



Identifying Unhealthy Behavior

By: Dara Vint

Dara Vint is a current UDA instructor. She has danced competitively for thirteen years and is currently a student choreographer and dancer in the Missouri State University Theatre and Dance Department. She is a member of the University's Inertia Dance Co. and has traveled to perform across the mid west and east coast.

It's important for a dancer to stay lean and healthy but in some cases the pressure of being in the spotlight can be too much. Between practices and performances the amount of physical activity dancers undergo makes it necessary that they follow proper, well balanced diets. If you notice a dancer who may have an eating disorder it is important you notify a parent/guardian or a medical professional immediately. Some signs of unhealthy eating behaviors are:

- Sudden weight loss
- Skin may take on a pale yellow tone and eyes may appear dark and sunken
- Dizziness
- Change in wardrobe- he/she may be very self conscious and wear lose fitting clothes or multiple layers to "hide" themselves
- Pay attention to what he/she says before, during and after practice. Are they are constantly bringing up their image/size in relation to other team members?
- Preoccupation with food- they may obsess over talking about calories or recipes and often cook for others, but don't eat themselves
- Excessive exercise habits outside of practice
- Social withdrawal from the other members of the team-especially if it involves a situation or gathering with food

Eating disorders, unfortunately, are not all that uncommon for teenagers, especially teenage girls. The consequences are serious for those afflicted by the disease and will more often than not affect the entire team's morale. As a coach, if you suspect a dancer has a problem it important to not simply assume but gently confront your team member. Approaching them should not be in an accusing manner but supportive. You are only looking out for their best interest. Never avoid the situation at risk of being embarrassed, but try not to jump to conclusions too soon and wrongly accuse the dancer. It's all about being perceptive, knowing your dancers, and having good judgment. If a disorder is confirmed by the dancer or a teammate, be sure to let a parent or guardian know so they can make plans to seek professional help.

Make a point to bring the situation to the other team members' attention as soon as possible. Discuss how they should try to approach the problem. It is important they don't directly bring up the subject of "eating disorder" to or around the afflicted dancer. Eating disorders are often related to an emotional imbalance and the dancer could spiral even further into the disorder. Avoid saying how "you've *noticed* that this person has gotten so skinny/thin" or that "they *look* like they need to eat". Those who have eating disorders are sick because of their perception of how they are noticed by others or look to themselves. Key words like fat, skinny, anorexic, or saying that they look a particular way may not be entirely wise choices of words and could make the situation worse.

As teammates and friends it is important to constantly remind your teammate that you are always there as a friend and that you care about them and their health. Be a confidante and honor him/her for other, less physical things. Maybe they are really great at Hip Hop, or they are a great asset to the team and always come with a positive, infectious smile. Talk to them, include them, but leave out conversations about body image, clothing or eating habits. Redirect their focus to fun activities like going to the park or catching the late night movie. The more love they get, the better they will feel about themselves and the sooner they can get back on a healthy life track.

Sources: Teenhealth.com, Healthyplace.org/eatingdisorders