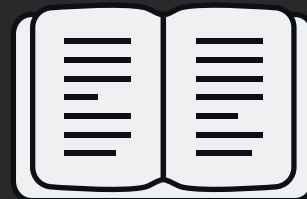


# TURNING NEGATIVE INTO POSITIVE

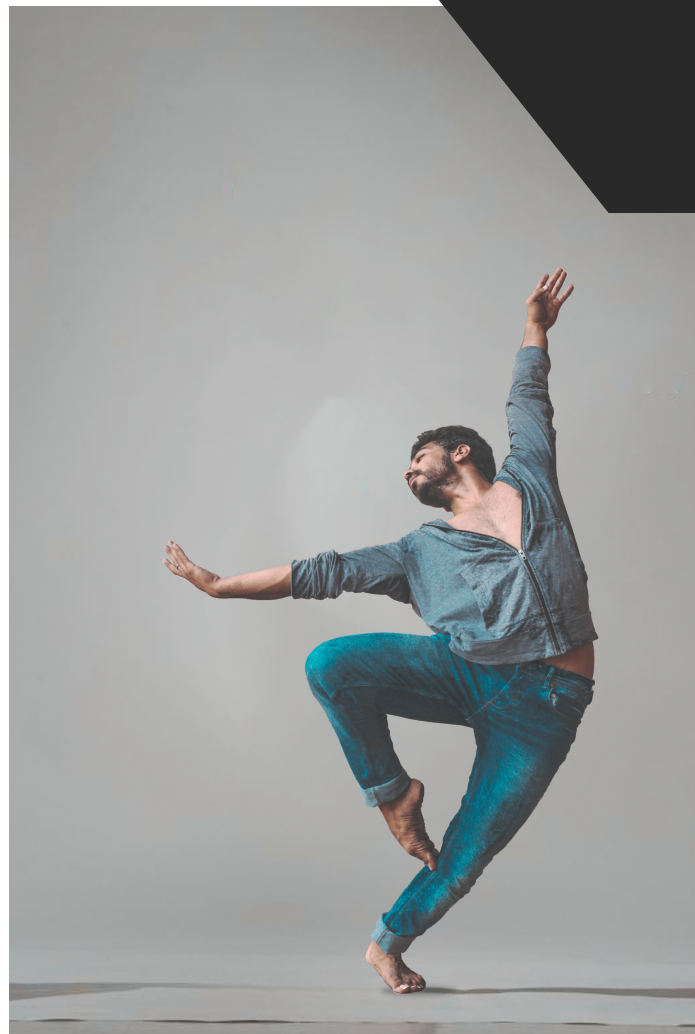
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Do dance students sabotage themselves with negative personal criticism? “I feel awful today, I can’t bear to look at myself in the mirror. Will I ever get this right?” **Negative personal criticism is the inner dialogue that blocks student’s ability to reach their potential.** Self-talk can either be negative or positive. Students can learn to use their self-talk for motivation to improve their outlook and self-image or to improve their technique. Motivational self-talk creates a positive mood and increases confidence. For example:

“When I dance, I always feel better. I will not look in the mirror. I will focus on my inner energy coming up through the floor making me stronger.” Instructional self-talk focuses on improving skill and technique by triggering the desired movement. For example, “I can see the desired double pirouette in my mind, now execute, spot and complete the double turn.”



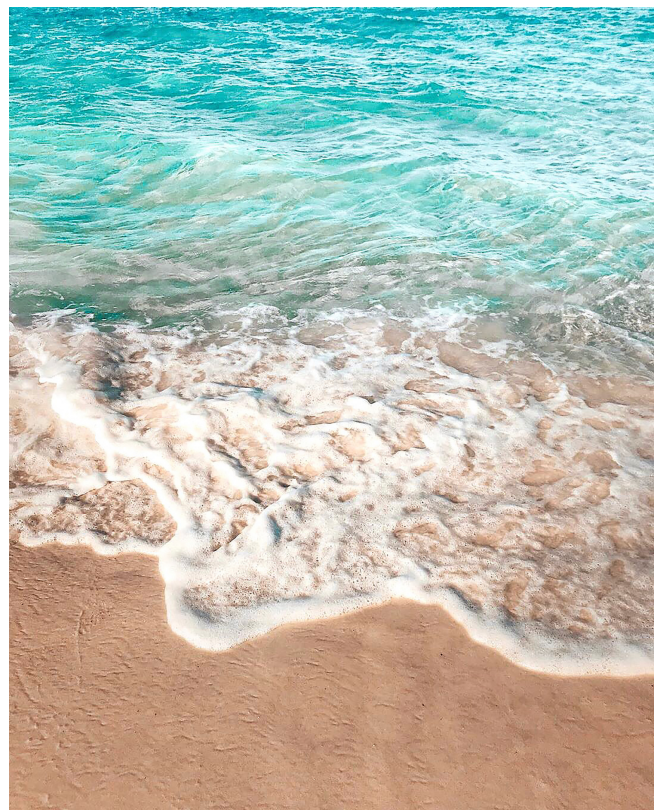
Concerned teachers have asked - how can I help my students break the habit of pessimistic self-talk and the excessive negativity that is associated with it? First, the students must recognize what they are doing and then learn how to utilize their inner dialogue as a foundation to reach their goals. Integrated positive self-talk is a strong predictor of success, builds self-confidence, poise, and creates a positive attitude. Rehearsing with a coordinated mind and body is useful for improving performance. However, some teachers find that despite their best efforts to give positive cues and suggestions to help their dancers, the dancers are still very self-critical. This paper reviews a few psychological skills that some teachers have found useful in breaking the pattern of, “Yes, but I’m so awful”.

# PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

## 1 Gentle Thought Release

**Thought release is a skill used for quickly getting rid of negative thoughts.** For example, in class the teacher requires a combination or skill that is not one of the student's strengths. By practicing ocean breathing the student can be calm and focused. The student is taught to slightly constrict the throat when breathing making a light snoring sound on both the inhale and exhale. It is a sound that is like the waves on the shore. The student can visualize the wave come in and slide back out with the gentle noise. After just two or three of these breaths the dancer can give full concentration to their work.

Teachers can assist this by periodically reminding the students that breathing and focusing is part of preparation.



## 2 Thought Stopping



**To obtain confident thinking dancers must first recognize it, then they can stop the negative thought** by simply saying, STOP or GET OUT or CHANGE CHANNEL. Dancers may use their own preferred phrase. It helps to speak out loud, but of course this would need to be private. The negative thought is replaced with a positive one. For example: "I will probably blow the audition. I won't be chosen." This can be changed to "I am going to do my best. I have done all I can. I am ready and I am not afraid to try. This is a good experience."

# PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

## 3 Use of Mirrors

Research has shown that using mirrors affect body image. Writing in the *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science*, Sally Radell and colleagues found that both beginning and advanced level ballet students experienced a decrease in body image satisfaction in a mirrored studio. (Radell et al., 2017). It may be that students use the mirror critically and compare themselves to others. If students develop a poor body image this can be psychologically damaging and putting them at risk for psychological problems.

Teachers cognizant of this research may be more cautious about how they use mirrors and suggest that dancers focus less on body parts and more on the movement and flow. Students may be less self-conscious if they are less dependent on feedback from the mirrors.



## 4 Positive Comments

At first, dancers may have trouble saying out loud one or two positive comments about their work. If this is the case, **they can try thinking of something negative and turn it into something positive.** It can be hard if it is not something that one can change easily. "I have really bad turn-out on my left side" might be turned into a positive by saying, "I am working on this, some of the best dancers lack turn-out but have wonderful stage presence, I will continue to work on my hip rotation and allow myself to feel good about my performance expression". Each repetition of their combination or routine can be seen as a new opportunity. When the student has a positive thought, they can put it in a journal, so that when they read it again it becomes more embodied. The student is now more emotionally connected and aware of positive thoughts.



# PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

## 5 Use of Third Person Self-Talk

Some students find it beneficial to **speak to themselves silently in the third person. By addressing themselves by their own name they can improve self-control by reducing egocentric bias.** By taking the very personal, “I” out of self-talk and using third person motivational dialogue, the student can decrease the emotional distress of the gloomy self-talk. For example, if a student named Claire is saying to herself, “I can’t do a triple pirouette, I am terrible at turning”, she could say instead, “Claire, just keep trying, you can do this, stop complaining and practice your turns, just keep trying”. Claire is now distancing herself from her emotions and thinking more objectively about her pirouettes.

## 6 Self-Compassion

Some studios actively teach positive emotions such as respect, acceptance, and support for fellow students and even competitors. **Dance students need to learn to be kind and compassionate towards themselves as well as to others.** Developing compassion is associated with less anxiety and more happiness. Some dancers may think it is important to be hard on themselves to be a better performer, but dancers that have compassion still have high standards and goals for themselves as performers. By helping students to practice gratitude, they can fight off negativity. Practicing gratitude is also associated with a sense of happiness. The act of being grateful releases serotonin and dopamine which will make students feel valued.

Some teachers have students acknowledge two or three things for which they are grateful for before each class. Developing self-compassion, being grateful, and feeling valued can lead to a more secure and passionate performance, which is easily perceived by the audience.

# CONCLUSION

**Negative self-thoughts can be toxic for dancers.** Helping students learn to choose the psychological skills that will have the best impact on them may be viewed as an overall improvement in their outlook and performance. Hopefully, they can learn to let go of the inner critic and develop a positive state of mind to recapture the joy in their dancing and performances.

**Disclaimer: This is not an exhaustive list of psychological skills and is not intended to replace direct counseling nor the need for assessment by a registered health professional when the student is emotionally troubled.**

