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## Disconnecting from the "Dancer" Identity: Dance/Movement Therapy in Support of Maintaining the Sense of Self in Professional Dance

Sandra Ross

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DISCONNECTING FROM THE “DANCER” IDENTITY: DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY  
IN SUPPORT OF MAINTAINING A SENSE OF SELF IN PROFESSIONAL DANCE

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**Abstract**

The culture of the professional dance environment perpetuates an ideal image of the dancer identity. In the pursuit of this ideal, dancers struggle with integrating their own personal identity, creating internal conflict that potentially underlies dance related mental health issues. Dance/movement therapy offers a different therapeutic environment that promotes self-awareness, acceptance, and trust within the body to establish a connection with a deeper sense of self. An examination of the research and documentation of the utilization of dance/movement therapy with dancers suggest it could be beneficial to the issues they face, including maintaining their own sense of identity. This discussion is important to destigmatizing mental health issues in the professional dance world and, more importantly, offers therapeutic treatment suited to the language of dancers, dance.

*Keywords:* dance/movement therapy, identity, professional dancer, body image, therapeutic environment

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## Introduction

My decision to stop dancing professionally was an unconscious decision to choose myself and my mental health over a career that prioritizes stripping away one’s identity for the sake of becoming a blank canvas to serve the “art”. But at the time I had a list of other more practical reasons for why I was quitting, none of which related to the emotional state of being I was in. I couldn’t understand how I could be unhappy in the career I was most passionate about since childhood. Relentless pursuit was so engrained in me to become the dancer I always wanted to be that I rarely paused to investigate what was lacking in that identity.

My relationship to the identity of professional dancer is a common one, full of complexity. The process of demystifying it is emotional, and it is an ongoing process. While I made the right choice for myself, I could only see myself as a failure, stripped of the title of “dancer”. I know now that this mentality was supported by the environment of professional dance and the narrow definition it has for a “dancer”. I now call myself a dancer without quotation marks. To me, this means I have allowed myself to acknowledge what I have accomplished in dance, accept what I have not, and know that dance is deeply a part of how I navigate the world around me. It took a long time in my personal journey to come to these realizations and my training as a dance/movement therapist has helped me reach an understanding of my own identity and the role dance plays in it.

Dancer as a title doesn’t define all of who I am. I struggled with this while pursuing a career because, while I recognized the truth in that statement, it seemed like a betrayal to my training, my dedication, and my love for dance. Examining the collection of written articles and anecdotal evidence, I don’t believe this struggle is independent to me and this is the inspiration for this thesis. Many dancers struggle with their identity, especially when faced with a departure

from dance. I feel that had dance/movement therapy been supplemental to my dance career, I would have been better able to reconcile this conflict within myself. I venture to guess it would have helped me in better navigating my career, or at the very least relieved me of some of the pain caused by walking away from it. A dancer faces many challenges that shake the ground they walk on, but I believe with a strong connection to themselves they are better positioned to make choices that protect their well-being.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Professional Dancer and Dance Environment**

This thesis refers specifically to traditional Western dance settings where dance is used as a performance art. Classical training in forms like ballet and modern dance techniques remain essential for professionally trained dancers. As such, those are the training environments being referenced in this paper. The number of people that reach the point of being compensated for performing dance works is far less than those who have trained for that same goal. The field of dance is highly competitive and opportunities for paid work in the United States are limited. This research includes individuals that undergo the rigorous training that is required to be a dance performance artist.

Becoming a dancer involves an adherence to an accepted identity of dancer within the field. In the role of a dancer, you are expected to be seen, not heard. You must earn the title of dancer by living up to the standards of certain aesthetics, technical skill, and reverence for the art form and its traditions. While in other art forms individuality plays into the identity of the artist, in dance there is a narrow definition of dancer that is strived for by most. Fitting into this identity awards individuals with careers, esteemed roles, and job security. Reaching extraordinary achievements, the successful dancer is held on a pedestal while simultaneously

being objectified. The visual artist and the viewer both use their vision to experience the work, a musician and audience hear the music together but, when a dancer performs on stage, they experience the movement alone, being witnessed by others. The standards for the title of dancer are high, and because it is externally validated by leaders of dance organizations and public opinion, a cathexis on the identity of dancer develops in order to achieve it. “The phrase ‘I am a dancer,’ is such a source of masochistic pride that I am not sure it reads to people outside the performing arts community, but it is often the only way we can see ourselves” (Phelan, 2018). Within this quote the specialness one feels of being identified as a dancer is revealed, as well as an admission of enduring pain to earn the title.

Even outside of the field, the title dancer carries many assumptions including physical ones like good posture and extreme thinness to personality traits of being aloof and neuroticism. It seems no matter where the dancer goes, they take the dancer identity with them. As with the method actor, the dance self is with them all the time. The performance artist is living artwork. Therefore, the self is inextricable from the art and the dancer becomes objectified not only by the viewer but by themselves. The dancer seeks embodied perfection. Dance technique dictates a correctness that carries through to an overall demeanor of selfless dedication and perfectionism in dance culture. The dancer strives for freedom through the obtainment of technical skills. The training of mastering steps and body mechanics to the point of muscle memory trains the dancer that only in mastery or perfection is there a sense of ease. In this aesthetic form, the artist does not perform things they cannot do. The process behind the work and failure is hidden away. They are encouraged to hide their shortcomings either in reshaping their bodies or building strength where there is weakness, learning that the body is malleable and can be manipulated (Aalten, 2007).

Once the individual feels they have been bestowed the title of dancer, a fear looms it will be taken away. This fear is created because of the way dancers view others who have moved on. There is aggravation towards those who still call themselves a dancer yet no longer train (Phelan, 2018). This is why many dancers endure the physical and emotional pain that is inevitable and prevalent in the career. Dancers risk their all too valuable bodies by refusing to address pain and injury (Wainwright, S. P., Williams, C., & Turner, B. S., 2005), and deprive themselves of food in order to remain thin, all in order not to miss any opportunities in their career they have been convinced will be short. They treat the body as an object, using their heightened awareness of the body’s sensations and motion to control it, rather than protect it (Aalten, 2007).

In order to understand the mental health issues that dancers face, one must understand the professional dance environment and its subsequent effects on a dancer’s sense of self. The elitism and insular nature of the professional dance world poses a challenge for those outside of it to understand it. This is why ultimately, this author will suggest the importance of dance/movement therapists many of whom are current or former professional dancers to extend their services to dancers.

It is important to recognize dance in the context of society. In the United States the arts are not supported financially or culturally and dance specifically within the arts genre falls to the bottom of the list of funded art forms. It does not gain as much recognition as the fine arts, music, or theatre. Dance companies that put on dance productions struggle to finance their businesses, leading to limited budgeting, lack of resources, and insufficient pay for their employees. Since there is little federal funding, dance companies rely on large donors, ticket sales, and tuition from their training schools. The artistic staff is in charge of the creative and production decisions while the executive staff handle operations for the business. Ideally, these



departments are handled by different individuals or teams, but the responsibility is often left to the same individuals or, in many cases, just one person.

The dancers report to the artistic staff of directors, choreographers, and rehearsal directors. They are the means to create a director or choreographer’s artistic vision. As a former Miami City Ballet dancer explains, “Our body is the art” (Kourlas, 2021). While the dancers’ image and performance create the actual artwork and what the audience observes, they often have little to do in the decision of how their body, skill or expression will be used. The future and arc of a dancer’s career is dictated by the artistic vision and personal preference of directors and choreographers. As a result, dancers’ training not only includes reaching high physical and artistic expectations but demands them to be malleable in the hands of those in charge of artistic decisions. Suvi Honkanen describes the effect this has had on her, “I felt that I had no control over my artistry or expression; every gesture, every movement, every choice was in somebody else's hands and one wrong move could destroy everything” (Honkanen, 2021).

The process of creating dance works for production demands professional dancers to mold their bodies and expressions to a certain aesthetic that fits the conversation the choreographer wants to have with the audience. Dance companies’ productions are built upon works that are collected as part of their repertoire. Because of the great expense of building a production, companies keep the works in rotation, performing them alternately for many years. Economically, it makes sense for the company to select dancers that best fit the demands of their repertoire as opposed to adjusting choreography to fit the individual dancers. Company members are chosen by their ability to perform works that are part of the company’s repertoire and are expected to dance the roles as originally choreographed, no matter what it takes. While there are dancers known famously as muses for choreographers, such is not the case for most.

The constant practice of assigned movement expression often diminishes the experience and identity of the individual dancer. There is a conflict between maintaining the personal identity of the professional dancer and the expectation for them to remain a blank slate for the production of their art form. The disciplined training and desire for the coveted title of dancer can involve a stripping of personal identity to fit the specific mold of the ideal dancer and a denial of independence to operate within the hierarchical system of performance dance. “In more developmentally sophisticated struggles, we noted dancers’ experience involving a premature foreclosure of identity for a dance career” (Gray, K., Kunkel, M., 2001 p.19).

The form of the body, the expression of the dancer, and their emotions are enlisted to present the work. Bill T. Jones described the role of the dancer in relation to his work “Still/Here”. The work is based off of inspiration he gained from working with people facing life threatening illnesses.

The sound score incorporated words which only came from the workshops. They were very intense, so as you do it somebody is talking about something very real and the dancers did not know how they were supposed to feel. I said "just do your job" and the audience will put it together or not as is always the case. In post-performance discussions the audience would ask "how does it feel doing this night after night? Doesn't it tear you apart?"...The dancers stay with the text of the dance. That is their job to understand what we are trying to get across in each moment in the piece. (Jones, 1998, p. 20)

In this instance the conflict of the dancer as a human being and the requirements of their role in producing works is visible. While surrounded by emotional content and the expectation to embody it, dancers’ internal responses are devalued and left unprocessed in the professional setting.

This power dynamic is explicit and starts early in training. The dancer’s learned experience and exposure to the dance community over time becomes ingrained in their bodies, psyche, and overall identity. “Dance is physically etched into our identity” (Hendrickson, 2020), as are the lessons learned from the professional dance culture. The dancer’s life, like many artists, is one of sacrifice. The physical demands on the dancer include copious amounts of time in the studio dedicated to training and conditioning of the body to acquire technical skill and the ideal aesthetic. Sacrifice of time, mental and physical health, finances and more are not uncommon and often expected. This destabilization of the individuality of the dancer to meet the mechanized requirements of a company member relinquishes their sense of identity to the director, choreographer, or company itself. The dancer learns that someone else is better qualified to define their career and ultimately their identity.

American ballerinas like Suzanne Farrell, Gelsey Kirkland, and Jennifer Ringer, (Farrell, 1990; Kirkland, Lawrence, 1986; Ringer, 2014) have famously told their stories of a life in dance. Each autobiography has its own distinct tone, but all showcase significant mental health issues perpetuated or exacerbated by the dance environment. And while these voices are from the past, it seems little has changed over the years. The insular nature of the field perpetuates a cyclical pattern of harm, “The circle keeps going: Broken dancers become broken teachers who produce broken pupils” (Honkanen, 2021).

Today some dancers are specifically naming their mental health struggles in the field, while others suffer silently. The psychological impacts of the dance environment include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, body image issues, perfectionism, substance use disorders and more (Kirkland et al., 1986; McGuire, 2018; Ringer, 2015; Wrobel, 2012.) It is suggested that dancers don’t address their own struggles or the less-than-ideal working environment

because they are aware of the number of dancers eager for their jobs (Kourlas, 2021; Wainwright et al., 2005).

It is normal and required of dancers to master techniques and vocabularies as part of their training. This provides a framework for integration into a company’s repertoire or a choreographer’s unique movement vocabulary. Recently, as companies have expanded and diversified their repertoire, dancers are expected to master many sets of techniques. Value is placed on being able to perform whatever is asked of you. This makes a dancer a more hireable candidate as they are more able take on many roles. The result is demand for a virtuosic artist. Today, more than ever, dancers are pushing the limits of their bodies to obtain this desired virtuosity. Trying to manage extraordinary physical feats preoccupies the dancer’s mind on technique and creates a distinct body and mind dichotomy. Dancers are hyperaware of the body, but they operate in a one-way dialogue, telling the body what to do in order to achieve their artistic pursuits.

Dancers reach a curated form of expression through codified movement and the artistic vision of another. They build up a satisfying reward system from achieving higher levels of skill by repetition and altering their body image through concentrated effort that keeps them dedicated. Preoccupied with what steps they can execute and external validation, dancers have a difficult time recognizing the status of their mental health. Much like they can suppress the cues from their body in order to obtain technical achievements, they often ignore their overall well-being to maintain their dancer identity because they don’t know what they would do without it (Aalten, 2007; Wainwright et al., 2005). This makes instances of failed or abandoned careers a mystery to even the dancer themselves.

The professional dancer traditionally has been left to their own devices when it comes to their mental health and related treatment. Though recently more dancers are coming forward about their mental health challenges, there is still little research, acknowledgement, and support of the mental health issues dancers face, especially in the United States. Often a dancer’s mental health is not acknowledged until there are physical implications that interfere with performing their roles. The only time a dancer might see a psychologist is when they are dealing with an injury (Wainwright et al., 2005). The physical health of dancers is prioritized. Medical teams and advisory boards for dance companies are filled with medical clinicians such as orthopedic doctors, physical therapists and sports medicine clinicians. It is rare to find a psychologist on staff in companies and schools and resources for mental health are extraordinarily lacking. “In a recent interview, Dr. Brian Goonan, who works with dancers at Houston Ballet Academy, told me that the same drive to succeed that make so many ballet students great may also predispose them to depression. And yet, as a dance writer, when I call up so many of the great training institutions in this country to ask for an interview with the psychologist they refer their dancers to, they can't produce one” (McGuire, 2017).

Beyond accessibility, there are other barriers preventing dancers from seeking mental health care. As outlined above, many if not most aspects of the dancer’s life surround their studio environment and mental health is not prioritized in that setting. Mental health issues aren’t seen as an obstruction to dancing and performing and therefore not addressed as much as other medical care and body work practices. And, just as it is in society as a whole, therapy is stigmatized and divergent from the dancer identity of perfection. Dancers find difficulty in explaining and acknowledging their experience to non-dancers and they are unaccustomed to expressing their needs. Like most other health services beneficial for dancers, it helps for the

clinician to have a background in dance as most people do not understand the demands and intricacies of the field and therefore difficult to gain trust and compliance from dancers.

Additionally, the recognition and understanding of the psychological effects of the environment sometimes occur long after they have left it.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy: A Different Environment**

The origins of dance/movement therapy are tied to modern dance and its conceptual theories for movement and choreography. Modern dance pioneers broke from the traditional principles and aesthetics of ballet and emphasized the human condition as inspiration for their techniques and thematic material for the stage. While the content of modern dance artists diverged from more traditional forms, the structure of producing stage works meant to be seen by an audience remained. And so, the practice of assigned movement shapes and expression continues to be a part of the role of the contemporary dancer, often diminishing the experience and identity of the individual. Early dance therapists utilized their background in the study of movement and dance and applied their knowledge of the creative process to inform their therapeutic process. They took their focus away from the stage to movers and non-movers alike and began harnessing the physiological and psychological benefits of dance for the purpose of healing. Dance/movement therapists relinquished the sacredness of the stage and its traditions and instead illuminated the experience of the mover.

In dancers’ stories of redefining what being a dancer means to them, a shift of environment is often part of this process (Hendrickson, 2020; Kourlas, 2021; Phelan, 2018). These shifts include stepping out of the classic studio setting and finding themselves taking class in a gymnasium with no mirrors, denying them the opportunity to scrutinize their own image, or dancing without the intent of performing and no longer feeling the pressure to fit a role, harsh

criticism, self judgement and the ability to move without comparing themselves to others. They found themselves in positions no longer able to ignore the signals of pain after an injury. And other times they followed new callings entirely, where they were more easily able to engage and feel confident in their work. Some of the spaces described by these dancers have aspects of a therapeutic environment including nonjudgement, safety, opportunity for internalization, esteem building, and a sense of freedom, but they all included distancing themselves from the professional dance setting (Hendrickson, 2020; Kourlas, 2021; Phelan, 2018).

The therapeutic environment is almost antithetical to the dance field described above which is why dancers may find it uncomfortable and intimidating. Early dance/movement therapists were interested in combining dance with a safe and relaxed environment that fostered the intelligence of the body and movement, cultivated expressivity as a means for self-examination and utilized psychotherapeutic theory to promote a balance of the internal and external processes of life, all through the language of dance. They believed in the potential and power of dance to access one’s own emotions (Bartenieff, 1980). The field of dance/movement therapy took the therapeutic aspects of dance and provided an environment where it was safe to explore inner expressions free from aesthetic judgements.

One way dance/movement therapy seeks to facilitate emotional wellbeing is to address the connection of the body and its movements with cognitive and emotional functions to discover how this relationship within the individual might reflect their interactions with the outside world. A major principle of dance/movement therapy is establishing harmony between psyche and soma through the recognition of the interrelationship of the two. This concept is supported by psychotherapeutic theories that the dance/movement therapy field has adopted in its practice. It has long been recognized that western society views the mind separately from the body, valuing

the cognitive and executive functioning of the brain as a means to control the everyday activities of the body. However, psychoanalytical theorists acknowledged the reciprocal action of musculature tension and inner attitudes that dance/movement therapy observes through movement analysis methods and directly addresses through applied movement interventions. Neuroscientific studies further influence the field of dance/movement therapy and are providing embodied research to support the brain and body connection (Acolin, 2016; Berrol, 1992; Homann, 2010) and the benefits of movement for emotional health are well supported through scientific studies.

Dance/movement therapy promotes integration of the psyche and soma through building kinesthetic awareness, strengthening body image, and observing natural movement patterns of the individual. Kinesthetic awareness is the ability to recognize muscle tension, the subsequent movement of that tension, and the positioning of the body in space. Dance/movement therapists are tasked with building this awareness in order for their clients to become reacquainted or more in tune with their bodies in order to proceed with psychological interpretations of further movement experiences in their treatment.

In the practice of dance/movement therapy, development of kinesthetic awareness correlates with the client's formation of how they picture their own body in their mind. This picture reflects the body image the individual holds for themselves. A goal in dance/movement therapy is to strengthen one's body image through deepening this awareness. Through intentional effort to explore body boundaries and movement patterns, an opportunity is created to strengthen the sense of self. This approach is based on the notion that how one experiences their body and movements is correlated with how they identify themselves. In order to access natural



postures and movement patterns of an individual, dance/movement therapists offer their clients the freedom of self-directed movement.

Influential dance makers on the development of dance/movement therapy are Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman who rejected the idea of a codified technique and instead embraced self-directed movement. Laban took an interest in unadorned movement, rhythm as a form of expression, and allowed the dancer artistic freedom to develop their own technique and individual style. Wigman relied on experimentation, intuition, and the sensory experience of dance. She believed that each dance should have its own unique vocabulary, derived from personal subconscious material (Reynolds & McCormick, 2003). Their methods of creating encouraged dance/movement therapists to release the use of technical vocabularies and to consider all movement material as an opportunity for internal processing, furthering the concept that unconscious processes reveal themselves through spontaneous movement behavior.

A student of Mary Wigman and early dance/movement therapist was Mary Whitehouse. Mary Whitehouse’s studies with Wigman began her transition into what she would later call “movement in depth” (Levy, 2005). The combination of her training in improvisational movement and Jungian psychoanalytical thought initiated a letting go of a particular image for what it means to dance and instead move from inner sensations (Levy, 2005). From this mindset there became no right or wrong way to dance in the eyes of Whitehouse and she found the role of the therapist to use their own experience of following intuitive movement to help guide clients to do the same. Moving away from the traditional teacher/student relationship in dance, Whitehouse used a client centered approach. In this therapeutic relationship the client is empowered to find their own solutions through the resource of their own body.

In dance/movement therapy, building awareness, acceptance and trust with the body is a way to develop ego strength. The therapeutic relationship in the dance/movement therapy context provides individuals with a nonjudgmental witness who can reflect back movement and postures of the client. The training of dance/movement therapists require them to examine their own movement habitus and biases in order to leave space for attunement with others. Through an understanding of their own relationship to movement, dance/movement therapists offer themselves as a mirror to their clients. Emotional content that comes up can be acknowledged and worked through in both movement and verbalization as the dance/movement therapist facilitates a dialogue of the body and mind. In the client centered practice, the client establishes their own identity and personal growth is encouraged.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy with Dancers**

There is limited research on dance/movement therapy as an effective treatment for the mental health of professionally trained dancers. However, the existing research on dance/movement therapy with dancers combined with the writings of dance/movement therapists who were also dance educators such as Alma Hawkins, show promise for dance/movement therapy as a means for positive personal growth in professionally trained dancers. Research and documentation of dance/movement therapy with dancers suggest it could be beneficial to the issues they face, including maintaining their own sense of identity.

There are research studies (Arcelus et al., 2014; Eusanio et al., 2014; Peric et al., 2016) that include multiple mental health issues that dancers face, but the studies that most related to dancer's identity focused on body image. One study showed that while dance at beginner levels increased positive body image, at advanced levels it had the opposite effect on body image and self-esteem (Swami & Harris, 2012). Another study found that those who more strongly

identified with being a dancer had poorer body image and lower body appreciation (Langdon & Petracca, 2010). This is particularly of interest because the dancer identity was subjective to the participant. This indicates two possibilities: first, that there is an ideal dancer aesthetic that is ascribed to by those who consider themselves dancers, and second, this may encompass many more individuals than just those who pursue dance professionally.

In a study with undergraduate dance students, the findings suggest that dance/movement therapy can prove to have positive effects on dancers, which makes it relevant to dance training and education (Hayes, 2016). Through analysis of collected themes from interviews with the participants, occurring categories highlighted by the researcher were playfulness, self-confidence, and relationship. Free from product making, participants' feelings of acceptance and permission allowed them to be themselves, experience freedom to enjoy their movement, and time and safety to participate in self-examination. Some of the effects of a process-oriented environment were decreased anxiety, an escape from aesthetic concerns, and self-awareness leading to feelings of self-confidence (Hayes, 2016).

Alma Hawkins' work as a dance/movement therapist and dance educator demonstrates the importance of safety of environment for the creative process in addition to the therapeutic process. She viewed creative growth as personal growth and saw creative potential as an innate quality in all beings (Hawkins, 1991). Hawkins created an atmosphere of safety and creativity through relaxation techniques, the use of imagery, and bringing awareness to inner sensations. She believed people's inner sensations were often blocked by the bombardment of external messages from society and she worked with dance students to allow their inner voice to be heard. Through the expression of their inner voices, they built trust and confidence in the self and gained more willingness to take risks. This process of creating a safe environment for the inner

self to be expressed not only allowed dance students to create choreography but they made personal discoveries about themselves along the way (Hawkins, 1991). This creative process is the basis of dance/movement therapy’s therapeutic process, one that promotes self-formation.

### **Discussion**

“Dancer,” as it’s known is a highly demanding, idealized identity. This author posits that the ways in which dancers deny themselves to achieve this identity can create internal conflict that could be underlying many dance related mental health issues and, as such, dance/movement therapy is an appropriate form of therapy for dancers to establish and reconnect with a deeper sense of self. The prescribed identity of dancer discourages individuals from self-examination and instead seeks external validation. When dance is first introduced, it strengthens body image because it awakens kinesthetic awareness. But as students progress and focuses more on perfecting technique and an aesthetic ideal, they develop a critical relationship with their body. Because of the pressure to achieve a very specific image, dancers are inclined to focus on the ways in which they do not meet the criteria and have difficulty accepting themselves. Disconnection from themselves is further solidified through dance’s exaggeration of the body/mind dichotomy already inflicting western society. Dance/movement therapy addresses the challenges dancers face through the principles of body integration and defining oneself through awareness and acceptance.

While they use the same language, dance/movement therapy and the performance dance environments are very different from one another. While one is conducive to honoring the sense of self, the other poses many challenges to doing so. Dancers hold many of the tools that dance/movement therapists often need to provide clients with, but the dance/movement therapy environment offers the safety of a confidential space. Dancers are advantaged by their

familiarity with the creative process, and this can bridge the gap between dancers and therapy. A dance therapy session allows time away from the dance identity and the removal of codified technique gives the dancer permission to move freely, opening up the possibility of examining internal processes. A movement dialogue based around acceptance of the body and inner expression could be a welcomed respite for dancers.

Through the use of dance/movement therapy, dancers can reclaim dance and movement as a tool for reconnecting with their identities, using the shared language of kinesthetics and the creative process. Dance/movement therapy lends itself well to the unique predicament of dancers in which their life experiences occur simultaneously with movement within the body and where verbalization can be uncomfortable and unpracticed. This discussion is important to destigmatizing mental health issues in the professional dance world and, more importantly, offers therapeutic treatment suited to the language of dancers, dance.

Creating an environment where the dancer is not on display yet still feels witnessed will be a collaborative effort between the dancer and therapist. Dimming the lights, closing of the eyes, or changing the therapist's body in relation to the dancer might be explored to detour the dancer from their performative practice. Dancers, unlike some clients of dance/movement therapy, are well acquainted with their bodies and moving. Instead of developing kinesthetic awareness, dancers will need to be encouraged to accept the findings of their body sensations and muscle tension in order to restore the reciprocal nature of the body and mind. This can be practiced by slowing the dancer down to notice and listen to the interconnectivities of the body and movement. Integration of the breath is a simple yet effective place to start, as dancers are typically taught to breathe through the chest in order to maintain muscle tension in the abdomen.

In order to be productive at their job, dancers cannot tend to all of the emotions that may occur from physical sensations of their body or its movements and, as a result, they learn to disconnect from them. Before dancers can physicalize their emotions, they may have to reconnect to them through the use of movement prompts or imagery provided by the dance/movement therapist. With a deeper connection of the psyche and soma, the freedom of improvisation can lead to movement as metaphor for the dancer's inner conflicts. This poses the possibility of working through emotions with further movement or, more explicitly, through verbalizations.

With the safety of the therapeutic setting, the dancer can work through the realities of their daily life by not exclusively using improvisational movement but use the space and expertise of a dance therapist to look at their experience of technique and choreography in new ways. They could reimagine choreography for themselves, recreating works to their own tastes and strengths. Accepting their own version of the dance can begin a separation from the ideal image that is imposed on them. A disconnection from the ideal dancer identity could be realized through embodying it, differentiating from it, and finally, letting it go.

As it stands now, there are dancers who are struggling with their mental health at all stages of their training and careers positions in the field. As the process of therapy is a non-linear practice, dance/movement therapy can be applied to these different stages. It can be supportive to the dancer who is in training or in the midst of their career, with the goal of maintaining self-awareness amongst strong external messages. It can be used in times of crisis management during injury and/or a mental health crisis as a means to process their physical and emotional needs as well as accept pause in their career. Dance/movement therapy can also be used in times of transition for those changing careers or preparing for retirement. Keeping dance

alive in their lives can assist with the difficult emotions present in letting go of a career in dance and provide practice in building self-confidence in the next stage of life. While implementing dance/movement therapy at these stages can offer relief to dancers, normalizing mental healthcare in the culture of the dance community is needed to make impactful change for dancers' wellbeing. Progress in the dance community is needed that encourages shifts in the way teachers instruct and how companies treat their employees.

### **Conclusion**

Further discussion and research are needed on how dance/movement therapy affects the mental health of dancers and not just how it can benefit dance making. Dancers have been making their desire to address issues of mental health within the dance community known for a long time and the connection of the professional dance environment to dancers' struggles is identifiable. Dance/movement therapists have done what many dancers do, which is to remove themselves from the environment. While their psychotherapeutic interests led them to working with other populations, I think it is time for them to bring this knowledge to a world left behind. Dance/movement therapist's scientific gatherings can help dancers advocate for themselves and promote a dance production environment that enables dancers to define themselves while continuing to participate in the dance community.

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