

## We Need Counselors Working With Ballet Companies

Why is physical health deemed more important than mental health, in regards to ballet dancers? Nearly every American ballet company and even some schools employ physical therapists or have connections with one in the area. Dancers face so much more than just injuries, aches, or pains, yet these seem to be what a majority of companies, and the dancers themselves, solely focus on; dancers have been found to suffer from a vast array of mental health complications. These issues frequently are not addressed and it may be years before the dancer realizes they were suffering from them. Furthermore, if a dancer is aware of a present issue or concern, they often feel unable to speak up out of fear. In a time such as today, where mental health concerns are coming more and more to light, ballet companies must make counseling an available resource for their dancers and artistic staff to address mental health issues; furthermore having an expert, a figure that is trusted and working within the company, but still maintaining the authority to speak about the concerns, articulate why a behavior may be problematic and offer a solution or advice.

Counseling in America frequently comes with a stereotype: you only go to therapy if you are unable to deal with issues by yourself. The subtext here is that should you seek the help of a counselor, it means that something is wrong with you, that you are crazy, or even that you are weak-minded.<sup>1</sup> However, this is certainly not the case with most other medical professionals. Poor mental health can lead to physical illness and symptoms as well as decreased functioning overall. Why is mental health considered less important than that of our physical health? According to the 2020 American Psychology Association report on “10 Trends to Watch in

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<sup>1</sup> “10 Reasons Why People Don't Go to Counseling.” *CSUM*, 12 Oct. 2020, [www.csum.edu/student-health-center/10-reasons-people-avoid-counseling.html](http://www.csum.edu/student-health-center/10-reasons-people-avoid-counseling.html).

Psychology,” only a quarter of the global population get the counseling help that they need, despite mental health issues and substance abuse disorders ranking the top cause of disability.<sup>2</sup> While there are new media platforms making counseling more readily available, concerns over data privacy, effectiveness, and there is often little to no relationship between good usability and credibility of a platform. This can make it incredibly challenging for those who would need counseling to get it and the number of people who could benefit from counseling is only increasing.

Ballet dancers frequently face a host of possible mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and trauma- and stressor-related disorders, among others. Watching from the sidelines with an injury as their peers surpass them<sup>3</sup> can easily lead to feelings of hopelessness and depression. The competitive environment, the constant presence of eyes on their bodies, the pressure to be skinny can all lead to anxiety and body dissatisfaction; dancers are about three times more at risk to develop an eating disorder than that of the average individual.<sup>4</sup>

A study performed in 2017 found that many ballet dancers have an apparent psychological inflexibility. This can lead to a greater impact on their mental health and their abilities to cope with the emotional and physical demands of the art form.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, fear and

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<sup>2</sup> Winerman, Lea. “2020: 10 Trends to Watch in Psychology.” *American Psychology Association*, American Psychology Association, 2020, [www.apa.org/members/content/2020-trends-report.pdf](http://www.apa.org/members/content/2020-trends-report.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> McGuire, Kathleen. “Advice For Dancers.” *Dance Magazine*, Dance Magazine, 27 July 2017, [www.dancemagazine.com/why-are-we-still-so-bad-at-addressing-dancers-mental-health-2466177083.html?rebelltitem=1](http://www.dancemagazine.com/why-are-we-still-so-bad-at-addressing-dancers-mental-health-2466177083.html?rebelltitem=1).

<sup>4</sup> Arcelus, Jon et al. “Prevalence of eating disorders amongst dancers: a systemic review and meta-analysis.” *European eating disorders review : the journal of the Eating Disorders Association* vol. 22,2 (2014): 92-101. doi:10.1002/erv.2271

<sup>5</sup> Serrano, Telmo, and Espírito-Santo, Helena Amaral. “Music, Ballet, Mindfulness, and Psychological Inflexibility.” *Psychology of Music*, vol. 45, no. 5, 2017, pp. 725–738.

shame-based practices are often used to teach and instill obedience in dancers, leaving them even more at risk for mental health concerns.<sup>6</sup>

Another study found that both parties, both teachers and dancers, all “worked to normalize and rationalize potentially harmful behaviors in ballet, leading to long-term negative health outcomes.”<sup>7</sup> I would like to say that both parties may not intentionally be working to potentially damage the mental health of the dancers, and are unaware or unsure as to why the damage is occurring. However, considering that both parties are actively working to “normalize and rationalize” these potential harming behaviors, they are at least somewhat aware that these behaviors are wrong but feel either unwilling or unable to make changes. That is what is alarming; a stubborn mindset against change. I have heard teachers and professors say, “This was just how I was taught,” as if that is the reason for their potentially harmful behaviors. This is concerning because when those words are said, it likely means that they were called out on their harmful practices, and are now using their background as an excuse for continuing them. While it may be the reason for their behavior, that should not give them the right to continue behaving in such a way when alerted to the harmful effects of their behavior. Once again, we see a stubborn mindset against change. How are we to improve and adapt if we are stuck in the past? Our field needs counselors to keep the minds of dancers healthy just as much as it needs physical therapists to keep their bodies healthy.

While there are many sports psychologists and counselors in America, there are very few who are focused solely on the unique mental health complications dancers face, being a part of an athletic art form. Houston Ballet Academy one of the very few schools or companies that can

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<sup>6</sup> Moola, Fiona, and Krahn, Alixandra. “A Dance with Many Secrets: The Experience of Emotional Harm from the Perspective of Past Professional Female Ballet Dancers in Canada.” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2018, pp. 256–274.

<sup>7</sup> Moola, Fiona, and Krahn, Alixandra.

easily name the counselor they employ for their dancers.<sup>8</sup> In August of 2020, the Pacific Northwest Ballet School welcomed a former company member, Josh Spell to the faculty as a therapist to provide health and wellness seminars and to meet one-on-one with students as needed. This was a momentous event in the ballet community as such a vast, internationally recognized company took steps towards addressing mental health concerns within their school and company and towards embracing a more holistic, well-rounded approach to ballet dancers' care.<sup>9</sup>

The dance field has a desperate need for counselors who have a background in or a keen understanding of the dance field and the issues dancers can face within it. This could raise the concern that these counselors would have a bias towards dancers. However, it could be that these counselors could be a figure of knowledgeable authority that could help protect dancers during situations and allegations and work to better educate the dance community. They could be driven to do so by their backgrounds and personal experiences. Due to the standards of counseling, information gathered from sessions is kept confidential and anything shared or studied is carefully kept anonymous. This would be especially important for dancers who need support for their mental health but fear losing their jobs, being demoted, etc. by speaking to someone about what they are experiencing.<sup>10</sup> Finally, it is not just the dancers who need counseling, but the artistic staff, who are typically under high levels of pressure to churn out productions, as well.<sup>11</sup> Everyone in the ballet field could benefit from having a counselor on the staff.

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<sup>8</sup> McGuire, Kathleen.

<sup>9</sup> "PNB School Welcomes New Consulting Therapist, Josh Spell, MSW, LSWAIC." *Pacific Northwest Ballet*, 27 Aug. 2020, [www.pnb.org/pnb-school-welcomes-new-consulting-therapist-josh-spell-msw-lswaic/](http://www.pnb.org/pnb-school-welcomes-new-consulting-therapist-josh-spell-msw-lswaic/).

<sup>10</sup> Moola, Fiona, and Krahn, Alixandra.

<sup>11</sup> Stafford, Abi. "I'm a Professional Dancer With Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Here's Why Dance Companies Need to Start Prioritizing Mental Health." *Dance Magazine*, Dance Magazine, 22 Nov. 2020, [www.dancemagazine.com/abi-stafford-anxiety-2647826840.html?rebelltitem=4](http://www.dancemagazine.com/abi-stafford-anxiety-2647826840.html?rebelltitem=4).

In America, few people who need mental health assistance receive it, causing mental health concerns to be some of the highest-ranking causes of disability. Artists frequently suffer from mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and self-injurious behaviors, among others; ballet is no different. Companies are weakening their dancers' and artistic staff's ability to adapt, handle pressure, their overall health, and their career's overall longevity by not providing them with safe, reliable access to a mental health counselor. A counselor with a background in dance would likely be dedicated to their job and willing to go to great lengths to help these individuals, having possibly experienced similar situations. Finally, a counselor could act as a mediator between the dancers and the rest of the staff, speaking out for them about issues and concerning practices without the dancers fearing losing their jobs and educating the company on topics of wellness and mental health from a position of authority. The ballet world is finally starting to accept a more holistic approach to training and dancing as a whole, so why has that holistic approach not been included in a dancer's care? It is time for that to change.

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