

Dance/USA

Task Force on Dancer Health

RESOURCES FOR DANCERS' MENTAL HEALTH

Professional dancers need to stay in tip-top physical shape, and when they're ill or injured they often have access or referrals to athletic trainers, physical therapists, and medical doctors. Dancers' mental health is equally vital to their careers' success, yet connecting with dance-informed mental health treatment may not be as easy to find. This paper offers resources for professional dancers and dance companies to access a range of mental health care, including free and discounted services. This will make it easier for dancers to seek support or treatment whether they are working in a location with limited resources or working in a company where they hesitate to ask leadership or peers for guidance. This paper also facilitates companies' responsibility to provide information for mental health care services, no matter the company's size or location.

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

In compiling a list of mental health resources for professional dancers, it's important to first review the current mental health needs that many dancers are dealing with. Most of these needs have existed in the professional dance world for many years, but the recent pandemic also introduced new dimensions of mental health issues.

NEEDS SPECIFIC TO THE DANCE CULTURE

The mental disorders most common among professional dancers include anxiety, depression, and body image issues. Following these are issues with trauma, attention deficit disorders, and substance abuse.

Career-specific contributors to **anxiety** may include:

- Financial instability
- Performance anxiety
- Repeat stressors of live performances and the real risk of something going wrong without ample mental skills training to bolster the recovery from such things
- Stress of competition among colleagues for roles and promotions
- Fear of injury
- Stress from dedicated physical efforts if unbalanced with recovery
- Pressure to consistently perform within the higher realm of one's abilities to decrease risk of being replaced
- Stress from suppressing negative or vulnerable emotions without managing them effectively

Depression among professional dancers can involve the following:

- Internalized self-criticism: dancers are often their own harshest critics.
- Hopelessness: this can be felt in degree of progress made, in casting frustrations, in hierarchical system dynamics, and in struggles with recurring injuries.

- A mindset of hopelessness can develop if dancers link the constant strive for improvement with the assumption that wherever they are is not good enough.
- A lack of control: for example, in directors' subjective decisions, or in a dancer's focus being on other's performability instead of on their own progress and goals.
- Emptiness around feeling that the body is ultimately a tool that the dancer's career and identity depend on.

Body image issues in the industry can be associated with the following:

- An expression of control issues
- Striving for an ideal image
- Habits of negative self-talk, irrelevant and destructive comparisons to others' bodies
- Detail-oriented training with an eye to line and form, that focuses on imperfections
- Cycles with both anxiety and depression

Body image issues can be reinforced by feedback from costuming, by casting and promotions, even by director evaluations, and of course by the dancers' minds themselves with whatever it is *they* perceive in those very big mirrors all around them. Over 80% of professional ballet dancers have met criteria for an eating disorder at some point during their lives (Ringham et al., 2006).

The **trauma** typically addressed in clinical practices results from dancers' experiences of emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse, from either within the dance world or outside it. Trauma therapy can also be helpful following severe injury or illness.

Some of these dance-culture-specific traits contribute to the unique mental stress experienced by many dancers. These cultural traits are not disorders per se, but rather traits or habits that can lend to mental vulnerability. When symptoms in any of these areas interfere with a dancer's ability to perform with satisfaction within their potential range, or to engage contentedly in their personal functioning, the dancer should be referred for evaluation and treatment by a mental health specialist.

In addition to possible treatment for the above, mental health support is needed to develop performance enhancement skills such as goal-setting, focus-training, mental rehearsal, managing recovery from injury or from poor performance, and individualized enhancement plans. These are not just performance-enhancing tools, they help prevent mental distress. They can be viewed as mental health strengthening tools necessary for this level of athletic artistry and performance.

REPORT OF MORE CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Through the recent pandemic, new mental health trends arose in the professional dance world, and some pre-existing ones swelled.

- Career instability heightened
- Financial stress became acute
- Competition increased as companies closed and reduced staff
- Career changes or premature retirement brought stress
- Many who did remain in the industry had residual fear (of COVID-19 and of their career's uncertainty) and depression
- Artists not being able to work and perform their art contributed to a loss of identity

These are in addition to the social disconnection many people experienced. The co-occurring national unrest over systemic racism and exclusion (Black Lives Matter movement, Asian hate

crimes), and the growing awareness of sexual harassment (Me Too movement), factored in as well, mounting stress levels. While it is a positive evolution that dancers are more open about their mental health needs now, it is unfortunately because so many of these needs have increased drastically.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

Attached is a comprehensive Appendix of resources, divided into four categories: therapy for mental illnesses and disorders, crisis hotlines, national advocacy and support organizations, and other nonprofit organizations for support or therapy referrals. Within these are services that can be accessed by a range of budgets, including free care. There are also services targeted to certain groups and for specialized issues. It is the aim of Dance/USA's Task Force on Dancer Health to update this appendix of resources regularly, to keep up with current needs and populations within the dance profession.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING THE CARE

With all these mental health resources available for dancers and companies, what is getting in the way of dancers accessing them?

Some dancers may not seek help until their discomfort has grown to a near-debilitating state. They may not recognize their clinical needs earlier because much of their unrest has been culturally normed for so long or they may be unaware of their ability to seek help. Culturally normed means the ballet culture may have discouraged help-seeking, with its history of suppressing or ignoring troubling thoughts or emotions, and believing that is what it means to "be professional." A scan of the professional literature since 2004 shows that nearly every dancer involved in the research expressed a desire for counseling services integrated into their schedule and provided by a counselor who understands this unique ballet culture and its specific stressors. An unfortunate sticking point was that many also feared counselors not understanding their world or why they'd commit to such a lifestyle. Some also feared retribution by artistic leadership for having sought help. The professional ballet industry needs to get "professional" to mean: responsibly addressing issues so that struggles don't get in the way of performance. As it stands now, if a professional dancer is asking for help with mental health, they may be well past the threshold of needing it.

Another obstacle is that some ballet companies may not be equipped to adequately inform or provide dancers with the resources. This paper's appendix will help facilitate that for companies' management and leadership, as well as directly provide the information to dancers themselves.

Some individual dancers have their own obstacles to engaging in treatment, such as feeling therapy is expensive, time-consuming, and emotionally taxing. Some may also hold their own stigma against seeking mental health treatment. Fortunately, the benefits of mental healthcare and the courage to seek it are both growing in our culture's awareness, especially among younger or well-informed dancers, choreographers, and leadership. It is true that not all companies provide dancers with health insurance that covers mental health services, but the appendix does include several organizations, such as the Entertainment Community Fund, that can help with that. It also lists resources that connect affordable services to dancers and companies alike. For example, *Minding the Gap* consults with schools and companies to help them create mental health programs within their policies and procedures. *OK, Let's Unpack This* offers free individual therapy and support groups for dancers with a focus on destigmatizing mental health within the dance field.

Another obstacle to care is that there needs to be even more of it available. The world needs more mental health care practitioners increasing their research and their clinical specialization for professional dancers. This is niche work. Therapeutic treatment for dancers is its own unique specialization. Fortunately the profession of performance psychology is growing rapidly to include therapists within this specialty who are well-informed of the dance culture and demands.

CALL TO ACTION

With all these stressors and mental afflictions, dancers are not just missing out on personal satisfaction. Their performance is affected, their risk of injury and burn-out is increased, and their career longevity is shortened. So it is better for both dancers and companies' business interests to access mental health support. How can we all work to improve connection to the increasing amount of resources available? The call is for collaboration.

Together we can continue the strong progress made in destigmatizing mental health support. Companies can implement mental health screening that is available to a range of budgets. Companies should provide access to local resources to the extent they can, and distribute the attached appendix of applicable resources to their dancers and staff. Company management can even add their own local resources to the list to personalize it for their company. With the help of some of the resources in this appendix, companies can evaluate their subculture against healthier standards, and implement a system of education, enforcement, and support of these healthier norms. There also needs to be a bold shift in companies' development and grant-writing departments to incorporate mental health programming among their initiatives. And finally, there needs to be more evidence-based research in mental health issues specific to professional dancers, distinct from elite athletes and other performing artists, to better identify needs within the ballet culture and treatment modalities to address them. There are plenty of surveys and self-report scales out there that help us hear voices in the industry, but professional evidence-based research on this population is needed. With more information, we can equip more support, and address more of what the professional dance world needs to thrive. Advocacy groups, mental health professionals, companies, training schools, families, and dancers themselves must collaborate as a system toward embracing a mentally healthier climate. Companies distributing this paper's appendix, and dancers and staff utilizing it, is an easy start, and a huge positive message with tremendous potential benefit for all. A sustainable cycle of healthy dance careers is attainable, and we all have a part in working toward enabling it.

APPENDIX*

THERAPY FOR MENTAL ILLNESSES AND DISORDERS

What kind of therapist can help?

Seek a therapist who is informed about the dance culture and its impact on dancers' mindsets.

Therapeutic modalities can range from client-centered to psychodynamic to cognitive-behavioral, and more, depending on the presenting issue. Specializations can be sought in disordered eating, substance abuse, trauma, grief, and other issues as needed.

What degree should my therapist have: PhD, PsyD, LicSW, or LMFT. CMPC and other certifications represent specialized career interest and experience.

Therapists should be aware of:

- *The dance culture* and its impact on dancers' mindsets and identities. For example, in ballet this is applicable when addressing issues of body identity influences, requirements for successful ballet dancing, and the relationship between ballet standards and mental health disorders.
- *Clinical symptoms normalization* within the dance culture when assessing. Dancers may under-report a symptom's impact if they feel it is normal for the culture of their dance genre.
- *The ongoing conversation* to dismantle established perceptions of beauty, athleticism, and inclusion, while acknowledging its impact on presenting symptoms.
- *Helping dancers discern* when expectations placed on them may be perceived as inappropriate or abusive by the world outside the studio. This would entail psychoeducation about different forms of abuse and discussions of power and control.
- *Exploring internal self-talk* around a dancer's relationship with their body as well as their comparisons to others or to their internalized ideal.

Therapist Locators

APA: American Psychological Association: <https://locator.apa.org/>

For mental illnesses or disorders. Includes sport and performance psychology. Large database with several filters for specialty.

Better Help: www.betterhelp.com

Psychology Today: www.psychologytoday.com

Filters for location, specific issue, insurance. Issues are based on diagnosis or topic, but neither performance nor dance psychology are included among these filters.

Therapy For Black Girls: <https://therapyforblackgirls.com/>

AASP: Association for Applied Sport Psychology: www.appliedsportpsych.org

Within AASP: *Find a CMPC* (Certified Mental Performance Consultant) - These are individuals with graduate education in a sport science or psychology who help performers develop and strengthen their mental, self-regulatory, and life-skills to optimize performance, enjoyment, and personal development. The website elaborates on the range of specializations unique to professional dancers and athletes:

Advocacy and social justice
Academic/Career
counseling
Aggression
Attention/Concentration
Biofeedback/Neurofeedback
Burnout & overtraining
Career transitions
Coach education
Communication
Disability/Accessibility
Diversity, equity, inclusion
Eating disorders
Elite performance

Emotional control/regulation
Esports
Exercise/Fitness & well-being
Fair play / Good sportship
Goal-setting
Identity issues
Injury & Rehab
LBGTQ+
Leadership/Captaincy
Life skills
Mental health
Mindfulness

Motivation
Parent education
Performance enhancement
Physical/emotional abuse
Public speaking
Racism in sport
Religion/spirituality
Stress management/
arousal regulation
Substance use/abuse
Team culture/cohesion
Work/school-life balance
Youth sport

CRISIS HOTLINES

Emergency: 911

Crisis of Mental Health, Substance Abuse, or Suicide: 988

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673

National Eating Disorder Hotline: 1-800-248-3285

The Trans Lifeline: 1-877-565-8860

LGBT National Help Center: 1-888-843-4564

NYCWell: 1-888-692-9355, or text WELL to 65173 (for New Yorkers, over 200 languages available)

NATIONAL ADVOCACY & SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

IADMS: International Association for Dance Medicine Specialists www.iadms.org

A global network of dance medicine professionals. Has a library of resources that is informative for dance professionals. Highly instrumental in advocacy work and professional development.

Dance/USA: Task Force on Dancer Health www.danceusa.org

The U.S. national service organization for dance, championing an inclusive and equitable dance field through leadership, advocacy, and convenings. Its Task Force on Dancer Health offers a library of Informational Papers on dancer health and well-being.

NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness www.nami.org

Text "HelpLine" to 62640 for mental health support Mon-Fri 10am-10pm ET. Also has support group referrals.

NEDA: National Eating Disorders Association www.nationaleatingdisorders.org 800-931-2237

Confidential information and referral helpline, 11am-9pm ET Mon-Thu and 11am-5pm ET Fri.

NAANAD: National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc www.anad.org

Helpline Mon-Fri 9am-5pmCT for referrals to treatment professionals, treatment centers, hospitals, and residential programs. 847-831-3438

ADAA: Anxiety and Depression Association of America www.adaa.org

ABCT: Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies www.abct.org

Mental Health America

Online Screening Test: <https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/?ref=MHASWPA>

Not directly linked to treatment resources.

PAMA: Performing Arts Medicine Association <https://artsmed.org/resources/>

An information resource hub, originally for medical doctors, now includes a variety of healthcare resources for performing arts. No link to specialists, but can email them for help in accessing their referral directory: <https://pama.memberclicks.net/referral-directory>

Mentalhealth.gov links to <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/> which has a great mental health facilities locator

Entertainment Community Fund (formerly Actor's Fund), founded The Dancers' Resource:

<https://entertainmentcommunity.org/services-and-programs/dancers-resource>

New York City: 212-221-7300, ext. 119 eastern@entertainmentcommunity.org

Chicago: 312-372-0989 central@entertainmentcommunity.org

Los Angeles: 323-933-9244, ext. 455 western@entertainmentcommunity.org

- Individual and group support for dancers dealing with injuries
- Referrals for health care and health insurance
- Information and advocacy with workers' compensation and disability insurance
- Educational seminars on injury prevention, nutrition and wellness, financial planning and more
- Uniquely for professional dancers
- Emergency financial assistance as follows:
 - For active dancers an applicant must have earned in the performing arts and/or entertainment industry a minimum of \$2,000 per year for the past three years, or
 - For former dancers an applicant must have a minimum of seven years paid employment in the performing arts and/or entertainment industry with five years of earnings of at least \$5,000 per year, or
 - Documented Financial Need

OTHER NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS FOR SUPPORT OR THERAPY REFERRALS

Minding the Gap www.wearemindthegap.com

Consults with dance schools and companies to help them create mental health programs. They do not directly link dancers and companies to a database of mental health professionals, but they can help a school or company form a relationship with a qualified mental health professional near their location, ensuring insurance compatibility.

Dancers Anonymous www.thedancersanonymous.org

Anonymously share your written story. Offer virtual support groups, currently facilitated by someone trained only in Mental Health First Aid training.

Resource list: <https://thedancersanonymous.org/resources-for-dancers/>

Born This Way Foundation www.bornthisway.foundation/get-help-now/

Easy to navigate the website for finding support and for self-care tips. Support connections include subcategories of crisis, body-image, bullying, substance abuse, and finding cognitive-behavioral therapists via link to ABCT.org. Does not include performance psychology- or dance-specific therapists.

Ok, Let's Unpack This www.okayokayokay.org

Does offer free individual therapy and support groups for dancers with a focus on destigmatizing mental health within the dance field. See www.okayokayokay.org/free-individual-therapy for a list of current therapists donating services to dance artists.

Biscuit Ballerina <http://www.biscuitballerina.com/dancer-resources>

Articles and blogs on dancer mental health

From Here To Diversity <https://fromheretodiversity.com/>

Consulting services from the work of Theresa Ruth Howard through MoBBallet (Memoirs of Blacks in ballet)

Mental Health First Aid www.MentalHealthFirstAid.org

In partnership with National Council for Mental Wellbeing: Recommended for larger companies interested in having an employee take their MentalHealthFirstAid course to have someone on staff know what to do in the event of a mental health crisis.

RESOURCES SPECIFIC TO DISORDERED EATING

National Eating Disorder Association: <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/>

Project Heal: <http://www.theprojectheal.org/>

Youth Protection Advocates In Dance: <https://www.ypadnow.com>

Eating Disorders Resource Center: <http://edrcsv.org/>

Eating Disorder Recovery Support: <http://edrs.net/>

Treatment Placement Specialists: <https://www.acadiahealthcare.com/programming-treatment/>

ED Referral: <https://www.edreferral.com/home>

Alliance for Eating Disorders: <https://www.allianceforeatingdisorders.com/>

Sage and Spoon: <https://www.nalgonapositivitypride.com/sage-and-spoon>

Breaking the Chains Foundation: <https://breakingthechainsfoundation.org/>

RESOURCES SPECIFIC TO LGBTQ+

The Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists <http://www.aglp.org/>

Offers numerous resources for LGBT people who are experiencing mental health conditions, including a directory of LGBT-friendly therapists.

LGBT National Help Center <https://www.lgbthotline.org/>

Provides multiple resources and access to a hotline and a youth chat line.

The Pride Institute <https://pride-institute.com/>

An unlocked, LGBT-exclusive facility that offers a residential treatment program, including psychiatric care for depression, anxiety, and other needs.

The Trevor Project <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

A multimedia support network for LGBTQ youth providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

Manhattan Alternative <https://www.manhattanalternative.com/>

Provides a list of kink, poly, trans & LGBTQ affirmative providers.

FEDUP Collective <https://fedupcollective.org/resources>

Callen-Lorde <https://callen-lorde.org/behavioral-health/>

Offers LGBTQ healthcare, currently only to those in their primary care in NY. Waitlist for behavioral healthcare.

The Hetrick-Martin Institute <https://hmi.org/services/youth-services/>

A NYC-based organization offering various services to LGBTQAI+ youth, including health care and counseling.

** Appendix for Resources for Dancers' Mental Health is compiled as a courtesy service for the convenience of those in the professional dance industry seeking referrals for mental health support, advocacy, and treatment. It is not comprehensive of all mental health resources for dancers. Individuals and organizations on this list are not sponsored by Dance/USA.*

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Disclaimer: The information on mental health resources for dancers contained in this paper is intended to help guide and inform the dancer. It is not meant to take the place of the advice of a medical professional. This information is provided by Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.

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