it, will give you something to strive for," says Fisher.

On the other hand, if the mirror reflects poor support, or a lagging spirit that doubts her own worth, you'll see a dangerous distortion.

"The mirror can be several things," Andressen says. "It can be a wonderful tool ... you can also become so attached you don't know how to break away. You're looking at yourself in the mirror and at other dancers, and you're comparing your reflection to theirs."

Andressen consciously teaches the proper use of the mirror. Likewise, ballet must be approached carefully, and with some reverence. "Dance is always the mistress that you're chasing. It's an unnatural form of perfection that very few can inhabit and reach. It's so elusive, this mistress. It's like a siren's call."

> I'D SEE MY INSTRUCTOR'S FACE JUST WRINKLE UP WITH SCORN.

Dancers can answer that call in different ways, according to their personality, in-born resilience, and indeed, the tools they've learned while dancing. "The healthy dancers, the way they describe it is that when they dance, it’s not them," says Hershenson. "They become a character, they become another person. They’re able to step outside themselves." When these dancers judge their image in the mirror, they judge their practice of an art. They understand that no mirror can reflect their intrinsic worth.

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The Injuries

Dancers earn physical scars suprisingly early. Dr. Derek Ochiai of the Virginia Sportsmedicine Institute is a medical consultant for the Washington Ballet, specializing in hip issues. "Ballet ... puts a ton of stress on the hip, forcing external rotation, where you put your legs into positions that 95 percent of the population can't manage," he tells Romper. Cartilage and Achilles tendon tears, hip flexor strains, and foot and ankle issues are par for the course. Dancers also get concussions, and male dancers develop upper extremity problems.

Unfortunately, such injuries aren't limited to seasoned professionals. In the past year, Ochiai has seen at least three dancers, just 15 or 16 years old, with hip injuries so severe they required surgery.

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What exacerbates these injuries is the fact that young dancers don't always report them, because they want to keep dancing. "I've had several dancers tell me ballet is their life, and they're 14 years old," says Ochiai. "With other athletes, we talk about cross training. Each season, do something different. Ballet isn't really like that. It's truly a yearlong thing."

> IF YOU HAVE A WEAK SENSE OF SELF, DIFFERENT TYPES OF MENTAL DISORDERS MAY EMERGE.

Recently, Ochiai gave a talk about stress fractures, a number of which are the result of osteopenia or osteoporosis. "That can be hormonal, or it can be the result of extreme dieting," he explains.

Psychologically, even a recoverable injury can be devastating. For Dr. Miriam Rowan, Psy.D., who practices clinical sport and performance psychology at Amplify Wellness + Performance in the Greater Boston Area, an injury can also be an opportunity for growth. But how do you teach a young dancer that? "Resilience is important," Dr. Rowan says. "If you have a weak sense of self, different types of mental disorders may emerge." In her practice, she emphasizes balance — spending time with peers who aren't dancers, and being mindful of the present moment.

The Stage

Rowan considers dance an incredibly enriching experience, and many of the interviewees refer to ballet in romantic terms — as their first love. As does Melissa Musen Gerstein, who danced for almost 20 years. She's now the co-founder of the multi-media company The MOMS. "Dance has a wonderful impact on girls. It gives you the most invaluable tools for life," she tells Romper.

Courtesy of Melissa Musen Gerstein

Ballet has the potential to strengthen a person, to give them an outlet for fantasy, creation, and expression. Everyone I spoke to was hopeful that ballet would continue to become more inclusive and more human, especially for younger dancers. Rowan tells me that American Ballet Theatre (ABT) recently put together a pedagogy to distribute nationwide. She's excited about their decision to incorporate mental health and wellness into the curriculum. "It's a real evolution for dance," she says.

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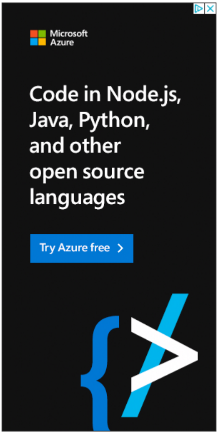
> YOU DEVELOP THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND YOU'LL NEVER BE PERFECT, BUT THIS ART FORM, IF YOU LOVE IT, WILL GIVE YOU SOMETHING TO STRIVE FOR.

Personally, I find it inspiring that so many former dancers entered fields that serve the next generation of dancers — as critics, therapists, and activists. But as Fisher reminds me, change comes slowly to ballet:

"Nowadays, when you enter the Royal Ballet School, or schools in Russia and China, they measure you. They meet your parents, they look at your teeth, and test your bones to see if you're worth investing in, like thoroughbred horses. A lot of people say we're missing something. None of us who trained years ago can believe what they're doing now ... these people are superhuman. But do you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they know *why* they're dancing?"

Misty Copeland performs. Photo by Amanda Edwards/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

The pendulum between artistry and athleticism may have swung towards the Olympians for now. Yet everyone continues to look for the spark of an artist, and not every girl who dances needs to aspire to the life of a prima ballerina. Long after dance, the joy and love remain. If our daughters want to take ballet, and if they continue to feel passionate and empowered in their classes, they should dance. They should also remember — and family and friends remind them — that they are more than a vessel for daunting techniques, and that they don't have to suffer silently.

A dancer's body is an instrument she alone has the power to control, nourish, and, as an artist, transcend.

ABC/Eric McCandless

Jordan Kimball Joined BFF Grocery Store Joe On 'DWTS' Trio Night & Twitter Couldn't Handle It

By Candace Ganger
a day ago

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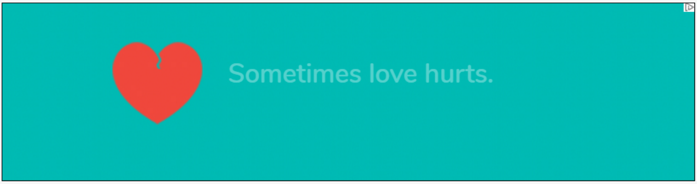

Sometimes love hurts.

After three weeks of fun, flashy dances, tonight's the night *Dancing With the Stars* fans have been waiting for — trio night. Yep. Week four gets you three dancers for the price of two. Talk about a bargain. The third dancer joining each pair might be a former *DWTS* contestant, colleague, or friend. In *Bachelor* alum "Grocery Store" Joe's case, it's his Best Bachelor Friend Forever. Jordan Kimball Joined BFF Grocery Store Joe on *DWTS* Trio Night and Twitter was seriously on top of it's posting game.

Though Joe [Amabile] recently told *Entertainment Tonight* Jordan knows how to work it, only time will tell. Judges scored the trio a set of 5s which, if you know *DWTS*, that's not great. "He's very confident. We're going to paint the board with 10s." Pro choreographer, Jenna Johnson gave Joe and Jordan a "sexy" salsa number to Right Said Fred's "I'm Too Sexy" and, well, the jury's out on if it was received as "sexy" or not (though the majority seems to agree it was not). Johnson said in the same *ET* interview "I don't think people are going to expect what we're going to be doing. I wanted to do something that just made these two shine, and the ladies are going to go crazy."

Some people were all for the awkward, clunky dance (that I thought was a-freakin-dorable). I mean, Twitter can be a supportive space sometimes. Especially when it comes to reality show-loving fans. Bachelor Nation always shows up for theirs and this is kind of huge. However, as the weeks progress, it's getting harder for poor Joe to keep up with those moving far past him in terms of ability. As one of the more lovable and memorable contestants in *Bachelor* franchise history, you want to root for him but at the same time, it's often obvious he can't match some of that.

Lucky for the former grocer, this dance was just as much for BFF, Jordan as a means of healing. After a very public breakup with *Bachelor In Paradise* contestant and ex, Jenna, Jordan's finally ready to get back out there and dancing with buddy, Joe was the perfect way to do it. "You gotta show people that the best thing to do whenever you're going through a rough time is to go to your friends and try to get out there and bust a move," he said. "Right now, *Dancing With the Stars* is very relevant in my life. I'm a big *Saturday Night Fever* kind of guy, and that's what we're bringing to you this Monday."

If there's one thing you can count on during a run of *DWTS*, it's the internet to bring you the cold, hard truths. Twitter's already buzzing about Monday night's performance: the good, the bad, and the, well, you'll see.

I think I muttered the same words but couldn't look away at all the denim. It was precious and perfect in its own weird way.

Agreed.

It can't be topped in terms of "this is the most entertained I've been in years, probably."

Other Twitter users were, *uh*, kind of harsh.

Maybe this will be Joe's last week on *DWTS*, maybe not. *He can't technically dance as well as the others but* id you see the overalls or the way Jordan's shirt wouldn't rip all the way off? Worth watching every second.