

Tips on Depression for Dancers

Everyone feels sad, worn out or listless from time to time. That's normal, especially for dancers because of the high demands of high levels of athletic endeavor, long hours, touring and performance demands. It is also normal to feel disappointment or emptiness with personal loss such as disappointment with casting. The experience of failure or disappointment often results in temporary feelings of worthlessness or even negative feelings about oneself.

However, when these emotions increase in intensity, persist for more than a few weeks and start to interfere with a person's life or performance, it may be an indication of depression. Depression is the most common mood disturbance.

What are the signs of depressive illness?

- Low mood lasting most of the day nearly everyday.
- Decreased interest in almost all activities that you normally enjoy.
- Significant changes in weight and/or appetite.
- Sleeping more or less than usual nearly every day.
- Others notice that you seem agitated or have a loss of energy.
- Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt nearly every day.
- Having difficulty concentrating or trouble making decisions.
- Thoughts of death and thoughts of suicide with or without a plan.

Depression with a Seasonal Pattern

Winter weather and diminished sunlight can sometimes affect mood. Some people react more to shortened days or other seasonal changes and this can trigger a type of depression. This pattern needs to occur for two consecutive years with no other depressive episode in between seasons to be confirmed. The chemical messengers in the brain called neurotransmitters, that regulate sleep, mood and appetite may be altered causing depression. The depressive symptoms associated with change of season are similar to the list above and can also include cravings for foods high in sugar, increase sleeping and weight gain. Seasonal pattern depression occurs more frequently at higher latitudes.

Help can make a difference

Anyone who has signs of depression lasting for more than a few weeks should seek help. A dancer may try to handle these feelings alone for fear of being criticized, rejected, not cast, or replaced. Some people try to cope by using alcohol or drugs. If left untreated a person can become so withdrawn they simply can't get out of bed or worse contemplate self-harm or even suicide. They may need the support of friends and family to get help from a health care professional. This may include medication, counseling, family support and self-help groups.

When should you tell someone at work?

Once a qualified health care professional has diagnosed depression and treatment has begun the dancer needs to make a decision whether to discuss this with someone in the company administration or the artistic staff. Mood disorders affect one in ten people. Therefore, most companies have had previous experience with employees with a depressive illness. If a dancer needs to be absent for treatment or rehabilitation (especially if the depression accompanies an injury), it may be wise to discuss the illness with the appropriate company administration. Dancers may want to seek advice regarding re-hire policies from an outside resource such as a Dancer Resource Transition Centre or an Artist Health Centre available in larger cities.

Recovery

The dancer may be able to take class, rehearse and even perform while in treatment. However, the dancer should be cautious if the symptoms persist or worsen. Furthermore, the symptoms of poor sleep and disturbed eating patterns may put the dancer at risk for injury. Early treatment is the best course of action as it will hasten the return to a full workload.

Additional Information

National Mental Health Association Hotline

800-273-8255

www.nmha.org

Depression & Bi-polar Support

800-273-8255

www.dbsalliance.org

Canadian Mental Health Association Mood Disorders

www.cmha.ca

The information in this article is based on the latest edition of the APA. DSM-5.

Disclaimer

The information on traveling tips listed above are to help guide and inform the dancer and training staff while traveling, it is not meant to take the place of the advice of a medical professional. This information is provided by Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.