

# Teaching for well-being: A dance teacher's guide to managing dancers' stress

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## Introduction

Mental health is central to optimising how dancers learn, grow, and sustain their careers. A scoping review of 115 studies on mental health in dance highlighted that dancers' well-being is shaped by individual personalities and the environments in which they train. Stressors such as cultural ideals, power dynamics, emotional suppression, and unsupportive learning environments consistently emerge as major contributors to distress, particularly among young dancers.<sup>1,2</sup>

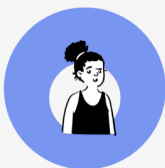
The review identifies powerful protective factors that teachers can directly influence: autonomy, competence, relatedness, emotional support, and a facilitative environment that balances challenge with care.<sup>3</sup> Despite the growing body of research, there are few resources that offer practical tools for the teachers who interact with dancers most consistently and shape their daily experience.

Drawing on the scoping review and on evidence-based practices from dance psychology and education, this article offers a focused toolbox for teachers to use that can support dancers' mental well-being. Each tool is mapped directly to a specific stressor identified in the research, offering concrete strategies that can be integrated into everyday teaching. The aim is to help teachers create environments where dancers can thrive both artistically and mentally. The scoping review identified several core stressors that shape dancers' mental health. Each tool below is designed to reduce one specific stressor through everyday teaching practices.

## Stressor 1: Lack of Psychological Support During Distress

Teachers can support dancers in managing distress. Here are some ideas on how to start conversations about mental well-being with your dancers. Be sure to stay within your own expertise: signpost dancers to mental health professionals when needed and ensure you are supported too.

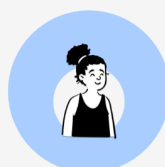
## Tool: Start a conversation about mental health



### 1. ASKING DANCERS: “ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”, “HOW ARE YOU?”, “ARE YOU OKAY?”

When we show that we care about a dancer's emotional state, they are more likely to confide in us. Keep in mind to:

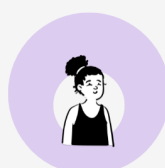
- Avoid rushing the conversation.
- Take the time to listen attentively and observe their responses.



### 2. BE A GOOD LISTENER

Show empathy and warmth for the dancer's situation and avoid diagnosing or trivialising their worries. A good listener:

- Takes the time to listen and understand what the dancer is saying.
- Pauses and makes space for some silence.
- Avoids interrupting the dancer mid-sentence.



### 3. OFFER CONSTRUCTIVE AND REALISTIC HELP

At the end of the conversation, offer some way forward, however, stay within your expertise and signpost to mental health providers and services if needed.

- You can offer to catch up the next day
- Accompany the dancer to an appointment with a mental health professional.
- Follow up with your offers so that the dancer feels heard and seen.

**How this reduces the stressor:** It provides a starting point to have ongoing conversations, reduces stigma about mental health, and offers support to dancers, reducing isolation and fear.

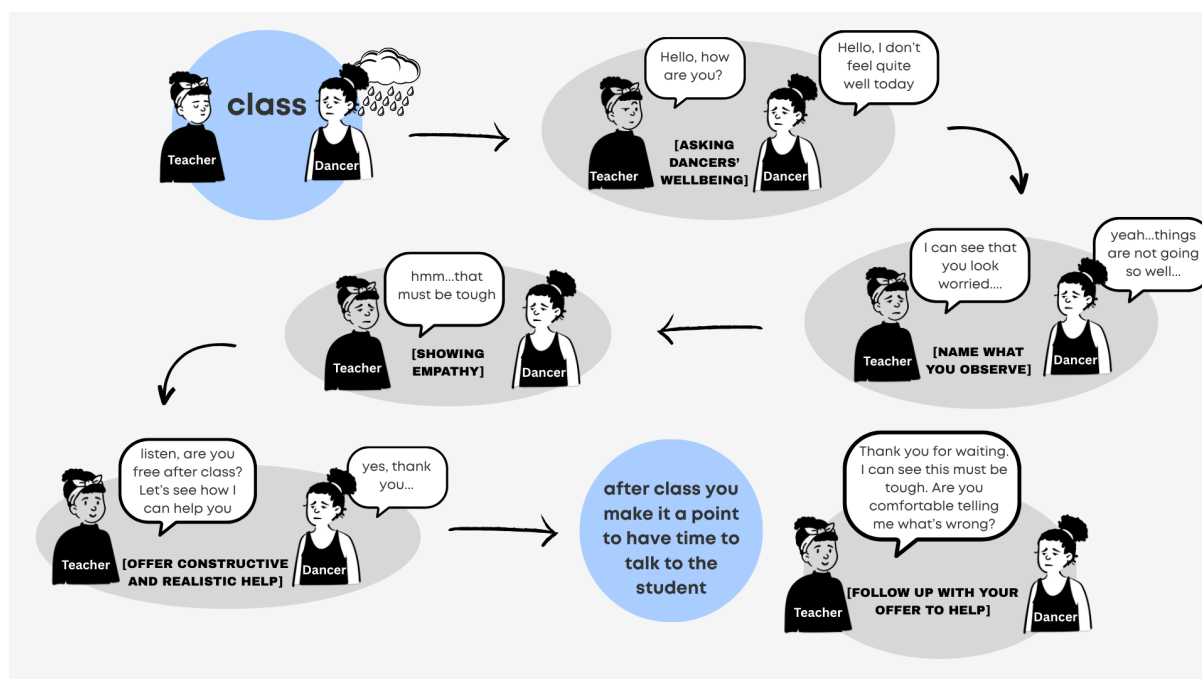
## Stressor 2: Body Ideals, Appearance Pressure, and Cultural Norms of Silent Conformity

### Tool: Emotionally Attuned Conversations (Notice → Name → Validate → Explore)

Cultural ideals like body aesthetics can concern dancers. While these can be delicate conversations to have, they help teachers emotionally attune to dancers and what concerns them. Here are some key points that can help you hold a warm and gentle dialogue that guides the dancer emotionally.

Key practices:

- **Notice** emotional cues (“You seem unsettled today”)
- **Name** the feeling (“It sounds like this was very upsetting to you”)
- **Validate** the experience (“It is ok to feel that way”)
- **Explore** gently (“What would help you right now?”)

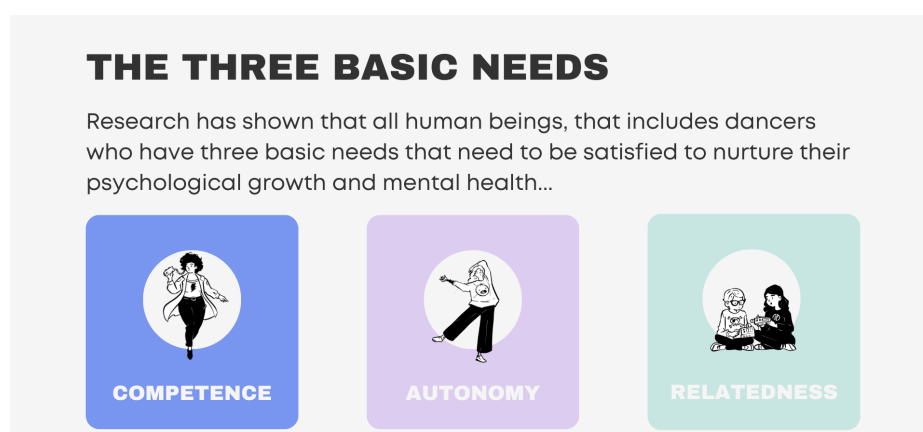


**How this reduces the stressor:** It breaks the culture of silence, reduces shame, and creates a safe space for dancers to express concerns and emotional distress.

## Stressor 3: Power Dynamics and Lack of Autonomy

**Tool:** Support the Three Basic Psychological Needs (Competence, Autonomy, Relatedness)

When teachers assume hierarchical relationships in which they hold power over dancers through their teaching approach, dancers can feel voiceless and dependent on approval. Being aware of the teaching approaches teachers use, making informed choices about who holds power, and incorporating the three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness can support dancers' mental well-being.



## The NEED for **COMPETENCE**



### Teaching Reflection

#### **Satisfied**

When a dancer feels efficacious and able to successfully execute desired actions.

#### **Frustrated**

If dancers are led to focus on or need to demonstrate superior ability that is normatively defined

#### **To Address Dancer Competence Needs**

- How can I show appreciation for a dancer's individual progress and learning process?
- In which way can I normalize setbacks, celebrate milestones?
- How can the dancers and I set realistic, achievable goals together?

## The NEED for **AUTONOMY**



### Teaching Reflection

#### **Satisfied**

When dancers perceive themselves as initiators of their decisions and can behave in a way that reflects their aims and choices.

#### **Frustrated**

When dancers feeling coerced into actions.

#### **To Address Dancer Autonomy Needs**

- How can I acknowledge a dancer's individuality and use it in their learning progress?
- How can I involve dancers in making choices in class?
- In which way can I present different outcomes of choices or decisions that are being made (think of yourself as a compass rather than the hand leading down the path)?

## The NEED for **RELATEDNESS**



### Teaching Reflection

#### **Satisfied**

It refers to feeling understood by, cared for, and connected to other individuals.

#### **Frustrated**

Dancers might feel a lack of relatedness when, for example, teachers favour one dancer to another

#### **To Address Dancer Relatedness Needs**

- How can I acknowledge the dancers' different strengths and use them to work on skills together?
- How can I support dancers in seeing peers as learning resources?
- When and how can I acknowledge kindness, warmth and the dancers' willingness to help each other?

**How this reduces the stressor:** It shifts the studio environment from compliance to collaboration, reducing fear of authority and increasing agency.

## Stressor 4: Lack of a Facilitative Environment (High Pressure, Low Support)

### Tool: Build a Facilitative Environment (High Challenge + High Support)

Creating a facilitative environment has been identified as a protective factor in supporting dancers' mental health. A facilitative learning environment offers a high level of support and an equally high level of challenge for dancers to develop their dance skills. Based on Sanford's theory of balancing support and challenge in learning contexts<sup>3</sup>, there are four distinct environments that teachers can cultivate, distinguished by two factors of challenge and support. This theory provides valuable guidance for building a facilitative setting in which dancers can thrive.



As illustrated in the matrix, Sanford suggests that too many challenges and insufficient support are part of an unrelenting environment, which, as the review shows, compromises dancers' mental health and well-being. Yet, if dancers perceive that they are not challenged and receive low support, their progress can become stagnant. If too much support is provided with insufficient challenge, the environment becomes too comfortable and might not enhance dancers' growth and performance. Therefore, we can aim to create a facilitative learning environment with the following characteristics:

High challenge:

- Learning from mistakes and failures
- Giving dancers agency and responsibility for their learning
- Recognition and celebration of success

- Constructive feedback
- Opportunities to grow

High support:

- Warmth and empathy
- Relationships built on learning from each other's strengths
- Psychological safety (daring to speak up and ask for rationale)
- "We're in this together" mindset
- Scaffolding and check-ins when needed

To start creating a facilitative learning environment, the following checklists might be useful to print out and reflect upon. Feel free to adjust the list as you go along.

# FACILITATIVE CLASSROOM

## Support-Challenge Checklist: High Support - High Challenge

### INDICATORS OF APPROPRIATE CHALLENGE

- ☐ Expectations are clear and aligned with the group's developmental level
- ☐ Tasks promote progression rather than repetition
- ☐ Precision, quality, and refinement are encouraged without promoting perfectionism
- ☐ Feedback provide developmental guidance on how to improve
- ☐ Students are held accountable for effort and engagement
- ☐ The level of challenge is purposeful and connected to learning goals

### INDICATORS OF EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

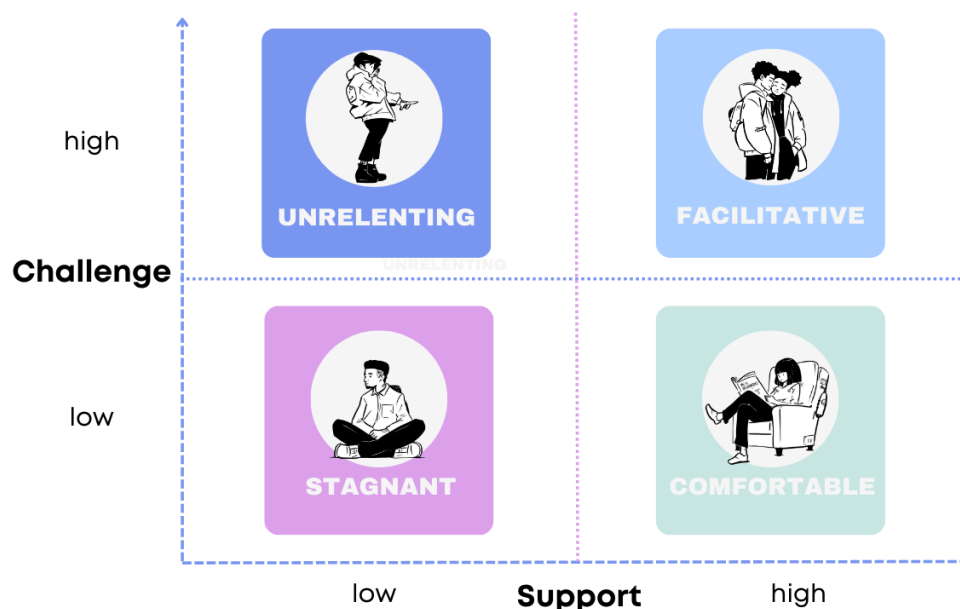
- ☐ Teacher's tone communicates belief in students' capacity to improve
- ☐ Strengths, progress, and effective strategies are acknowledged
- ☐ Students feel able to ask questions, seek clarification, or try again
- ☐ Emotional cues (e.g., frustration, withdrawal, overwhelm) are noticed and responded to with empathy
- ☐ Options, scaffolds, or pacing adjustments are offered when appropriate
- ☐ Effort, persistence, and personal qualities are reinforced



## ENVIRONMENT SCAN

IDENTIFY THE CURRENT BALANCE OF CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

| Environment  | Challenge | Support | Typical class indicators                                                                                                         |
|--------------|-----------|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stagnant     | Low       | Low     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low energy</li> <li>• Disengagement</li> <li>• Minimal progression</li> </ul>           |
| Unrelenting  | High      | Low     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tension</li> <li>• Fear of making mistakes</li> <li>• Withdrawal or shutdown</li> </ul> |
| Comfortable  | Low       | High    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warm atmosphere</li> <li>• Limited progress or development</li> </ul>                   |
| Facilitative | High      | High    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused engagement</li> <li>• Psychological safety</li> </ul>                           |





## REFLECTIONS FOR YOUR CLASS

### IF THE ENVIRONMENT IS **TOO COMFORTABLE**

- ☐ How can you introduce a clear goal or additional layer of complexity?
- ☐ Can you provide a developmental feedback?
- ☐ Have you increased expectations for detail, quality, or artistry?

### IF THE ENVIRONMENT IS **TOO UNRELENTING**

- ☐ Can you reduce the complexity or pace in a section during your class?
- ☐ How can you validate effort and acknowledge progress?
- ☐ When is it more effective to provide one clear, actionable piece of feedback rather than addressing multiple points?

### IF THE ENVIRONMENT **IS STAGNANT**

- ☐ When and how can you reconnect relationally (e.g., warmth, curiosity, presence)?
- ☐ When and how could you introduce a purposeful challenge?
- ☐ How can you clarify the immediate focus or success criteria?



**How this reduces the stressor:** It replaces harsh or stagnant learning environments with a facilitative environment that supports both performance and well-being.

## Conclusion

The scoping review highlights that dance teachers are central to the mental health landscape of dance. While dancers face a range of stressors, from injury and body ideals to power dynamics and emotional suppression, the studio environment can either amplify these pressures or actively buffer against them. Teachers shape that environment every day through their language, feedback, expectations, and cultural leadership.

The tools presented in this article are designed to help teachers reduce common stressors, strengthen dancers' internal resources, and cultivate a learning environment where well-being and artistry develop side by side. The toolbox offers teachers strategies which can enhance dancers' well-being for you to trial, adjust, and modify as needed.

Hopefully, you will be able to integrate these tools into daily practice and create training environments where dancers feel safe, motivated, and able to thrive across the full arc of their careers.

## Original Article:

Dwarika MS, Haraldsen HM. Mental health in dance: a scoping review. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2023;14:1090645. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1090645>

## Further Reading and Resources

Lundqvist C, Andersson G. Let's talk about mental health and mental disorders in elite sports: a narrative review of theoretical perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2021;12:700829. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.700829>

*Let's Talk About Mental Health and Mental Disorders in Elite Sports: A Narrative Review of Theoretical Perspectives* by Lundqvist and Andersson offers valuable ways of understanding well-being in sport psychology, serving as a useful reflective tool for dancers and dance teachers to consider mental health in dance. The article outlines how various organizations and individuals interpret, define, and discuss mental health. It also explains the strengths and limitations of each perspective, offering insights that can serve as a useful reference for dance training and practice.

The authors conclude that mental health is a highly complex construct and that consensus on a uniform definition is unlikely. Yet, they suggest that diverse perspectives and experiences can foster a more holistic understanding of how mental health can be promoted and incorporated. By opening up more platforms for conversation, varied viewpoints can be accommodated, helping to establish a shared understanding of mental health within the dance community. Ultimately, the article provides dancers and dance teachers with a valuable framework for approaching mental health.

## References

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