

# A GLIMPSE IN THE DANCE STUDIO MIRROR

When standing in front of a mirror, dancers may develop a distorted view where their perception of themselves does not match reality. In this collection of dance-related stories, Culture Editor: Print Eden Leavey reflects on how her relationship with dance has evolved through the years, while Staff Writer Giulia Scolari examines the toxicity of body standards within the dance community.

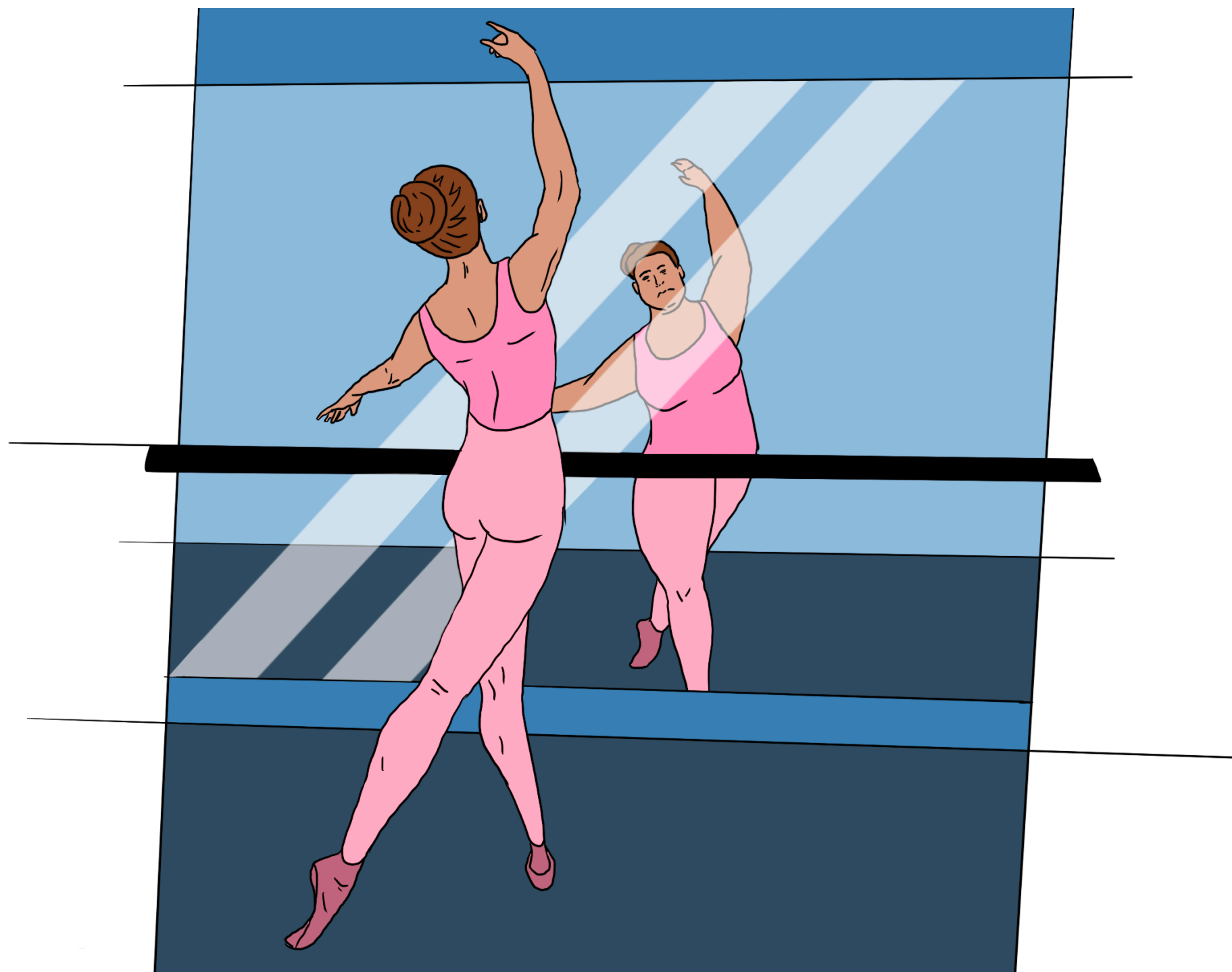


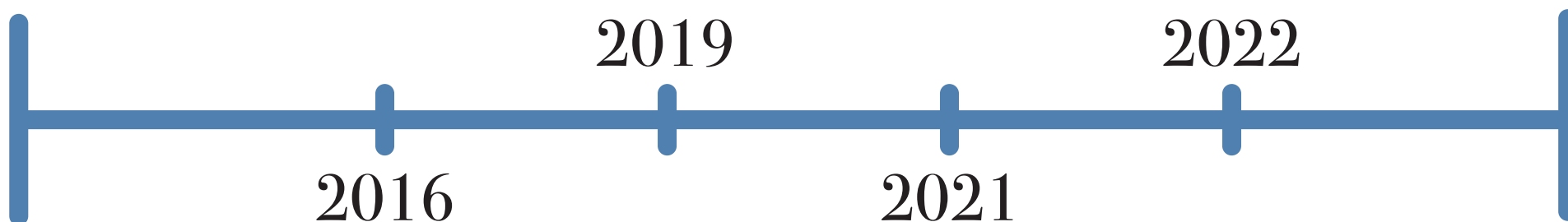
Illustration by Zainab Shafqat Adil



Molly Drown (pictured on the left) and I rehearse the "Giselle" Act One Variation Oct. 26, 2019. *Photo by Amy West*



I introduce my self-choreographed piece at Trinity Laban's Centre for Advanced Training program. *Photo by Mary Kinsella*



My cousin Lindsay Appleby congratulates me with flowers after watching me perform as a Polichinelle in "The Nutcracker" December 2016. *Photo by Robin Appleby*



Daneworks Ballet Academy holds its summer intensive program online due to COVID-19 restrictions Aug. 10, 2021. *Photo by Eden Leavey*

# Dance shapes personal mindset, core beliefs

## COMMENTARY

Eden Leavey /  
Culture Editor: Print

**E**ngage fully. Act professional. Look the part. Dedicate your entire self. Early is on time. On time is late. Although there are countless others, these are some of the key principles of being a dancer that instructors ingrained in my head since I was a young child.

At age 3, my parents decided to enroll me in a creative movement class in hopes of combating my incessant fidgeting. I have been a "bunhead" – a dedicated ballerina – ever since. As a shy child, not only did baby ballet classes serve as a space for exercise and creativity, but they provided me with an opportunity to express myself non-verbally.

Alongside these key principles – for which I am grateful to have embodied – are a multitude of negative thinking patterns that dancers often develop, including low self-esteem, body dysmorphia, eating disorders and all-or-nothing thinking.

In dance, particularly bal-

let, we strive to be perfect. Yet, perfection is not an attainable goal, thus leaving many dancers feeling as if their hard work and dedication will never be enough. I was, and sometimes still am, one of those dancers.

However, my negative thinking patterns developed incrementally over the years, at such a slow rate that I barely noticed how much they altered my mindset in regards to ballet.

During my early years, I simply loved the experience of being in classical ballets, such as "The Nutcracker," and the joy of dancing on stage. But, over time, the satisfaction I felt after a performance began to wear away, and in its place was a deep, unfulfilled river of what I believed to be my potential as a dancer.

I worried that with each imperfection of my body, my dance career would undoubtedly amount to nothing due to problems with my technique, my flexibility and my strength. Despite the develop-

ment of these negative thinking patterns, I persisted with ballet due to my undying love for repertoire and the dance community. These two elements working in tandem convinced me that the physical and psychological pain was worth suffering.

Herein lies the most detrimental issue within the ballet world: the normalization of dismissing one's needs for the sake of appearing as the "perfect" image of a dancer.

For instance, during my time in the studio, I have observed dancers competing with one another to see who is the better calorie estimator, friends going on diets with the intention of losing an unhealthy amount of weight together and severe judgment around eating habits, particularly the consumption of junk food or snacks.

One of my most memorable experiences transpired during a dress rehearsal before the opening night of "The Nutcracker,"

the first show in which I was cast as a soloist. I was 13 at the time, standing in the wings of the stage when suddenly, one of the older dancers I looked up to fainted a mere two feet away from me due to starvation.

Although she regained her strength quickly after some rest and a juice box, no one seemed especially concerned by the incident, and the dancer who passed out said it was a common occurrence when she had skipped too many meals.

Body dysmorphia began to feel like a rite of passage; you start ballet, you get your pointe shoes and then you develop your eating disorder.

As my negative thinking patterns developed through the years, I concurrently began taking modern and contemporary dance classes. While becoming a ballerina had always been my dream, I enjoyed participating in something different, primar-

ily because my physique was more equipped to execute that style of movement, but also because the environment surrounding contemporary dance was much more inclusive. I never felt out of place or upset with

my reflection in the mirror during class. When COVID-19 hit and we transitioned to virtual classes, I lost all motivation to continue dancing.

Without true performance opportunities and the in-person support of my fellow dancers, I felt my love for dance slip away. To keep it from burning out forever, I pulled away from my passion until I could step back into an actual studio.

Unfortunately, my ballet company was unable to stay afloat due to the pandemic, and by the time I was ready to return this past summer, I needed to find a new place to dance.

So, when looking for another company, I researched programs with a greater em-

phasis on contemporary dance and a curriculum dedicated to tackling the prevalence of eating disorders in the dance community.

Now, I'm a member of Shift, a youth performance company that specializes in contemporary dance, and I'm a student at Trinity Laban's Centre for Advanced Training, both of which provide a safe and supportive environment. Additionally, I have developed a more recent passion for choreography and creating movement. I am currently working with a group of dancers as a youth choreographer, which is playing a crucial role in helping me reinvigorate my passion for dance.

Despite the inevitable adversity within any dance environment, I have been able to overcome the majority of my negative thinking patterns and preserve my love of the art form over the years. I am thankful for the resilience ballet has taught me and cannot wait to see how my relationship to dance will flourish.

“ I have been able to overcome the majority of my negative thinking patterns. ”

“ The satisfaction I felt after a performance began to wear away. ”

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# Body dysmorphia leaves perpetual impact on dancers

COMMENTARY

**Giulia Scolari /**  
Staff Writer

Floating against the floor, spreading her arms open into the air, the dancer glides against the black background of the theater curtains. Behind the stage walls, the endless hours of rehearsals, blood, sweat and tears go unnoticed.

The dancer does not feel skinny enough, her waist is not tiny enough, her hair does not sit in a perfect bun, and she is not as flexible as the girl next to her in class.

In an industry focused on the physical appearance of

its practitioners, it can be challenging to avoid issues such as body dysmorphia. A substantial number of teachers within the dance field deliver specific verbal comments to downgrade the physical appearance of the dancers, per *The Dance Magazine*. “You need a smaller stomach for ballet,” or, “Slimmer means more elegant” are examples of such comments.

The strain of the fierce judgements on appearance induces the dancers to a susceptible development of body image struggles throughout their growth and beyond.

Soon after I began dancing myself, I started to analyze my figure at every opportunity. I had chubby cheeks and hair that was frizzy at the top of my head where my not-so-perfect bun rested. My arms were disproportionately short, my shoulders were too small, I wasn’t tall enough, and my bodily structure wasn’t picturesque. The imperfections I faced overwhelmed me; dance wilted from my passions.

No matter a dancer’s predisposition to mental health, the emotional toll from critical comments is unavoidable.

Flawlessness is a moving target, both unattainable and unrealistic. Its pursuit renounces dancers vulnerable to eating disorders, anxiety and depression, threatening to deprive them of the necessary imagination to produce joy solely experienced when performing.

Dance is art. It is magnificent, and very little trumps the sensation of drifting through the stage as lights illuminate the floor. The activity also increases aerobic fitness and improves muscle tone, per the Better Health Channel.

**“The emotional toll of critical comments is unavoidable.”**

Despite the health advantages, a dancer’s mental price is not worth the benefits.

In an online study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, 40% of participants said they had a lifetime diagnosis of anorexia nervosa, while 20% presented a current diagnosis of body dysmorphic disorder. These mental difficulties can result in suicidal thoughts and behaviours, displaying their appalling severity, thus clearly outweighing the physical advantages to the sport.

The rates of suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and completed suicides appear distinctly high for individuals who suffer from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), per *Karger Journals*. Nevertheless, treatment research on BDD lingers far behind other standard conditions as the world still does not acknowledge the disorder’s severity.

Described as a chronic, long-term condition that progressively worsens without treatment, BDD can be difficult to address due to poor insight and low motivation from the patient for appropriate care. Those affected often desire ineffective cosmetic surgery to “fix” their appearance, rather than mental health therapy.

However, cosmetic surgery cannot serve as a permanent repair to a disorder as severe as BDD – there will always be aspects about oneself that a dancer won’t appreciate and will therefore desire to alter.

Even when applied solely to the dance world, the gravity of BDD causes a significant loss of practitioners in the field. It is common for a dancer to abandon their practice because of the toll on their mental health or stability, per *Stylist*. When continuously told to alter eating patterns, minimize food intake or begin dieting, participants often lose interest in dance, preoccupied with appearance concerns.

Moreover, the competitive and aggressive dance setting, alongside the grueling training schedules, heighten the effects of specific mental health difficulties.

Despite the dance world teaching its practitioners heavy discipline through the so-called method of “toughing it out,” there are countless wellness professionals one can meet beyond this artistic field for additional support.

In an effort to change the dance world’s perception of negativity around seeking help, former dancer and current Master of Fine Arts student at Duke University Courtney Liu said in an interview with *Dance Spirit* that therapy should be a standardized topic of discussion, especially in areas with concentrated numbers of the condition, such as the dance community.

Liu said support groups and counseling for mental support should be normalized as a part of overall wellness. Nonetheless, CEO of Chicago Dance Therapy Erica Hornthal said teachers and dance educators often shame their students for

reaching out for additional help with mental pressure and stress.

The work completed in therapy to counter BDD intends to see the body as an ally, not an enemy. If feelings of empathy, compassion and understanding are provided, a dancer can begin to recover from deep-rooted, harmful comments. Requesting help in a time of struggle allows one to detach their physical appearance from their self-worth and value, according to *See Chicago Dance*.

In a recent study conducted by Harvard/Brown Anxiety Research Project involved 22 patients clinically diagnosed with BDD. The investigation showed 76% of patients who underwent therapy to treat their body dysmorphia were able to successfully recover.

By assigning responsibility for one’s thoughts and behaviors, therapy serves as a voice for one’s insecurities and can be used as an outlet for the challenges patients may encounter in dance.

Expressing these personal difficulties can assist in overcoming mental obstacles, allowing one to recover their relationship with dance and using appropriate strategies to manage and control insecurities.

You do not have to conform to unrealistic standards to do something you love. You do not have to have a specific set of features to be beautiful, and you do not have to let your insecurities control you. As Liu said, the mirror, a two-dimensional, restricting object, cannot begin to describe us as three-dimensional beings.

## From the dance studio

What are some of the biggest challenges dancers face with body image?



“If you look in the mirror too much you get a different image of how you actually look, and there’s an idea that you have to be super skinny and tall to be the prima ballerina.”

– Zoe Lawrence (‘25)

How does the dance industry perpetuate body dysmorphia among dancers?



“We’re all trained to just cope and be positive. There’s an element of embarrassment, shame, maybe guilt, there are such a complex medley of emotions when asking for help.”

– Performing Arts Teacher Helen Culling

## Signs of body dysmorphia

- Constantly scrutinizing oneself in the mirror
- Avoiding mirrors altogether
- Making disdainful comments about one’s body
- Frequently comparing one’s body to others
- Extreme self-consciousness
- Fixating on minor imperfections
- Constantly obsessing over one’s weight fluctuations

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