Practices for Increasing Longevity of a Dance Career

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DANCE DEPARTMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

Under the advisement of Carlo Antonio Villanueva

April, 2026

As a senior dance BA at the University of Minnesota, not only has my love for dance grown, but I have also broadened my scope and discovered other interests. In addition to my passion for dance, I am interested in the intersection of dance and therapy. I have been working as a rehabilitation technician at the three Fairview hospitals on campus, assisting occupational and physical therapists. Most of my duties involve helping patients in acute care get out of bed and making them more comfortable as they recover from major surgeries. I started this job one and a half years ago, and it has really made me wonder how to set up a body for success when it goes through stress, trauma, or rigorous training.

This curiosity has led me to research best practices for increasing longevity in a dance career from the people who know best: dance and health practitioners. One thing I noticed as a rehabilitation technician in the hospital is that two people can have the same procedures or complications. However, their bodies react vastly differently based on the routines and practices they had before the trauma. Certain ways of approaching care set the body up for success, and I was curious about what those practices may be, specifically for a dancing body. According to Data USA, people ages 20-34 make up 77.3% of the US dance workforce. As our bodies age, injuries become more difficult to avoid, but dance does not have to end at 35, or when you have a child, or whenever the industry tells you you are no longer “young”. I have conducted 15 interviews with dance and health professionals to gather their perspectives on how they have kept their bodies moving and/or what has worked well for their patients.

PARTICIPANTS

When deciding on people to interview, I reached out to dance faculty at the University of Minnesota to see what resources they had, from Minnesota and across the country. This led

me to many Alumna from the same dance program I am attending, who took dance in a direction of care or rehabilitation. After each interview, I also asked the interviewees whom they might know that would be interested in speaking with me, which led to a wider variety of practitioners. I also cold emailed a few individuals whom I researched online. I messaged 25 individuals and ended up scheduling 15 interviews, some virtual and some in person. Being a student was an easy way to convince people to meet with me. Alumnae of the University of Minnesota were especially eager to help me with my research.

Jinza Thayer is a registered Somatic Movement Therapist, movement educator, choreographer, and performer.

Sharon Picasso is a Minneapolis-based movement, performance, and transdisciplinary creative artist.

Sarah Baumert is a long-time dancer, certified yoga teacher, yoga therapist, and Feldenkrais® practitioner.

Eve Schulte, who is a former James Sewell Ballet company member, current executive director, and ballet instructor at the University of Minnesota.

Mariah Lefeber is an educator, dance/movement therapist, and licensed professional counselor.

Kia Hill is a professional dancer with Crash Dance Mpls, a freelance choreographer, and Body Art Certified, with a BFA in Dance from Marymount LA.

Jaime Ryan-Karels, who holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a professional dance career behind her, is now a Certified Massage Therapist, Board Certified in Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, and the owner of her business Mammal Body Work.

Brittany Fedor, who is currently the Minnesota Vikings Cheerleaders' athletic trainer,

also has a BA in dance from Minnesota State.

Kim Stroud, who is currently a faculty member at the Martha Graham School, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, SUNY Purchase, and the University of Hartford. Former Principal Soloist with the Martha Graham Dance Company for 11 years and former dancer with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet.

Barbara Nordstrom Loeb, who is a Laban/Bartenieff movement analyst certified, board-certified dance movement therapist, somatic experiencing practitioner, and licensed Marriage and Family therapist.

Laura Osterhaus, who is currently a freelance dancer in NYC, is the Artistic Director of SLO Dance Company, holding a BFA in dance from the University of Minnesota.

Allison Doughty, a former principal dancer of the Saint Paul City Ballet Company, holistic nutrition and wellness coach, certified yoga instructor, and trained in Healing Touch Energy therapies, is also an instructor at the University of Minnesota, who teaches a class on nutrition and body maintenance.

Erin Thompson, a longtime professional dancer in the Twin Cities and NYC, a Bessie Award winner, and a former faculty member at the University of Minnesota and Zenon Dance, is also certified in the Alexander Technique.

Hanwen Wong is a physical therapist for performing artists, a former dancer, and a choreographer for dance studios.

Moreover, Hollie Palmisano is a recognized expert in sports medicine and wellness. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Physical Education from William Paterson University and a Master's in Sports and Health Sciences, specializing in Health and Wellness Management, along with being the Athletic Trainer for the Dance Department at Rutgers University.

METHOD

After taking many psychology courses, I have learned that if the interviewer wants specific information from a study participant, it is easy to sway the subject if one is not careful. While conducting these interviews, I wanted to stay as neutral and unbiased as possible. Knowing this, I went in with some really broad questions at the beginning of my interviews and then tried to ask follow-up questions based on how I felt the interviewee was taking the conversation.

I started each interview by introducing myself and sharing my background to provide context for why I was speaking with them. Then I asked about their dance background. Once they gave me some information, I would try to ask more specific questions, such as: How did _ _ _ experience make you feel physically? Did this affect you emotionally? Positively or negatively? Without pushing some sort of personal agenda to the best of my ability. I tried not to talk much, just listen. I asked to record each interview so I could review them later to confirm I had all the correct information, and I did not want to take notes during the interview. I wanted these "interviews" to be conversational and feel low-pressure. I also tried to be very transparent about how I would use their information, so they could feel comfortable sharing some vulnerable memories with me. I wanted to cast a wide net, so I sought out a diverse range of people with as many varied experiences as possible.

Although I was specific about my method, the research has limitations regarding generalizability. There were no male dancers included in this study. I also did not include younger dancers in this research; all of the women I spoke with were in the midst of, or in the latter part of their performance careers, not at the start. The styles the dancers I spoke with

performed were primarily ballet and modern, as I had the most access to these within my resources. I would love to continue this research by involving more dancers with more diverse stylistic backgrounds.

After reviewing each recording, I created a mind map to identify which topics were most frequently mentioned. I wanted to see which topics seemed most pertinent across the different artists and disciplines. After noting recurring ideas, the four topics I felt were strongest and most emphasized were anatomy, autonomy, mental health practices, and physical practices.

I have conducted this research to strengthen mine and other dancers' tool belts to combat harmful practices or routines ingrained in the culture, values, and roots of many dance forms. I want to acknowledge that not all of these experiences are universal and that taking formal dance classes is a huge privilege. Furthermore, I also want to recognize that not all training is equal, and some dancers have not been taught the importance of caring for their minds and bodies during rigorous training. For me, this is a way to collect and share knowledge from dance and health practitioners to identify best practices for increasing longevity in a dance career for myself and my peers.

ANATOMY

Dance is not necessarily taught with anatomy in mind; much of dance pushes the boundaries of human anatomy. To avoid creating or perpetuating injury, a dancer must understand how their muscles and skeleton work. When learning a combination, many teachers do not specify which muscles are necessary to perform the movement correctly, and repeating the movement with the wrong muscles can lead to pain; hence, it is crucial to understand how

the human body works.

Most of my interviewees emphasized not only the importance of knowing anatomy, but of knowing your own personal anatomy. Dancers are athletes, but they are not always treated as such. For example, at my University, the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, there are no physical therapists or athletic trainers available for dance majors. Since dancers are not always given easy access to physical support, it is important to learn how and why the body works so they can provide it for themselves.

To begin, it is crucial to understand that evolutionarily, the body is designed to respond to its environment. During my conversation with Jinza Thayer, the somatic therapist, she gave me the example of a bear running at a person. She described the biological reaction this would cause, how the person's body would tell them to run. This reaction stems from our fight-or-flight response and the adrenaline it triggers. Bodies respond to environmental and internal cues: additionally, when humans were hunting and foraging, they bent down to pick berries when hungry or reached up to pluck fruit from trees. The way bodies move in everyday life is based on their surroundings, what is available, and what is happening around them. As surroundings change and develop, so do bodies; it is how our ancestors stayed alive.

Dance contradicts these natural habits in several ways. First of all, in an hour and a half-long ballet class, a dancer will stand in a turned-out hip position, which is unnatural, for 90% of the class. When rehearsing for a performance, dancers repeat the same movements, typically aiming to perform them the same way once they have perfected them. In a modern class, dancers may do the same warm-up every single class period for a whole semester. Human bodies were not designed to perform the same movements repeatedly without adaptation.

This realization raises the question of how one can practice consistently in the same style without overuse or excessive repetition when systemic change is not possible. Barbara Nordstrom Loeb, Dance Movement Therapist, recommends being more choiceful in movement and using deeper muscles, which allows for greater ROM and depth. She asks, "How do you make the healthiest choices to get the broadest range of expression"? Being intentional with movement combats repetition not only physically but also mentally. One way to approach intention, as discussed with Eve Shulte, former professional ballerina and instructor at the University of Minnesota, is to view repetitive motion through the lens of different values, motors, qualities, and muscle activations. This keeps class exciting and helps with fatigue, Eve says, "There are so many ways to do every step, you should find your best way."

In practice, this means thinking about plies initiated from different locations, such as your knees or ankles, or considering how far your neck can reach as you bend your knees for opposition. Imagery allows the dancer to achieve a greater range of motion, recognizing that all movements can be performed in different ways. Moreover, Imagery is a powerful tool for achieving safer, better form and muscle activation. Sharon Picasso, pilates-certified, talked about how saying the words for the movement as she did it helped her get better at pilates because she was saying, doing, and imagining. "Imagined actions can promote increased efficiency of neuromuscular coordination… both pictures and words in the mind influence the feelings in the body and provide constructive information to create powerful and dynamic alignment. (Quin et al., 2015)

Sarah Baumert, who is certified in the Feldenkrais technique, a method that emphasizes bodily awareness and mindful movement, uses imagery with people in pain after accidents or with aging bodies. She explains that when the body ends up deep into a habit, for example,

when compensating for an injury or from overuse, or lack of understanding correct alignment, the nervous system begins to think that is the only way to go about certain movements, which can lead to chronic pain. It is beneficial to teach the brain that there are many options. Sometimes the best way to know if you are using the correct muscles is to step out of the mirror and focus on how the movement feels. First of all, there is no mirror in performance, so it is important to know how movement is supposed to feel rather than what it is supposed to look like. If a dancer is knowledgeable about anatomy, they will understand how to create movement safely rather than relying on what it looks like.

As a body's movement becomes more advanced, the brain and body become more efficient, which is why shortcuts occur; humans have movement biases. Mariah LeFeber, DMT, explains that all bodies have patterns they like to follow, but if we do not recognize them, we end up with imbalances. “Muscle imbalances can occur when one set of opposing muscles is stronger than the other. Muscles are negatively affected by improper alignment; conversely, muscles that are compromised can affect alignment because of changes in the direction or intensity of force that they exert, literally pulling joints out of normal position.” (Quin, Rafferty, & Tomlinson, 2015)

Furthermore, Jinza emphasizes that after a rigorous rehearsal or a class that worked specific muscle groups, the body needs to unwind from the positions the style requires. Ballet dancers should sit with their knees turned in after long days of standing in turnout, as this helps the opposing muscles relax. If a modern class is spent primarily in spinal flexion, extension afterward is necessary to relieve the tension caused by the movement and avoid muscular imbalances.

Knowing anatomy is an important skill that helps dancers keep improving, even when practice becomes mundane or repetitive. This knowledge allows a dancer to avoid leaning into personal movement biases that may be harmful. In addition, knowing personal anatomy may inspire dancers to move their bodies in ways that are good for them, rather than worrying about how a different dancing body may look when doing the same movement. Understanding and being able to picture anatomy allows for a deeper mind-body connection and the opportunity to utilize imagery in practice.

AUTONOMY

Correspondingly, knowing one's own personal anatomy and how movement affects one's being allows them to feel confident in their own boundaries and, therefore, gives the dancer the ability to stand up for themselves and their bodies and exercise their autonomy. With that being said, dancers strive to press the boundaries of their anatomy. They are constantly pushing their bodies' endurance, flexibility, and strength. This is not purely due to internal motivations, but rather a culture of needing to consistently exceed expectations and intense competition for a small number of spots. In this section, I share many individual anecdotes, but the hardship of exercising autonomy for self-care is a systemic problem in the dance industry.

I had a dance teacher growing up whose signature saying was "beauty is pain," but my question is, does it have to be? My other question is, if you have consistent pain, how are you supposed to fix it? A common conclusion I gathered from these interviews is that if you go to a doctor, they will most likely examine the injured part and then move on with their day. The entire body is connected in every way. "The body is a closed system, meaning all of its parts

are connected. If one part is out of alignment, then the entire structure can be compromised." (Quin et al., 2015) Sometimes hip problems actually stem from the knee due to an ankle imbalance. Unfortunately, a typical doctor will only look at the hip. This is why it is crucial to look at the body holistically. All of the dancers I interviewed with a professional career emphasized the importance of a chiropractor, masseuse, and or somatic therapist because living off of Advil or other prescribed pain medications is not the best way to fix an imbalance.

Jaime Karels, a professional dancer who performed with multiple Twin Cities companies, described herself as a "die-hard dancer." Because of this mentality, she had to get knee surgery at the age of 18. When she got this surgery, she did not know it, but her issues stemmed from spine problems, and her doctors only focused on the pain in her knee. In college, her back pain eventually began, but she ignored it for " fear of judgment". Postgrad, she danced in a few companies in the Twin Cities, but continuing to dance perpetuated her pain. This led her to leave Minnesota, to take a break, and find her other passions. She said at this point she felt "her identity was shattered," and if she stayed, she would destroy her body. Ultimately, this experience led her to her current passion, massage therapy and mammal bodywork. Mammal bodywork is her business, which is massage therapy for all mammals, humans, dogs, horses, etc. Now, as a massage therapist, she is adamant about how the body has the capacity to heal itself if you let it. That first step, however, is to listen to it and advocate for it so you can actually give it what it needs. This can be difficult, as Kim Stroud, who danced for 13 years with the Martha Graham Company, explained. She missed out on some opportunities because she stood up for her values and her body.

All of the dancers I interviewed who had professional careers spoke on the lack of body consciousness in the industry and the normalization of working to burnout.

Kia Hill, who was on her University dance team and ultimately moved to LA to pursue dance at Loyola Marymount, said, “I came from a world of, you keep dancing no matter how injured you are.”

Brittany Fedor, Minnesota Vikings Cheerleading Athletic Trainer, danced full out on a broken foot in high school because she did not want to seem lazy or miss the competition season as a senior.

Eve, a former professional Ballerina, fractured a vertebra when she was performing one January, but did not get it checked out until that March because she did not want to be told she could not dance. After going to the doctor, she then found out her psoas was the only thing holding her spine together.

Autonomy, as defined in *Safe Dance Practices,* is the “sense of voice and choice” (Quin et al., 2015). Being injured can be detrimental to a dancer's mental and physical health, but there are different ways to care for the body while still dancing as fully as possible. Sometimes it comes down to the rehearsal director trusting dancers to listen and know their own bodies; if this is not the case, the dancer must advocate for themselves. The culture that dancers need to push through injuries and pretend they do not exist is extremely common. Barbara, DMT, watches people's bodies and helps them work through trauma as a career. She says, “Movement is always communicating, expressing, and transforming.” She says that “ our bodies are not bad or wrong, you do not need to follow choreographers or instructors blindly. Find the people who 'get it' and work with them.” This is easier said than done, but exercising autonomy is key here. You have to find your own personal practice and stick to it. Once you understand your own anatomy, it becomes easier to advocate for yourself and say, This is how my body works, and I am respecting it.

As dancers, we do not have to romanticize dancing on bloody toes and strained hamstrings; we need to learn to look internally for cues. Barbara recommends getting to know your body's pace. If you are constantly exhausted, you can not sustain what you are doing. The hustle culture in dance is not right for everyone. It is okay to trust your body and not compare it to other dancers, because it is telling you what it needs. Aches and pains are real; it is important to pay attention to them.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

Dance is, on the outside, a physical practice, which at times leads to mental health being overlooked. As I mentioned previously, in the current dance industry culture, there is pressure to work harder and more often than the competition, the normalization of burnout, and, in some cases, over-identification as a dancer. The experience of losing identity when taking a break from dancing was echoed by many professionals who changed their career trajectories due to burnout, injury, or a desire for change. Not to say that stepping away is bad; It is more than okay to step away if that is the best thing for you. Alas, you cannot separate the dancer from the art, meaning dance can be very personal and become a big part of someone's identity. Because dance is extremely time-consuming, it is also hard to find time for other things. This means that getting injured or needing time away can feel like a complete derailment of one's life. This is why it is pivotal to be a human first, dancer second. Dancers need an identity outside of dance.

Allison Doughty, holistic healer and dancer, spoke on her experience, "It is truly confusing when burnout comes from a place you love." If dancers can achieve better balance for themselves, they might not reach the point of running away from it. Allison stepped away

from dance, and she and her husband went to Thailand after she developed an illness and burnout from pursuing roles with a ballet company and a jazz company, as well as consistently teaching. They left, and she found and studied holistic healing.

Laura Osterhaus, an alumna of the UMN Dance program and now a freelancer based in New York City, was completing a 40-hour-a-week apprenticeship with zenon Dance while working multiple part-time jobs to stay afloat. She explained that at this point her relationships were suffering, she did not feel present, and her nervous system was working overtime. This led her to her research and, eventually, to her company, SLO Dance. She is passionate about the social movement described in Carl Honoré's book “In Praise of Slowness.” This movement encourages moving more slowly because it is better for bodies, along with being better for the environment, for example, through slow cities, slow fashion, food sustainability, and more. Slow movement allows the individual to be more mindful and to move with intention, as I discussed earlier.

Slow movement allows one to be in tune with their body, move from a deeper place, and really listen to what the body needs in the present moment. During her company's rehearsals, she said they really relied on quality over quantity. She brought up questions like, “How does this affect your mind and body?” “How does this movement affect the audience?” “How am I arriving in the space?” “Where do I need to build heat today to dance fully?” Laura used this practice as a moving meditation. Sometimes our nervous systems are begging us to take a breath and slow down. Current societal norms, such as the need to constantly grind and work harder than everyone else, the normalization of unrealistically busy schedules, and the culture of immense productivity, do not lend themselves to this kind of internal evaluation. This is why it is so crucial to take time to slow down when you are feeling ramped up, anxious, or

overworked. This does not necessarily mean moving slowly; quick movement is great; it means creating space for internal reflection, breath, and evaluation amid busy schedules.

Kim, the former Graham dancer, remarked during our interview, “Dance is the art of striving for perfection that is impossible to reach.” This can feel frustrating at times and can lead to emotional pain. Constant rejection, unsustainable training, and unrealistic expectations, either from choreographers, instructors, or oneself, can contribute. Kia, who is Bodyart certified, a physical activity that combines elements of yoga, dance, fitness, and physiotherapy, and a professional dancer and choreographer, shared her experiences with me. She described how, during her career development, she reached a point at which dance became emotionally painful. The way she has since learned to counter the harm dance caused her includes finding what she enjoys about moving. Ignoring the hierarchical dance culture and moving the way you want, not the way you have been told. Such as the stigma that ballet is technique, not just a technique, something that is perpetuated in competition studio dance. Certain movement modalities, like classical ballet or acrodance, define dancers in very specific ways as good or not good. Sometimes we need to ask ourselves, " Do I believe in the mental rules I have been force-fed about movement and style, or do they actually work for me? If movement is not fueling a dancer's emotional and mental health, then it is not good for them.

Another stigma Kia opposes in her classes is that you need to leave your emotions at the door. In many class spaces, dancers are told to be present, and the expectation is that they forget everything that is going on outside the classroom. This is not living in the present; this is swallowing down emotions. Our bodies hold trauma, and not working through or releasing it makes it worse. Kia recommends living in the “messy middle.” To her, this means letting emotions show up; if emotions arise, use them! “ Our emotions are what fuel us and make us

human," she reminded me. "There is nothing wrong with any of us." She explains that she "has disregarded pieces of herself" for dance before she came to this realization because it was not part of the culture.

Dancers are always giving, whether performing, teaching, or choreographing. So they must also find ways to replenish. Feeling emotional and experiencing tension or mental exhaustion are part of life; how a dancer refuels is what will save them. Eve talked about how the endeavor is the goal: approach it by dancing with playful practice, be curious, and remember that the how and the why are just as important as the what. Make sure to find moments that give you energy rather than pull from it. Kim, while traveling with the Graham company, reached out to her connections outside the company, noting that although her dance colleagues had become like family, they were also her competition, and that maintaining relationships outside the company was important. Many of the other professionals said they journal, meditate, watch movies, connect with family, and engage in other forms of art to refill their hearts and souls. When physical dancing is not a good option for reenergizing, it is great to engage with dance in other ways, such as seeing shows, supporting others, or having a no-pressure dance party with friends in your kitchen. Recall, dancers can always come back to dance. The amount of training can change as life responsibilities change, but as a dancer, there is a built foundation. Dancers should not feel pressured to keep going every day if they need time away.

For a mentally stable dancer, there is no reason personal life cannot influence practice or improve one's dancing in a positive way. Having a life outside of dance is what will allow a dancer to function if their body needs time away. Making time for other things allows a person

to be rejuvenated if their art and or career becomes stressful. The way to find an identity outside all-consuming dance without reaching a point of emotional and physical pain or needing to run away is to slow down, reflect on what serves oneself, and let go of what does not. Be a whole person, not just a dancer; allow outside life to join dance, and allow the identity of a dancer to also have an outside life and identity as a person. Human first, dancer second.

PHYSICAL PRACTICES

With the understanding that the mind and body are inseparable, we see that they are connected, meaning mental tension goes hand in hand with physical tension. How we feel shapes our body language, and vice versa. To find mental freedom, you also have to find physical freedom. Which brings me back to my original question: how does someone set a body up for success, not just mentally but physically?

I keep mentioning the idea of intentional movement and depth, but what does this look like physically? Jaime and Jinza both spoke tremendously about the power of stretching and grounding the feet into the earth. Jaime explained that there are tons of nerve endings in the feet, and specifically, a spikey ball wakes them up, giving your body more awareness of your feet and the earth. Jaime talks about how we lose strength in our feet because of the shoes we wear, which constrict blood flow. Any sort of self-massage or rolling moves around blood and lymphatic fluid, allowing new blood to rejuvenate the muscles. This is one reason feet should be a priority; after all, feet are the foundation of the body.

Along with waking up the nerves in the feet, Jinza recommends waking up the nerves all over the body, especially in the morning. She does this by tapping her face and forehead,

smacking her arms and legs, or brushing to improve her bodily awareness. This also does not have to take an hour; while waiting for a bagel to toast, start tapping. Leave a lacrosse ball in the bathroom and roll it on the feet while brushing teeth and hair. If habits are stacked together, they are more likely to get done—a reminder: needs will change as the body changes. If legs are sore and achy, give them more attention that day than you do to arms.

The advice I got from Erin Thompson, who is in her 70s and still performing, was never to stop moving. Move as big as you can for as long as you can. The key to this is as much as you can. Eve calls it dialing up and dialing down. If a dancer is in pain, it is okay to dial down the movement. Dial up as you feel better and dial down as you need to. It is okay to, as Barbara DMT says, do things "sufficiently passively." It is not possible to sustain 100% energy and focus 100% of the time. Dance does not have to be all-or-nothing. All movement is good movement; it is better to activate your muscles than just sit and observe the world around you. This also helps with feeling disconnected from practice or a team if the injury is long-term. Additionally, training or warming back up does not have to look like dance, be a human! Go for a bike ride, walk your dog, or take a hot yoga class.

On the other hand, the importance of rest cannot be overstated. Sharon has strong feelings about rest: she explained to me that it is how you gain muscle, and she recommends not working out if you are beyond exhausted or hungry. "Exercise, especially intense exercise, creates tiny tears in the muscles. Over time, as muscles heal, they eventually grow bigger and stronger. It is important to remember that this process occurs during rest and recovery, not during the exercise session itself."(Cunningham & Ansorge, 2025)

Another way to avoid unnecessary fatigue is to realize that muscles do not always need to be clenched while we are dancing. Dancers should have their muscles engaged, not

tense. Erin is certified in the Alexander Technique, and this influence shows in her work. She is all about dancing from the skeleton, not the muscles. She emphasizes the leg's mobility and ease of movement in the hip socket, and learning how to use all the different types of joints. The body is designed to stack, and when we utilize the bones over the muscles, it is really effective.“The less work the body has to do, the less tension is produced, and the less likely it is that injury will occur”(Quin et al., 2015)

Lastly, the key to setting yourself up for success before a class is the warm-up. That consists of dynamic stretching; do not just sit in the splits. The heart rate needs to be elevated to bring blood to the surface. Jumping, moving stretches, going across the floor, starting in a downward dog alternating into and out of a plank, crawling around a room with the knees lifted an inch off the ground, or shaking are all fantastic, quick ways to build muscle warmth. If you have a massage gun, use it before class to get blood flowing. “Although static stretching is the most common and frequently used type of stretching, research has noted that it can change the contractile properties of the musculotendinous unit, thereby decreasing strength and power capabilities” (Quin et al., 2015)

Hanwen, the physical therapist specializing in performing arts, spoke about how runners, swimmers, and football players all have an off-season and then gradually return to their competitive season. The dance industry is not designed that way, at least at the collegiate or studio levels. Hanwen describes studio dance schedules as typically taking time off in the summer, then returning full swing in the early fall. Sometimes this includes 8-hour choreography days or intensive workshops. At this University, we typically hold our performance and residency auditions the first weekend back after summer break, and then

begin long rehearsal hours. Most students use the summer to work and rest. I can not speak for all of us, but a ramp-up period is not built into our University dance classes. Dancers, as I mentioned earlier, should be treated like other athletes; they need a ramp-up period. If your program does not have the time to provide it, you must create it for yourself! Rest is important; however, making sure you give the body time to recover after rest is even more important. Hanwen said, “Time off is not the problem; it is how you come back from it.” She says she sees the most injuries 4-6 weeks after the season starts because the muscles and joints were not properly prepared, and this finally catches up with the dancers.

Another misconception that many studios, dance teams, and companies perpetuate is the practice of extra-intensive rehearsals, sometimes 2 a day, right before performances. Physically, you want to be at your peak during the performance, so if the muscles are too worn down, that will not support it. Intensive rehearsals or dress rehearsals are often better two weeks before the performance, allowing the body to recover and rebuild. Knowing this about muscle endurance can inform a better training regimen and help prevent these injuries.

To maintain physical preparedness, movement is key; not necessarily just dance movement, but movement in ways that are different from dance. Cross-training can include less rigorous activities such as walking, stretching, or playing pickleball, as well as strength training. Listening to aches and pains in the body and tending to them, resting when needed, developing a strong warm-up practice, before class, and before a season. Lastly, utilizing engagement rather than tension, and recognizing that strength does not coincide with gripping of muscles.

Ultimately, to set the body up for success when pursuing a dance career, it is essential to learn anatomy, exercise autonomy, and create a plan to support mental health and physical

practices. Knowing anatomy helps dancers to keep improving through repetition and to avoid leaning into personal movement biases that may be harmful. Also, allowing dancers to move their bodies in ways that are good for their personal well-being, in hopes of helping avoid toxic comparisons to other dancers. Additionally, being able to picture anatomy allows for a deeper mind-body connection. Exercising autonomy is important for reversing the perpetuation of injury and the romanticization of dancing through pain. A vital part of this practice is learning your body's pace, paying attention to it, letting your body tell you what it needs, and actually listening. Having a life and hobbies that fuel a person, outside of dance, is what will allow a dancer to feel fulfilled, even if they end up needing time away. Emphasizing that we are human, then dancers, and pouring energy into things that lift our spirits besides dance. In the midst of the grind or a busy schedule, we need to remember to allow ourselves to slow down a bit to reflect on our emotions, rather than pushing them aside. Lastly, get yourself a lacrosse ball, roll out your feet, make a plan to get to your practice, and understand that creating better habits takes time, but it is how we increase the longevity of our careers! Start small, add one thing at a time, bit by bit.

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