



Post-Performance Depression

Coping with the Inner Silence after the Applause

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Introduction

Dancers typically spend months preparing physically, mentally, and emotionally for a dance production. This intense preparation often comes with high self-expectations. Despite the elevated cost that productions can have on energy and life balance, most artists find that the thrill and the satisfaction of performing on stage is worth the blood, sweat, and tears they have invested in their dance! Each show or series of shows eventually comes to a close, but what happens when the applause dies down and the curtain falls?

If satisfied with their performance, dancers usually experience joy, excitement, and relief, however, within a few days this *emotional high* can turn into Post-Performance Depression (PPD). PPD is defined as « The combination of the physiological decline and the psychological loss of purpose [that] often lead to down emotions such as sadness, listlessness, irritability, and general malaise » (9). Studies show that this *body-mind letdown* (general decrease in energy level) is a common experience for various professional and pre-professional performers: not only dancers, but singers and musicians as well. PPD is often accompanied by harsh self-criticism about one's artistic performance, especially in the case of disappointments (1,10).

Components

PPD is a necessary adjustment process that helps dancers to recover from the stress of high-intensity performing. It involves both a physical and a psychological component (9).

Physical: Sustained high-intensity training and performance can be an exhilarating experience for dancers. During this demanding period, dancers' bodies trigger instinctive stress responses (e.g., increased heart rate, sweating, energy level, awareness, and focus), in order to meet prime requirements that are asked of them. Studies show that optimal amounts of stress, called *eustress*, are energizing and often improve a dancer's performance (8). After these peak experiences, however, there is a need for physical recovery and the body moves into a general *letdown* mode, which can affect energy levels, thoughts, and emotions.



Psychological: Once a high-intensity performance is achieved, dancers will often go through a brief mourning period for the joys and sense of purpose that had been invested in the performance project. As many performers have their personal identity--sense of uniqueness and continuity-- so ingrained in their craft, they may feel challenged once they return to the norms of daily living (6). Many things may seem pale in comparison to the thrill of performing! The inner silence that follows a high-intensity, high-stimulus period may be perceived as a nameless malaise that can be distressing for the artist, particularly if they cannot pinpoint the source of uneasiness. This mourning process can be especially painful and difficult to navigate for independent performers without an upcoming contract, or for dancers who retire unexpectedly (e.g., following an injury, loss of company status)(3).

Symptoms

PPD symptoms resemble other types of depression and range in intensity and in duration, depending on a dancer's artistic experience, personality traits, general level of well-being, coping abilities, and performance satisfaction (7,9,10).

Although PPD is common, few dancers talk about it openly and scientific literature on the subject remains scarce. Clinical interviews conducted with professional dancers indicate that the following disturbances may occur at various degrees, after a meaningful show, a series of shows, a disappointing performance, and/or receiving negative feedback (e.g., from an artistic director)(3):

- Physical and mental fatigue, lethargy,
- Excessive sleep or insomnia,
- Loss of appetite or bingeing,
- A feeling of emptiness,
- Inability to experience pleasure,
- Anxiety and/or panic attacks,
- Irritability; outbursts of crying and/or anger,
- Lack of motivation (especially in activities other than dance),
- Negative self-talk and rumination over perceived flaws,
- Destructive comparisons with others, leading to loss of self-esteem,
- Emotional and social withdrawal,
- Doubts regarding one's artistic competence and dance career,
- Intense self-questioning (e.g., *Who am I? What's the use? What do I next?*),
- Loss of sense of purpose in their artistic pursuit, sometimes in life as a whole.



Aggravating Factors

Personal attitudes and/or behaviors have been shown to heighten the risk of developing anxiety and depression, and may also contribute to PPD symptoms (2,4). The following factors tend to make dancers feel more vulnerable physically and psychologically, and may hamper the PPD adjustment process.

Over-exertion prior to and/or during a series of performances, for example:

- Excessive training,
- Inadequate rest and recovery,
- Denial of one's personal needs and limits (e.g., hunger, thirst, discomfort, and pain).

Debilitative life habits during training and/or long tours, for example:

- Disordered eating,
- Work/life imbalance,
- Alcohol and or drug abuse.

Maladaptive perfectionism, in which an excessive quest for perfection can lead to obsessive thinking, critical self-talk, comparisons with others, and general dissatisfaction with one's self and one's dance performance.

Obsessive passion towards dance practice, for example:

- An uncontrollable need to dance,
- Self-esteem and need for social acceptance that becomes contingent upon dance performance,
- Over-identification with one's art (e.g. "Dance is my entire life and nothing else matters"),
- Over competitiveness with other dancers.

Negative self-talk that perpetuates negative emotions and self-fulfilling prophecies (predicting failure), for example:

- Filtering: focusing only on the negative events despite successes; remembering only the negative comments of a given constructive feedback.
- Personalizing: falsely viewing every negative event as related to oneself,
- Catastrophizing: believing a situation is far worse than actually is,
- Polarizing: *all good/all bad* thinking; lack of mental flexibility, fixed view of self and life.

Coping Strategies

Teachers, choreographers, artistic and rehearsal directors, as well as dancers need to become aware of the *body-mind letdown* that artists may experience after an important performance or a challenging season. The following strategies have shown to be useful in helping dancers deal efficiently with PPD (3,7,9).



Tips for Teachers, Choreographers and Directors

- **Before a meaningful performance or a series of shows** prepare dancers in advance for the possibility of experiencing PPD—conduct an open group discussion on the subject (*What is PPD? What are its symptoms and its function? What coping tools can be used?*).
- **After an important show or a series of shows** plan a wrap-up session with the dancers (especially for beginners) to help them express their thoughts and feelings about their experience.
- **In cases of intense PPD**, allow the dancers to resume training gradually, when possible.

Tips for Dancers

- **Acknowledge post-performance letdown** as a normal and inevitable adjustment process. Learn to identify the physical and emotional symptoms, as listed above, when they arise. This will help to put things in perspective.
- **After a meaningful performance or at the end of a series of shows:**
 - **Prioritize your needs**—practise self-care every day (body, mind, and soul);
 - **Take time to rest and unwind**—practise relaxation/breathing and/or meditation daily;
 - **Do and think of things other than dance** (e.g., catch up on everyday chores, go see a movie, take up a new hobby or resume old ones);
 - **Spend quality time with your loved ones** (family and friends);
 - **Talk about how you are feeling** with someone you trust and accept your feelings as they are;
 - **Return to the dance studio**—take technique classes, do dance improvisation for fun;
 - **Participate in other forms of fitness training** (e.g. swimming, yoga), according to your energy level;
 - **Watch fellow dancers' performances** to enhance your social support system;
 - **Engage in volunteer work within the dance community** (e.g. rehearsal assistance)—stay connected to your art, put your talent to good use, and reinforce your social networking.
- **Avoid going back to intense training before you are a physically and psychologically ready**—artificially shortening or hurrying the PPD adjustment process can heighten the probability of getting sick or injured, and postponing PPD recovery.



- If you are pleased with your latest performance(s):

- **Enjoy the success without getting overexcited** or placing expectations too high, knowing that *emotional highs* often lead to *letdowns* shortly after—keep a healthy emotional distance from your success, as it lowers the risk of developing obsessive tendencies towards dancing;
- **Emphasize your performance experience** not only what you *achieved* in your dance—this helps you to base your self-esteem on feelings of personal worthiness as well as competence;
- **Put emphasis on your artistic process and not only on the end result**—establish links between the quality and type of preparation, the dance experience and the success obtained, to gain insight for future performances.



- If you are dissatisfied with your latest performance(s):

- **Celebrate your joys and small victories**, in order to view your performances holistically;
- **Build self-compassion and tolerance**—look at your flaws as if they were someone else's;
- **Accept that disappointments and mistakes are a necessary part of the process**: learn from them, build realistic goals from them, and go on dancing with joy;
- **Recall past successes** to build self-confidence and self-esteem;
- **Look at the big picture**, place the event in a larger time frame (e.g. in five years from now);
- **Practise moments of gratitude (both towards yourself and others) every day**;
- **See yourself as a growing artist**—seek ways to improve and to be creative;
- **Add the word YET to negative self-judgments** (e.g. “I haven’t YET succeeded in doing this move”);
- **Pursue excellence instead of perfection**—be and do YOUR best.

Conclusion

PPD becomes more manageable once performers recognize and work through the symptoms as part of a normal recovery and self-regulation process, helping them cultivate a healthy perspective towards their dance. However, if PPD symptoms become severe or persistent, help from a mental health professional may be needed.

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