Tips on Depressive Illness for Dancers

Everyone feels sad, worn out or fatigued from time to time. It’s a normal life experience. It is also normal to feel disappointment or emptiness with personal loss. The experience of failure or disappointment often results in temporary feelings of worthlessness and self-blame.

However, when these emotions increase in intensity, persist for more than a few weeks and start to interfere with a person’s life, it may be an indication of depression. Depression is the most common mood disturbance, an illness in which the feeling of sadness can last for several weeks and begin to interfere with one’s work and social life. Depressive illness can change how one performs and functions.

What are the signs of depressive illness?

- Feeling worthless, helpless or hopeless
- Sleeping more or less than usual consistently
- Trouble falling asleep or waking early
- Having difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Memory problems or increased forgetfulness
- Increased irritability
- Loss of interest in activities that you normally enjoy
- Loss of energy or psychomotor agitation (e.g., pacing)
- Significant changes in weight and/or appetite
- Avoiding other people
- Feeling unreasonably guilty
- Thoughts or plans of death or suicide

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Weather often affects mood. Sunlight can lift our spirits while a rainy day can make one feel gloomy. Some people react more to weather changes and for them the winter blues can be severe and a form of depression. This is call Seasonal Affective Disorder and needs to occur in a pattern of 2 consecutive years with no other depressive episodes in between seasons for this diagnosis. The biological clock that regulates our daily rhythms responds to the seasonal change and shortened days. The neurotransmitters, chemical messengers in the brain that help regulate sleep, mood and appetite, may be disturbed. The signs may include all those associated with depression. SAD can affect an individual’s personal and professional performance. This type of depression does not only occur in the Fall or Winter and can develop during any change in a season. The depressive symptoms can be similar to the above, but can also include cravings for foods higher in sugar and carbohydrates, sleeping more than usual and weight gain.
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 may contemplate self-harm. A health care professional can assist with a proper diagnosis and begin appropriate treatment. This may include counselling, self-help groups, family support or referral to specialists who may recommend medication or psychotherapy.

Who should you tell 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 health condition with someone in the company administration, artistic staff, or other dancers. Mood disorders affect one in ten people. 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.

Recovery
The dancer may be able to take class, rehearse and even perform while in treatment, but the dancer should be cautious as the signs of depression such as poor sleep and poor eating habits are also those that put the dancer at risk for injury. Plan a reasonable return to a full workload and with early treatment any time lost is likely to be shortened. This process is easier with the professional guidance and support of a health care practitioner.

Additional Information

National Mental Health Association Hotline
800-273-8255
www.nmha.org

Depression & Bi-polar Support
800-273-8255
www.dbsalliance.org

Helpful tips for dancers
www.drlindahamilton.com

Canadian Mental Health Association Mood Disorders
www.cmha.ca

Disclaimer: The information on Depression listed above are to help guide and inform the dancer, 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.