

'DANCERS ♦ BODIES, PROMOTING WELLNESS': 3 TAKEAWAYS

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By Richard Gibbs, M.D.

From Richard Gibbs, M.D., creator and supervising physician of San Francisco Ballet's dancer health program

1. The Depth of the Problem: A theme of the panel was body image and the pressure, especially on women, to maintain relative thinness in a visual art form. Yet it was the story from a male dancer that opened the discussion to a far broader and underlying problem. He described being off with an injury one season and his growing "sense of shame" as he lay home for weeks on his couch. Finally in a state of despondency, he realized that "my entire identity is wrapped-up in this job." All his values and his self-esteem were intimately tied to dance. This is the norm among professional dancers. It makes them tremendously vulnerable and puts them at risk for any behavior that might further their dance, no matter how dangerous to their health.

2. How One Talks to Dancers Is Enormously Important: Because they are so desperate to "make it" and then move upwards in a company, young dancers cling to every word from the director and artistic staff. Casual comments and any reference to their bodies are critical to the dancer and can set them spinning into unhealthy behaviors. We cannot change the need for relative thinness in this visual art form. But we can find better ways to communicate with the dancers, always aware of their vulnerability and always recognizing them as talented young people rather than body types.*

3. Dancers Can and Should Help Themselves: The professional dancers on the panel and in the audience repeatedly emphasized the need for more experienced dancers in a company to mentor the younger ones. It's a golden opportunity to provide support, alleviate anxiety and bring a sense of reason to lifestyle issues such as diet.

* The paper "Guidelines on Nutrition for Professional Companies by the Taskforce on Dancer Health" has a chapter devoted to language and communication with dancers – available on the Dance/USA website.

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