

Shame on me: dancing and adversity

Professional and pre-professional dancers spend years training in order to express the deepest experiences of the human condition. They acquire physical skills that translate into aesthetic works of art. Regardless of the dance form, whether classical ballet, contemporary, jazz, hip hop, tap, ballroom, or cultural world dance, dancers and non-dancers viscerally understand the power of dance. It is a universal art form that integrates physical movement with music; it transcends language and crosses all cultures. A career in dance provides opportunities to powerfully embody creative expression that directly engages both the dancer and the viewer; however, compared to the other performing arts, a career in dance is typically short. Age, injury, burn out, financial constraints, and sociocultural pressures to sustain a thin and fit physical body are all factors that shorten a dance career. Currently, awareness is growing amongst health practitioners and educators about the unique needs of dancers. They require medical, psychological, emotional, financial, and social support in order to realize and sustain their talents.

Dancers who suffer early childhood adversity often face even more challenges. Childhood maltreatment profoundly shapes a sense of self as well as interactions with others and the world at large. Childhood abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction intensify shame-based beliefs that the self is damaged, defective, or flawed, which in turn increases anxiety. The combination of childhood maltreatment, shaming experiences, and heightened anxiety all diminish self-esteem. Whether maltreated in the home, the training environment, or both, abused and neglected dancers carry an added burden as they navigate a demanding dance career.

In the research study, "Shame and anxiety: The mediating role of childhood adversity in dancers," published in 2018 in the *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science*, results demonstrated that dancers who carried toxic levels of internalized shame were more anxious. The combination of high levels of shame and anxiety were also associated with diminished self-esteem. These dancers were at increased risk to respond submissively to authority figures and carry more body shame; behaviors that increase the risk for physical injury and disordered eating. Even more troubling, these dancers were exposed to more early childhood maltreatment, which further intensified shame-based responses. The combination of elevated childhood maltreatment, shaming experiences, and anxiety contribute to an increased risk for adult violent revictimization, addictive behaviors, depression, and PTSD. Dancers with a history of maltreatment, in conjunction with internalized shame, often struggle with feelings of inadequacy, self-condemnation, worthlessness, inferiority, and fragility. Many learn to hide these feelings behind their physical skills as a dancer; however, when they stop dancing they are left feeling lonely and empty.

Recommendations drawn from this study included creating positive training and work environments that nurture optimal performance behaviors. Dancers with a history of childhood maltreatment and high internalized shame should be encouraged to seek professional services in order to amend their autobiographic narrative of a defective self. Disambiguating memories of childhood adversity from self-identity may reduce stress symptoms as well as anxiety and shame, and hopefully this

will foster stronger self-esteem. Dance is a challenging career and gifted dancers need to dance without being encumbered by a past history of shame and maltreatment. The culture of dance is rich and powerful; this can be strengthened when dancers are freed from these psychological burdens.

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