



Healthy Dancer Canada

The Dance Health Alliance of Canada

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO DANCERS

A Resource for Dancers of All Ages and Their Families

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Written by Andrea Downie, MA, under the auspices of the Healthy Dancer Canada Resources Committee.

Dancers are passionate and hard-working. The pursuit of dance artistry and athleticism is a holistic endeavour that engages dancers physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. While dancing affords many benefits, it also provides many challenges. Whether young or mature, dancing for profession or leisure, dancers need their families to be their primary support – the ones who understand their passion and help them manage the demands of dancing. A strong support network contributes to a dancer's success, health, and sense of well-being.

The Benefits of Dancing

Being supportive begins with understanding why people participate in dance. When you know specifically what dancers gain from dancing, you will be able to have meaningful discussions about what they are learning and expressing through dance. It also helps you know how and why you should encourage their passion.

- **A Universal Language:** Dance is much more than a series of steps; it is a non-verbal and universal language. Dancing provides those who dance with a source of joy and passion, a sense of mental and physical well-being, and a form of artistic expression.⁽¹⁾ For dance professionals, it is also an important source of income. Dancing enables dancers to test their personal boundaries, and to learn more about themselves, others, and the world in which we live.
 - **Tip: Ask the dancers in your life why they dance, and what they gain from dancing.**
- **Physical Benefits:** Dancers acquire numerous physical benefits from dancing regularly. Dancing uses the entire body and teaches those who dance many of the fundamental movement skills that underlie physical literacy, particularly locomotor skills like galloping and leaping, and balance movements like spinning and rolling.⁽²⁾ Dancing also supports the development and maintenance of physical fitness, specifically postural alignment, agility, balance and coordination, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, and rhythmic abilities. Dancing can help alleviate pain and delay the effects of aging.^{(3) (4)} Like all physical activity, dancing promotes physical health and longevity by postponing chronic disease.⁽³⁾
 - **Tip: Appreciate that dancing supports physical health and promotes longevity. Share these ideas in open discussion with your loved ones who dance.**
- **Cognitive Benefits:** Dancers learn and express ideas through movement. Some of the benefits of dancing to cognitive development and function include: increased attention, concentration, and motivation; use of perceptual, observation and listening skills; creative-thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills.⁽⁵⁾ Dancing nurtures imagination and creativity. It also encourages kinesthetic, spatial, and musical

learning. Young people who regularly participate in the arts [dance] during their out-of-school hours are 4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement than their peers, while older people who regularly dance are 10% less likely to develop dementia. ^{(5) (6)}

- **Tip: Know that dancing is not just a physical act. It positively contributes to cognitive development and function, as well as academic achievement. Ask the dancers you know to describe some of the problem-solving and reasoning abilities they use in their dance classes.**
- **Emotional Benefits:** Dancers communicate and express feelings through movement. The emotional and mental-health benefits of regular dancing include increased self-esteem and body image; reduced anxiety, depression, and stress. ^{(7) (8)} Dancing can improve mood by helping those who dance feel good through the release of endorphins in the brain. Dancing cultivates intrapersonal knowledge and self-confidence. Some dancers find it is a constructive way to channel their emotions. ⁽¹⁾
 - **Tip: Help the dancers in your life to make connections between their dancing and their emotional lives. Ask them what emotions they feel before, during, and after dancing.**
- **Social Benefits:** Dancers have a heightened sense of communication and social relations. ⁽⁹⁾ Dancing promotes interpersonal knowledge, fosters relationships, and promotes social awareness. Young artists perform community service more than 4 times as often as their peers. ⁽⁵⁾ By moving together, dancers of all ages learn the important social skills of cooperation and collaboration. They also develop a sense of inclusion, increased empathy, and respect for diversity. Dancers gain awareness of diverse cultures, values, and customs by performing dances both from their own and other societies. ⁽¹⁰⁾
 - **Tip: Understand that being part of a dance community provides dancers with an important sense of belonging. Ask the dancers you know about their friendships at the dance studio. Encourage them to develop relationships with those who share their passion. Notice and discuss if they are dancing in an environment that emphasizes cooperation and belonging or competition and antagonism.**

Common Challenges Related to Dancing

Most dancers are well aware of the benefits of dancing. Despite this, they may become stressed by the inherent demands of participating in dance. It is easier to provide support to those who dance when you understand the challenges they face. Dancing is time-intensive and presents particular physical and psychosocial demands. Understanding this reality helps you know when and how to be supportive.

Dancing is Time-Intensive

- **A Life-Long Pursuit:** Dancing is a lifestyle and a life-long pursuit for many who dance. Participating in dance begins, on average, at the age of 7. Whether continued involvement in dance is for profession or leisure, by the time dancers are over the age of 35, they typically have been dancing for decades. ⁽¹⁾
 - **Tip: Realize that the dancers in your life may be involved in dance for many years, perhaps throughout their lifetimes. Accepting this potentially life-long commitment can greatly benefit your relationship with them. Ask the dancers you know where they hope to be in 10 years and how they see dance as part of their lives long-term.**
- **Make Time for Other Activities:** A dance education tends to begin early and progressively involve many hours of in-studio learning and practice. Time-intensive dance participation can make it difficult to fit in other extra-curricular activities. Dance, like gymnastics and figure skating, is artistic and acrobatic, highly kinesthetic, and involves complex motor skills. As such, it is considered an early-specialization activity. The skills of early-specialization activities are ideally introduced and learned before physical maturation, as it

is far more difficult to master these skills if they are introduced after adolescence.⁽²⁾ It is vital that young dancers enjoy, and are the motivators, of time-intensive dance involvement. Be wary of teacher and parental pressure on dance students to succeed.

- **Tip: Regularly ask the dancers in your life open-ended questions about their experiences at dance classes, rehearsals, and performances/competitions. Be sure that young dancers continue to enjoy participating in their dance activities.**
- **Tip: Encourage the dancers you know to make time for and partake in other activities.**
- **Take the Long View:** The road to excellence is not always easy; it has many ups, downs and plateaus. Maintain focus on the holistic, long-term benefits of dancing while striving to achieve short-term goals. Progress and the pursuit of excellence take time and commitment. It has been suggested that 10 years, or 10 000 hours, of deliberate practice are required to attain expertise in any field.⁽²⁾ Most teachers and dance artists realize that skill does not improve with just any practice. Dance activities must be carefully constructed with the intent of improving skill execution. Canadian dance professionals spend an average of 10 years training before they gain employment in dance.⁽¹⁾
 - **Tip: When temporary difficulties and disappointments arise (E.g. an audition, performance/competition that does not go as hoped), remind your loved ones who dance of the many long-term benefits of dancing.**
- **Share the Load:** Dance participants can spend anywhere from 10-20 hours a week taking dance classes, attending rehearsals, and performing.⁽¹⁾ Dance professionals may spend as many as 10 hours per day dancing when preparing for performance.⁽¹¹⁾ Dancers need extra support when their workload is heavier (E.g. during the performance/competition season).
 - **Tip: Understand that dance factors largely into the weekly schedule of dancers and their families. You can help the dancers in your life by assuming some of their responsibilities when their workload is heavy (E.g. expect less help with household chores, and assist by preparing their meals and snacks).**
 - **Tip: Share the responsibility of supporting dancers; find others who are in the same situation and coordinate your tasks and schedules (E.g. take turns driving dancers to their activities).**
- **Find Balance:** Finding the necessary time to participate in dance, deal with the tasks of daily living, succeed at school/work, make money, enjoy leisure time and spend time with loved ones can be exceedingly difficult for those who dance. It is imperative that dancers are equipped to manage the resultant stress. Goal-setting and prioritizing commitments are essential to be an effective dance artist and also help balance the important aspects of life.⁽¹²⁾
 - **Tip: Help your dancing loved ones to manage their stress and time:**
 - ❖ **Share the ideas and exercises found in Healthy Dancer Canada's resources Dancers and the Art of Stress Management⁽¹³⁾ and 10 Stress Management Tools for your Dance Bag (<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Dance-Resources-Open-Access.html>).**⁽¹⁴⁾
 - ❖ **Discuss with them exactly what needs to be done. Then set priorities and decide when these things can realistically be accomplished. Make up weekly schedules and to-do lists that address the most important things first. In addition to the obvious things, like classes and rehearsals, ensure that time is scheduled for the tasks of daily living and things like homework/studying. For additional ideas about effective time management, visit the Olympic website (<http://www.olympic.org/content/olympic-athletes/athletes-space/tips/time-management/>).**⁽¹²⁾

Dancing is Physically Demanding

Dancing is physically demanding because the whole body is involved in a large variety of complex movements. Additionally, dancers spend many hours per week exerting themselves in dance activities. Proper sleep and nutrition, adequate rest, and appropriate dance training help ensure optimal performance. These things also reduce the likelihood of overtraining and burnout which tend to occur in dancers during times of increased workload. “Burnout” shares the physical characteristics of overtraining, which include: reduced performance and strength; prolonged fatigue; and increased frequency of injuries and infections. Burnout, however, is additionally accompanied by emotional and behavioural changes.^{(11) (15) (16)} You can contribute to the overall health and well-being of those who dance by helping them anticipate and manage the physical demands of dancing.

- **Establish Sleep Hygiene:** Dancers are artistic athletes and require more sleep than non-athletes, particularly during adolescence. An athlete’s sleep needs change over the course of a lifetime. Inadequate sleep and sleep disorders have been linked to the following: changes in mood, concentration, and motivation; reduced endurance and recovery; and increased risk of poor performance and injury.^{(15) (17)}
 - **Tip: Help the dancers you know to establish sleep hygiene with good habits and a solid routine. Find age-based recommendations for sleep duration, quality, and phase in the Canadian Sport for Life resource, Sleep, Recovery, and Human Performance** (http://canadiansportforlife.ca/sites/default/files/resources/Sleep_Recovery_Jan2013_EN_web.pdf).⁽¹⁷⁾
- **Practice Healthy Eating Habits:** Dancers require optimal nutrition to excel. Finding time to prepare and eat nutritious meals and snacks can prove challenging. Further, the physical and aesthetic demands of dance lead to a higher incidence of disordered eating habits and eating disorders among dancers.⁽¹⁸⁾
 - **Tip: Promote positive body image, model healthy eating practices, and ensure that your loved ones who dance meet their daily nutrient requirements. See Healthy Dancer Canada’s resource, Eating for Energy and Optimal Performance** (<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Dance-Resources-Open-Access.html>), **for recommendations on what dance participants need to eat and drink, and when. It also provides guidance about what to do if an eating disorder is suspected.**⁽¹⁸⁾
- **Seek Qualified Guidance:** A high calibre of dance training with qualified dance teachers is essential to ensuring optimal health and performance. A degree or diploma in dance, or certification/affiliation with a recognized dance organization (E.g. Royal Academy of Dance), demonstrates that a dance educator has at least some understanding of safe and effective dance practices. Supplemental conditioning and cross-training also help dancers perform optimally and avoid injuries.^{(19) (20)}
 - **Tip: Check that the dancers in your life are working with instructors that have recognized qualifications. Suggest to them that they include supplemental conditioning or cross-training (E.g. C-I Training, Pilates, swimming, etc.) if it is not already part of their curriculum.**
- **Make Time for Rest:** Going for the occasional massage, and making time to rest and recover can help dancers reduce stress levels and the risk of overuse injuries. They need at least 1 day off per week to allow physical and psychological recovery.⁽¹⁶⁾ Additionally, a 3-5 week break from dance at the end of the season is recommended to help avoid overtraining and burnout.⁽¹⁵⁾
 - **Tip: Remind the dancers you know that it is important to make time in their daily and weekly schedules for rest and recovery, particularly during times of increased workload (E.g. the performance/competition season). Brief periods of rest during the day (without being on the computer or the phone) and a weekly day off can have tremendous health benefits.**

- **Understand How the Body Changes:** The adolescent growth spurt, which typically begins between the ages of 11 and 14, can be a particularly challenging time for young dancers. They may experience temporary decreases in strength and flexibility, coordination and balance, technical skill and control due to normal physiological changes.⁽²¹⁾ They are also more vulnerable to injuries during this time and may need to modify dance activities. Further, the onset and tempo of the growth spurt may impact a young dancer's class placement and the age at which they are ready for activities such as pointe work.⁽²²⁾ Differences in physiological development and maturity mean that chronological age is not a reliable indicator of readiness for technical advancement. Understanding the temporary nature of the physical changes of adolescence can help young dancers cope during this challenging time and ensure that they maintain their self-esteem.
 - **Tip: Help the young dancers in your life to understand the many changes that occur during adolescence. Assure them that a perceived loss of ability is temporary and that being "held-back" is in their best interest. The growth spurt can last for 18 months or more, so patience is required. The following International Association of Dance Medicine & Science's resources provide a good overview of this subject:**
 - ❖ **The Challenge of the Adolescent Dancer**
(https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/resource_papers/adolescent-dancer.pdf).⁽²¹⁾
 - ❖ **When Can I Start Pointe Work?**
(http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/imported/info/start_pointe.pdf).⁽²²⁾
- **Understand Injury:** Despite best efforts, dance injuries sometimes do occur. Fortunately, most dance injuries are minor and require little time off.⁽²³⁾ Knowing what to do in the event of an injury, and how to incorporate relative rest, can limit the extent of an injury and its healing time.
 - **Tip: Be wary of an environment that fosters ignoring injuries. In the event of an injury, encourage the dance participants you know to follow the guidelines in the International Association of Dance Medicine & Science's resource, First Aid for Dancers**
(http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/resource_papers/first_aid.pdf).⁽²⁴⁾
 - **Tip: Healthy Dancer Canada has multiple resources to help dancers dealing with injuries and other health concerns:**
 - ❖ **Check our directory** (<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Directory.html>) **to see if there is a health professional in your area with an interest/speciality in treating dancers.**
 - ❖ **Facilitate information-sharing amongst the dancer, dance educator, and health care professional with our Health Concern Communication Form**
(<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Dance-Resources-Open-Access.html>)⁽²⁵⁾ **and resource, Translating the Language of Dance and Science** (<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Dance-Resources-Open-Access.html>).⁽²⁶⁾
 - ❖ **Encourage your dancing loved ones to discuss with their teachers any technical problems that may have contributed to an injury. Find tips for discussing health issues with teachers, choreographers, and rehearsal directors in our resource, Suggestions for Discussing Health Concerns** (<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Dance-Resources-Open-Access.html>).⁽²⁷⁾
 - ❖ **Help the dancers you know to follow the advice of their health care professionals (E.g. remind them to do their rehabilitative exercises). Learn how to incorporate relative rest in our resource, The Art of Rest** (<http://www.healthydancercanada.org/Dance-Resources-Open-Access.html>).⁽²⁸⁾

Dancing Involves Psychosocial Demands

Dancers tend to be perfectionists and may have to navigate competitive environments and financial difficulties. Weak social support networks can leave dancers feeling anxious and lonely. Help the dancers in your life to traverse these unique challenges by reminding them to focus on process, and providing them with perspective and unconditional support. Be their advocate and help them communicate their needs.

- **Strive for Excellence, not Perfection:** The pursuit of excellence can sometimes morph into the pursuit of perfection. As a group, dancers exhibit higher than normal levels of perfectionism.⁽¹¹⁾ Like those who strive for excellence, perfectionists are highly driven and set particularly high standards/goals for themselves. Perfectionists, however, are inclined to pursue unrealistic or unattainable goals and thus experience a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt. Perfectionists are overly self-critical of themselves and others, and tend to ruminate on their mistakes and disappointments. Such dancers are at risk of suffering from low self-esteem, anxiety, disordered eating, injury, and burnout.⁽²⁹⁾
 - **Tip: Ask your loved ones who dance about their dance-related goals. Are these goals manageable and realistic? Help them to understand the difference between excellence and perfectionism. Recommend pragmatic and individual goals that focus on holistic (physical, mental, emotional, social) progress rather than outcome.**
 - **Tip: Take note of their self-esteem, and how they handle mistakes and disappointments. For information on identifying and helping dancers manage perfectionism, see the International Association of Dance Medicine & Science's resource, Perfectionism (<http://www.iadms.org/?page=RPperfectionism>).**⁽²⁹⁾
- **Develop Healthy Attitudes Toward Competition:** Evaluation and selection in dance are highly subjective and often surrounded by an atmosphere of competition.⁽¹¹⁾ Various choreographers, teachers, dancers, and audiences have differing standards and preferences, a reality that can leave those who dance feeling uncertain about their abilities/performance. Furthermore, because the dance market is highly competitive, dance artists may disregard injuries, strive for unnatural thinness, and work in less-than-ideal situations in order to gain competitive advantage and avoid losing income or a job.^{(29) (30)}
 - **Tip: Remind the dancers in your life to be motivated by their own sense of their potential rather than competing with others. Avoid adding to the sense of competition by critiquing and comparing. Appreciate the efforts and performances of the dancers you know AND that of others. Be the support – not the coach. Provide unconditional love and acceptance.**⁽³¹⁾
 - **Tip: Suggest to dancers that they ask their teachers and rehearsal directors for constructive feedback when they are uncertain or unhappy about their situation (E.g. class placement, casting, audition/competition results).**
 - **Tip: Encourage your loved ones who dance to share their health concerns and seek medical attention early. Professional dance artists can access affordable health insurance through the Canadian Dance Assembly (<http://www.cda-acd.ca/Default.aspx?PageID=14203816&A=SearchResult&SearchID=12056747&ObjectID=14203816&ObjectType=1>).**⁽³²⁾
- **Understand Financial Concerns:** Time-intensive involvement in dance can be expensive for dance students and their families, yet young dancers may have limited time for part-time work to help pay for their dance lessons and materials. Those trying to make a living dancing may be faced with financial and job insecurity. The average yearly earnings of professional dancers in Canada are \$17 893.⁽³³⁾ This is well below the poverty line. Low income adversely impacts health and well-being, and low income persistence

is associated with decreased health.⁽³⁴⁾ Many professional dancers must take other work to supplement their income, despite limited time to do so.

- **Tip: Encourage young dancers who are interested in pursuing dance as a profession to learn about the breadth of options available to them. Dance professionals include performers, teachers, choreographers, directors, researchers, writers, and more! Learn about the many career options in dance at ArtsAlive (<http://www.artsalive.ca/en/dan/make/professions.asp>).**⁽³⁵⁾
- **Tip: Understand that financial difficulties are a common reality for professional dance artists, and a likely source of stress.**
 - ❖ **Encourage the dance artists you know to work with written contracts that adhere to professional standards in dance. Minimum standards regarding hours of work, rates of compensation, and working conditions can be found through organizations like Union des Artistes (<https://uda.ca/>)⁽³⁶⁾ and Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists (http://cadaontario.camp8.org/Resources/Documents/Professional_Standards_for_Dance_Version3.pdf).**⁽³⁷⁾
 - ❖ **Remind the dancers in your life that dancing has given them many useful skills. Suggest that they explore their income-earning potential and options for work both within and outside of dance. Dancer Transition Resource Centre offers career and financial counselling (http://dtrc.ca/english_services/content/counselling/) for dancers.**⁽³⁸⁾
- **Build Healthy Relationships Both In and Out of the Studio:** While dancing fosters relationships at the studio, intensive training schedules and touring that takes dance artists away from their families and friends can result in weak social support networks.⁽¹¹⁾ Dancers rely on their families to provide this support, especially when their time is limited and difficulties arise.
 - **Tip: Be an advocate for the dancers in your life. Encourage them to prioritize health and wellness. Accompany them to appointments with their teachers at school and at the studio, and with rehearsal directors and health care professionals. Educate others about the benefits and challenges of dancing.**
 - **Tip: Remind the dancers you know that life outside of dance is important, too! Build-in and plan quality time with family and friends in the weekly schedule and include designated time for leisure activities.**

Conclusion

Understanding the benefits and challenges of dancing equips you to support effectively the dancers in your life. Find time to ask them questions and be there to listen. Help them through their disappointments and applaud their triumphs. Your unconditional support goes a long way to helping your dancing loved ones thrive as they dance through life.

Please send feedback about this resource to resources.healthydancercanada@gmail.com.

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