

## **Mental Health and Well-Being for Dancers**

### **What is Mental Health and Well-Being?**

The simple answer is, when our thoughts and emotions are congruent with our moment-to-moment life (reality) we are experiencing mental health and well-being. Or, in more poetic terms when our interior experience is in harmony with our exterior life. This does not mean that we are happy all the time, because life does not provide us with a reality of happiness all the time. What it does mean is we are mentally and emotionally “appropriate” for the given moment.

The fact is human beings are incredibly creative – and this is a very important and precious gift. However, people can easily use these creative powers against themselves and not even know they are doing it. A good deal of mental energy is spent “upstairs” and not presently oriented. We human beings make a lot of mental movies. The combination of our magnificent brain and our early childhood experiences are the schooling for our movie making.

### **In the Beginning** *(a very simplified illustration)*

Each human being learns their “style” of thought at a very early age (birth -2 yrs. Old). As soon as a child is born she begins to learn through observation (cause and effect) and emulation (mirroring the teacher, i.e. caregiver). Because an infant has no “language” or way of making meaning out of experience, he does not use his intellect, as an adult would. Memory is stored as implicit memory in the non-declarative part of the brain and exists as sensations, emotions, and images.

The reason this is important to understand is because by the time a child reaches the age of 2 yrs. old she is beginning to respond to life’s ups and downs automatically. Anything practiced, the brain makes automatic – and this includes how a child sees the world (safe or unsafe), and sees themselves in the world (worthy or not). However, because this memory/learning is not yet being routed through the intellect it becomes “hidden”. These implicit memories can be triggered and the child begins to make meaning out of these triggered experiences. In addition to that is that developmentally this small child is the center of their universe.

These hidden “thoughts” and the meaning attached to them are the maps that we navigate with throughout our lives. Some examples of these are “I’m not good enough” – “I don’t know if I will live through this” – “There isn’t enough” – ‘I don’t fit in”. These hidden “thoughts” and the attached meaning are born from traumatic experiences - trauma with a little “t”. And, no one gets through early childhood with out them. Developmentally it is virtually impossible.

The good, the bad, and the ugly, is – all experience of life is brought to each and everyone of us via our thinking/mental activity and 92% of it we are not conscious of. The brain has no spam detector – all thought is experienced to one degree or another. Negative thought having more evolutionary power than positive thought.

### **Adolescent Brain**

Taking the above information and adding to that – hormones, the developmental “job” of pulling away from parents, and a pre-frontal cortex that is not fully developed – is the perfect mental distress storm.

This is where it is important for teachers and parents to understand that unlike we adults with fully functioning pre-frontal cortexes, developmental calm, and mellowed hormones – 11-26 year olds will not be able to intervene on themselves when in the height of emotional upset or emotional excitement (this is also very difficult for adults as well – due to the brains design). They do not yet have the capacity to look at something “logically” in the midst of the storm. Sometime these “storms” are more like silent earthquakes and can go unnoticed.

There usually are warning signs of a storm:

- 180-degree change in personality
- Emotional roller coaster
- Isolation
- Anger that is far more potent than the crime deserves
- Self-mutilation
- Substance use/abuse
- Inability to communicate clearly
- Inability to calm one’s self
- Loss of interest in activities that used to bring pleasure
- Insomnia or always wanting to sleep
- Negativity – there is more wrong than right.
- Change in appearance and personal hygiene

Remembering that an adolescent/young adult will over react to situations that don’t seem to merit such response – is normal. And, to them it truly is that devastating – creating great amounts of fear and general insecurity. The best way to navigate these situations is to **listen** – this does not mean coming up with solutions for them – instead - **listening** with the understanding that the young person has the answer in side of them but in this moment is just not seeing it. The parent or teacher who **listens** gives the young person the space to talk it out – relieving distress, and as they calm down they will begin to see what needs to be done – if anything.

Being patient with this process is usually necessary because it can take some time. If this does not seem to work or is difficult, seeking professional help is recommended. Sometimes it is very challenging for young people to share what is going on for them with parents (remember where they are developmentally). If this seems to be true helping them find someone they can talk to is the next best action.

One last note – adolescents/young people many times will choose to talk to friends (in person or via social media) instead of adults – this is normal - however, friend advice may not be the best and healthiest advice – so it is important to be conscious of any changes in behavior as discussed above.

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This resource paper was written by Meggan McQuilian, MA, LFMT under the auspices of Minnesota Dance Medicine Foundation

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