The Effects of Negative Emotions on Professional Dancers

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Abstract: *It is inevitable that professional dancers will experience a wide range of emotions, both negative and positive, throughout their dance career (Taylor & Estanol, 2014). Among these emotions, negative ones are a very common situation for dancers (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010). There are a number of factors contributing to negative emotions in professional dancers, and mental stress is one of them. Whether it is stress inside that dancers put on themselves or stress outside, it can negatively affect dancers in a variety of ways (Grove, et al., 2013). Dancers' negative emotions linked with stress may influence their health. In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the health of dancers, emphasising both on physical health and mental health (Fauntroy et al, 2020). If the mental health of dancers is to be improved, it is important not only to understand the sources and effects of negative emotions, but also to relieve negative emotions during the dancer's training.*

Keywords: *dancer; emotions; health*

1. Background: Generation of negative emotions

1.1 From individuals

Perfectionism is a stress factor originating from dancers' individual mental state. Most dancers have a tendency to be perfectionists, who have extremely high expectations and constant pursuit of perfection (Eusain, 2014). Although perfectionism can motivate progress and lead to success, excessive perfectionism can induce pain in dancers' heart and create great psychological stress (Hall & Hill, 2012).

Firstly, perfectionism leads to dancers' anxiety and lack of confidence in their own performance level. This anxiety mainly stems from high expectations that dancers have of themselves (Taylor & Estanol, 2014). It causes dancers to feel anxious when they are unable to meet their actual performance status by demanding more of themselves (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010). Specifically, dancers may feel anxious about whether or not their performance will be successful and about not being able to perform a role to a high quality. Moreover, Taylor & Estanol (2014) stated that dancers' worries about themselves can undermine confidence and make dancers feel depressed and helpless in addition to anxiety. Eusain (2014) also argued that perfectionism has a negative impact on dancers' self-esteem to a certain extent.

Secondly, in addition to anxiety about dancers' dance level, body image anxiety is also a factor that affects dancers' emotions. Previous literature demonstrated that many dancers show a quest for a lean body (Heilard, et al., 2008), especially female dancers, who have been conscious of their figure since adolescence (Kosmidou, et al., 2016). As a consequence, when dancers feel anxious, Social Physique Anxiety (SPA) is formed because they care about audience's negative comments about their body shape (HART, et al., 1989). In addition to audience, choreographers or dance teachers may also place high demands on dancers' bodies (Oliver, 2005). This can lead to a loss of confidence when dancers gain weight, as they expect the choreographer, dance teacher and audience to see themselves in perfect shape[1-5].

1.2 From outside

Although stress inside may adversely affect dancers, the main source of factors that contribute to dancers' negative emotions is external pressure. External pressure, including external evaluations, or the rehearsal environment and partners within the group, may cause dancers to doubt themselves and thus generating negative emotions (Grove, et al., 2013). Moreover, the combination of external pressure

and dancers' perfectionism would severely interfere with dancers' emotions.

Firstly, stress is always presented during daily dance rehearsals or practice. Before a performance, dancers have to undergo additional fitness training besides their dance training (Grove, et al., 2013). Thus, professional dancers often have to deal with long and intense rehearsals, and this overexertion can lead to mental stress (Skwiot, et al., 2019). The excessive rehearsal time and physical fatigue can add stress to dancers in addition to the physical damage. Moreover, the pressure also comes from rehearsing together with peers. As each dancer is responsible for a different role, there naturally is anxiety from comparing oneself to their peers (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010). Dancers with perfectionist tendencies will inevitably hope to be more perfect than their peers, thus aggravating their stress. Furthermore, evaluations from outside sources can have an emotional impact on dancers. For example, dance teachers or choreographers may comment on the dancer's body shape (Oliver, 2005), which exacerbates the dancer's body anxiety.

Secondly, injuries and dancers' insistence on dancing regardless their pain can also have an emotional impact on dancers. According to Krasnow (1994), the injury rate for professional dancers, who go through years of dance practice, is as high as 97%. However, most dancers choose to keep working despite their injuries (Thomas & Tarr, 2009), as dancers worry more about whether they will lose their ability to continue dancing and whether they will be replaced by other dancers (Vassallo, et al., 2019). Some dancers have even stated that they would rather dance with an injury than be a spectator in a dance class (Hanranan, 1996). Therefore, after a dancer is injured, he or she is more inclined to endure the pain than to rest (Rivera, 2012). In this process, dancers not only bear the pain of their injuries, but also suffer from mental stress.

2. The effects of negative emotions

2.1 Moderate stress can facilitate dancers' progress

Although there are risks associated with stress, not everyone who experiences stress has impaired mental health. It is argued that daily stress may be a positive influence on mental health (Schönfeld, et al., 2016). According to Walker & Nordin-Bates (2010), moderate levels of anxiety is necessary for performance, as anxiety can achieve a facilitative and debilitating effect in terms of intensity. That is, moderate anxiety can have a facilitating effect on dancers. There are situations where dancers are under the proper amount of stress for their health and performance. In addition, dancers who repeatedly check or seek measures for the uncertainty of props also rarely experience negative emotions, thus facilitating their progress (Thomas & Tarr, 2009).

2.2 Negative emotions can interfere with dancers' performance

While moderate stress can have a facilitating influence on dancers, most of the time negative emotion can adversely affect dancers. It not only affects dancers' health, but also their performance. It is argued that if a dancer's increased stress is not recovered in time, it can disrupt physiology and metabolism (Wahl, et al., 2020).

Firstly, negative emotions can cause dancers to slip up during performances or rehearsals. During the rehearsal process, some dancers report that stress leads to mistakes in performance (Hanranan, 1996). Some dancers who strive for perfection will dwell on one of their mistakes and divert their attention. They will ignore important corrections from their teachers (Hall & Hill, 2012), without actually correcting the mistake. When dancers are worried about whether they can perform successfully, more attention is given to their anxiety about themselves, thus dancers feel nervous and increase the likelihood of mistakes. For example, according to Taylor & Estanol (2014), when dancers are anxious about their high expectations, they will focus more on their ability and appearance rather than on the performance itself, which may lead to a loss of coordination and affect the quality of the performance.

Secondly, excessive stress can lead to injuries to dancers, both mentally and physically.Taylor & Estanol (2014) stated that fear may also lead to muscle tension and loss of coordination, increasing the risk of injury. In addition, when a dancer's attention is focused on emotions, like embodying fearfulness of a difficult dance technique, the emotion can affect dancers' proper control on muscles, therefore increasing the risk of injury. Furthermore, injury and emotion also interact, with some dancers continuing to attend classes even when ill or injured due to internal stress (Hanranan, 1996), which can lead to more severe injuries, exacerbating dancers' anxiety and fear[6-9].

Also, excessive stress can cause dancers to feel burned out. Dancer's physical exhaustion and emotional depression due to not meeting expectations under perfectionism may lead to dancers' burnout (Jowett, et al., 2020), which is also a result of chronic psychological stress (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). However, there is little correlation between dancers' burnout and competence (Quested & Duda, 2011), as burnout is mainly characterised by emotional and physical exhaustion and a low sense of achievement after participating in the activity (Raedeke & Smith, 2001). According to Grove, et al. (2013), excessive stress increases fatigue and weakens performance, and even makes training difficult. When dancers feel stressed, their emotions are affected and they are unable to take pleasure in dance, regardless of whether they have performed successfully or not. Therefore, when dancers feel burned out, the most immediate effect is that they are unable to perform and progress with their initial expectations.

Furthermore, body anxiety may lead to eating disorder awareness, which is detrimental to dancers' health. According to Oliver (2005), weight is no longer a physical problem for dancers, but a psychological one, and some dancers even feel guilty about eating. Therefore, many dancers are under pressure to lose weight, thus eating disorders are common among dancers, especially among female dancers (Oliver, 2005). For instance, many female ballet dancers have eating disorders because their main way of losing weight is to reduce their diet (Benn & Walter, 2001). In addition to eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia exist among dancers (Arcelus, et al., 2013). Some dancers overdose on diet pills to control their weight, or use laxatives and self-induced vomiting to relieve post-binge stress after overeating (Ringham, et al., 2006). As a result of this unhealthy weight loss, some dancers have experienced menstrual disorders and osteoporosis (Heiland, et al., 2008) (Kalyva, et al., 2021). Thus, the health of dancers is severely affected by body anxiety and these extreme forms of slimming[10-15].

3. Solutions

3.1 Relieving personal stress

The most straightforward approach to relieve dancers' stress is to engage in positive recovery. Firstly, dancers can employ practical techniques during their training to relieve their stress, in order to perform better. According to Taylor & Estanol (2014), slow, deep breathing can reduce stress and facilitate muscle relaxation, as muscle tension is more likely to make dancers feel stressed. Walker & Nordin-Bates (2010) also stated that breathing is important to relax the body and keep it focused. As to muscle tension, meditation and visualisation can relieve it and reduce mental stress (Grove, et al., 2013). Moreover, some dancers report using medication to relieve stress rather than prescription drugs, like taking herbal remedies that function well in relaxing (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010).

Secondly, rest is also a way of relieving the stress caused by overtraining or injury. Liederbach, et al. (2013) also argued that if dancers choose to continue training when they are injured, it can affect the recovery of the wound. Faced with this situation, dancers can take rest to reduce burnout stress. Grove, et al. (2013) stated that rest is not only physical but also mental rest, such as taking a regular and moderate break from the pressure of performance and dance training, immersing in sleep, and focusing on other hobbies.

Furthermore, developing confidence can also prevent a great deal of stress. Walker & Nordin-Bates (2010) suggested that confidence plays an important role in relieving anxiety, but dancers' confidence levels are generally low. In Hanranan's (1996) study, the majority of dancers indicated that self-confidence was associated with performance. Dancers with perfectionism tendency especially have lower confidence, as analysed above. Therefore, mental skills are crucial for dancers to increase their confidence, overcome excessive perfectionism, and accept disadvantages. For example, dancers can try to give themselves some positive mental cues before going on stage, like watching images of their performance success (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010), in order to develop confidence and relive stress[16-21].

3.2 Reducing weight in a healthy way

Body image anxiety is one of the main causes of negative emotions for most female dancers (Oliver, 2005). However, it seems that it is necessary for dancers to be 'thin' in order to perform (Benn & Walter, 2001). Therefore, dancers are advised to make healthy choices when losing weight, to maintain their body shape and keep healthy with an optimistic state of mind.

On the one hand, it is important to focus on a nutritious diet and improve nutrition education. Firstly, a regular and healthy diet is essential for dancers. Swain (2013) stated that the foundation of good performance is nutrition, and Francisco, et al. (2012) suggested that dancers are not required by instructors to diet. Therefore, dancers could try to choose foods that are low in fat and oil and high in protein, such as broccoli and eggs; as high-calorie foods take time to digest and during this process, dancers may feel guilty and have a low mood (Swain, 2013). Secondly, most dancers' nutritional knowledge is limited (Challis, et al., 2020), which contributes to their eating disorder problems. Thus, it is crucial for dancers to receive nutrition education. Nutrition education not only teaches dancers on how to eat appropriately to stay in shape, but also benefits dancers' careers (Benn & Walters, 2010). As a large number of dancers already have eating disorders, Arcelus et al., (2013) suggested tailoring eating programmes for dancers and viewing eating disorders in dancers as an epidemic. When dancers learn how to lose weight in a healthy way, body image anxiety could be reduced.

On the other hand, dancers have to perform aerobic exercises to keep fit besides dance exercises. According to Ellis&Donton (2016), most dances are anaerobic and dancers' aerobic exercise during the dance is scarce. Therefore, dancers are unable to achieve lean body mass through dance and could perform additional aerobic exercise to lose fat. Moreover, aerobic exercises are linked with diet habit. Therefore, exercise and diet should be balanced, as excessive exercise and too few calories are undesirable approaches[22-24].

3.3 Creating a relaxed environment for dancers

The combination of external evaluation, the demands of the choreographer or dance teacher and the dancer's internal perfectionism creates a great deal of negative emotions for the dancer (Francisco et al., 2012). Dancers' stress will not be completely eliminated, but it is possible for dancers to work in an environment that relieves stress (Hernandez, 2012). Improving external stress and providing a relaxed training environment for dancers is not only beneficial to their mental health but also to their professional development[25-29].

The choreographer or dance teacher has to pay attention to dancers' mental health. They have to play a leading role to facilitate dancers' mental health, such as leading dancers to eat properly, teaching them how to avoid and deal with injuries, and communicating with dancers about psychological issues in a timely manner (Cardinal, 2009). Negative teacher-student relationships are a major source of influence on dancers (Francisco et al., 2012), and this traditional relationship continues moving into the dance teaching company (Benn & Walters, 2010). Therefore, dance teachers should aim at forming the positive relationship between teacher and student when communicating with dancers. In this process, attempts can be made to encourage students rather than constantly undermining the dancer's confidence. Furthermore, choreographers have authority in dancers' minds (Benn & Walters, 2010), thus choreographers should also be targeted to alleviate dancers' anxiety. Choreographers could take some methods to relieve dancers' stress. For example, for pre-performance anxiety, there is the option to shorten the preparation time before the performance, to reduce dancers' anxiety (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010). It could be concluded that the choreographer and dance teacher works closely with dancers during the training process. They have the responsibility to regulate dancers' emotional problems, not only for the success of the performance but also for the protection of dancers' health.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the main source of negative emotions in dancers is the combination of perfectionism in the dancer's personality and negative external evaluations, which not only affects dancer's performance but also harms dancer's health. In particular, dancers' body image anxiety leads to eating problems that seriously affect dancer's physical and psychological health (Ringham, et al., 2006). In terms of the solutions, not only should dancers themselves learn to regulate their own emotions during their dance career, but choreographers or dance teachers should also be concerned about dancers' mental health. At present, most scholars have begun to emphasise dancers' mental health, addressing their physical injuries as well as psychological problems. It could be concluded that the increasing focus on the mental health of dancers will be beneficial to dancers' professional development.

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