



Building Resilience in Dance

Learning to cope with everyday highs and lows

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Introduction

On certain days, dancers may feel joyful and light in their body, mind, and artistic exploration, while other days may feel frustrating and heavy. A dancer's body, mind, and artistry are constantly challenged in dance class and on stage. While accepting challenges in order to pursue their best, artists can also expect inevitable breakthroughs and breakdowns along the way.

Navigating success and adversity is deeply ingrained within dance, and as a result, building one's resilience and coping skills becomes crucial in order to face everyday challenges. This paper describes personal attitudes, mental practices and tools that can help dancers build resilience and cope more effectively with artistic highs and lows.

What is Resilience?

The notion of resilience may fall under two categories¹:

- **Rebound resilience:** experiencing a minor setback or disruption of well-being or performance while under pressure, followed by a quick return to normal functioning.
- **Robust resilience:** maintaining well-being and performance when under pressure and in adverse situations. It is coping effectively with pressures, stressors, setbacks, obstacles, and disappointments.

While it is important to learn how to “bounce back” from minor setbacks in order to maintain personal wellness, dance often involves cultivating and practicing robust resilience to withstand the pressure that comes with performing. Generally, building resilience is a slow and dynamic process, requiring the development of several personal qualities such as mental flexibility, curiosity, empathy, optimism, connectedness, vulnerability, and perseverance². True resilience does not put one's well-being or values at risk and involves acknowledging



and experiencing a wide range of emotions such as frustration, disappointment, excitement, and joy. Resilience is not a fixed personality trait, but rather a skill that changes over time and that can be enhanced by a series of mental practices and behaviors that performers may use before, during and after stressful encounters¹. These practices are discussed in the following section.

Useful Resilience Practices

Most dancers experience various artistic setbacks over the course of their career, such as being injured or rejected from a program, receiving tough feedback or feeling disappointed by their own performance. Resilience is rooted in a performer's ability to return and grow after those setbacks. According to research, a dancer can foster resilience by first acknowledging and experiencing one's emotions and reactions to an adverse situation, such as shame, sadness, or the fear of reprisal (e.g., losing a dance role). Once the obstacle is clearly identified, one can work more effectively on changing his/her negative mindset in order to return to the challenge with heightened confidence and focus. This process is facilitated by practicing awareness, self-compassion, and optimism, connectedness and active commitment. Artists may find these mental practices helpful in coping with challenging moments.

Awareness consists of shifting attention to one's thoughts, emotions, and physiology at any given moment, to better realize how mind and body are interpreting a situation or experience. The practice of awareness will support the mental agility and flexible thinking required to build resilience. It also helps prevent selective perception and ruminating over minor flaws rather than appreciating your performance as a whole³. This personal trap is common to many dancers and often impedes their ability to identify a problem, or tricky spot, and then create a solution.

Self-compassion involves first acknowledging personal suffering, rather than avoiding, disconnecting, or escaping from it, and then alleviating pain and discomfort through self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness⁴. Practicing self-compassion can increase motivation, reduce anxiety, and facilitate positive mental reframing while responding to adversity^{4, 5, 6}. When artists use self-compassion techniques, such as positive self-talk and perspective-taking, they are better able to counter the perfectionism and self-criticism that too often tax personal wellness⁷.

Optimism refers to the belief that the future is positive and good things will happen, or to the way in which someone routinely explains events in their life⁸. When optimistic dancers refer to a problem (e.g., injury or rejection), they do not regard it as permanent, pervasive, or the result of an unchangeable personal fault. Instead, optimistic dancers believe that problems and challenges are temporary and specific



experiences, which they have some degree of control over. An optimistic explanatory style is associated with higher levels of motivation, achievement, and physical well-being and lower levels of depressive symptoms⁸.

Connectedness involves sharing one's experience with trusted people who can offer feelings of support, relatedness, and accountability, to get through setbacks and navigate challenges⁹. When feeling distressed or overwhelmed by an obstacle, artists can also foster resilience by calling on family, friends or dance community members for help.

Active commitment is an essential component of resilience, as resilience is a dynamic process involving challenging oneself, moving through difficulty, stumbling, reflecting, learning, and trying again on a regular and cyclical basis¹. Dancers can improve resilience by regularly challenging themselves to engage in this cycle of trying, learning, and returning.

To summarize, resilience is a dynamic process fostered by the development of mental skills, the cultivation of supportive social connections, and the pursuit of mental, physical, and artistic challenges. Dancers can practice and advance these skills in training and performance contexts, both in-the-moment and long-term. The research above supports and encourages performers to engage with self-observations and reflections to nurture and build their resilience, as well as to foster the development of routines and planning that supports wellbeing and resilience over time.

Self-Reflection Questions

To build and nurture resilience, it is helpful to take time to self-reflect. Reflective moments enable dancers to become curious about what is effective and what is harmful to their artistic process and growth. Asking questions such as what, why, when, who and how may help to seek new opportunities, shift self-defeating attitudes, and pivot personal strategies to better achieve personal goals. According to scholars, this self-reflective process helps individuals not only to survive difficult experiences, but also to gain positive qualities due to adversity¹⁰. Here is a list of questions that dancers may find relevant to enhance self-awareness and self-compassion.

Self-Awareness Questions

The following reflection questions help build awareness about the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that guide a dancer's performance. It may also be useful to connect with their best and most challenging moments in order to identify and build on personal strengths and to learn precious lessons from the things that challenge them.



- A.** Why do I dance? For example,
- a.** Dance allows me to connect with/to...
 - b.** Dance allows me to feel...
 - c.** When I dance, I let myself...
- B.** During my best dance experience, what were my thoughts, my emotions, my bodily sensations, and my behaviors?
- C.** During my most challenging dance experience, what were my thoughts, my emotions, my bodily sensations, and my behaviors?
- D.** In my best dance experience, what obstacles were present that I worked through and used as an opportunity?
- E.** In my most challenging dance experience, what obstacles impacted me physically and mentally?
- F.** What lessons can I learn from each situation?
- a.** 2 positives / strengths - why are they important and how will they impact my thoughts and actions moving forward?
 - b.** 2 challenges / negatives / points for improvement – why are they important and how will they impact my thoughts and actions moving forward?
- G.** What accessible goals can I set for myself the next time I am challenged?



Self-Compassion Questions

Research shows that the words we use with ourselves can have an outstanding impact on how we approach, feel, act, and react in any given situation^{3, 4}. The following reflection questions may give added opportunities for enhancing self-compassion, through positive affirmations and self-talk.

- A. How do I usually talk to myself when I face a challenge?
- B. What I have said to my friends when they face a similar challenge?
- C. What self-compassion reminders could I give myself in the future?

Building Resilient Routines

When artists face pressures, challenges, or setbacks, self-compassion experts suggest taking a break from the situation. However, this is not always possible in the middle of a dance class or a performance. At these times, it may be helpful to take a mental step away and listen to one's internal experience with kindness and empathy. This process of compassionate self-reflection can include four simple steps: pause, breathe, reflect, refocus.

- A. Pause:** Take a moment to go still and let the mind and body communicate freely. Use self-talk to tell yourself to pause and gently "stop".
- B. Breathe:** Calm cognitive and physiological arousal. Step back for a moment and focus on your breath.
 - a. Take a deep breath*
 - b. Use familiar breath work to reconnect with the body.
 - c. Anchor focus back on breath.
- C. Reflect:** Recognize what is happening, so you can face it, learn from it, and take action.
 - a. Notice and name inner experience, without judgment:
 - i. What am I feeling in my body?
 - ii. What emotion is showing up right now
 - b. Get curious about it
 - i. What isn't working for me? Why?
 - ii. Where is my focus and attention? Is it helping me or hindering me?
 - iii. What would I tell a friend experiencing this?
- D. Refocus and Return:**
 - a. What do I have control over in this situation?
 - b. What is my next step to carry on with my goal?
 - c. Who can I call on for support?

Conclusion

Challenges, setbacks, or failures, as well as feelings of disappointment, discouragement, or frustration can all be invitations to nurture and practice personal resilience. Resilience is a dynamic process in

which dancers can learn from and return to a challenge in the face of adversity without compromising their well-being or performance. It is a trainable skill fostered through practices of awareness, self-compassion, optimism, and active commitment, as well as nurturing strong social support. A dancer's resilience may change through time and context, but by consistently prioritizing self-reflection, practicing mental skills, and seeking social support, a dancer will be equipped to navigate obstacles and feel empowered to persevere in pursuit of their goals.

Notes:

* Breathing is a natural occurrence, but it is also a skill that can be practiced and optimized to support both well-being and performance. Dancers who are new to using breath work or who wish to practice some breathing techniques, can visit the following resource: https://thebestbrainpossible.com/breathing-stress-brain-calm/?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=socialnetwork

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