

# TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO DANCE CLASS

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*A note: Since all trauma is about the REACTION to the event, not the event itself, it doesn't matter what the event was or whether or not an outsider would consider it traumatic. What matters is that the person to whom it happened had the ability to cope with/process the event and/or complete daily functions.*

From a young age, dancers are part of a toxic system—one that values certain types of bodies, hierarchies, and binaries, and behaviors like obedience, quietness, and perfectionism. This system can traumatize young people physically, mentally, and emotionally. So, how might we alleviate harm as much as we can?

Let's use this Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration graphic to guide us.

- ## SIX KEY PRINCIPLES OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH
1. Safety
  2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
  3. Peer Support
  4. Collaboration and Mutuality
  5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice
  6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

### 1. Safety

I had a bit of a rant on TikTok a few weeks ago (@intimacychoreof). I came across a post in which a teacher said they had to “get students out of their comfort zones,” and I vehemently disagreed. A “comfort zone” is not a sign that a student is lazy, disengaged, or argumentative. A “comfort zone” is simply a sign that a student feels safe. My job as an educator is not to take them nor force them to stay somewhere they don't feel

class at the top

### 3. Peer Support

Trustworthiness also needs to happen among students. Power dynamics amongst peers (someone has been at the studio for ages, a clear skill division between members of the class, someone who are on a competition team or not, etc.) can contribute to distrust, heightening anxiety and reactivity. Again, transparency is helpful. So, too, is offering options in combinations to meet all

students where they are, where a multiplicity of ways to engage are treated as equally valid.

Creating check-ins at the top of class where students get to share a bit about themselves can build camaraderie. Students can also learn from each other with “pair and share” activities or other group creative opportunities.

- Try:
- Check-in questions: My current favorite check-in question for taking attendance is “What emoji would you send me today to tell me how you're feeling?”
  - Multiple directions: “You can do this combo with a group, with a partner, or actively observe how the dancers use levels in their improv.” Or, “You can do this combo at this tempo in this group or at halftime tempo with the second group.”

### 4. Collaboration and Mutuality

If we've done the above, we have a more collaborative space. Another key to collaboration is to keep the focus on the work we are there to do, not on the personalities at play. When dynamics get involved, power opportunities get involved, opening dynamics can roll back in, opening opportunities for abuse and harm. Focus on the work also helps us keep forward momentum toward a shared goal, rather than dwelling on something that may be going wrong. We acknowledge the problem and then work together to fix it.

Collaboration validates the different skills and perspectives we all bring. When we collaborate, we celebrate the things that make us different.

Try: Centering the conversations around the task and how teachers and students can best support each other in accomplishing the task.

### 5. Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

I find Trauma-Informed teaching to be nearly synonymous with

Consent-Based teaching. Both involve addressing power dynamics, communicating with openness and specificity, and focusing on students' humanity, which means honoring their agency and power. Folks who have experienced trauma have had their agency taken from them. Therefore, opportunities to make choices, and have those choices upheld, can be crucial to healing and moving forward.

- Try allowing students to:
- Set boundaries for the class engagement (for example, I do not want corrective touch today), and
  - Engage in the material on their terms (for example: Manipulate this eight-count phrase around the concept of level)

### 6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Some will say that cultural, historical, and gender issues have no place in dance class. Again, I will vehemently disagree. Cultural, historical, and gender issues happen because of our bodies and/or the situations we find ourselves in while inhabiting those bodies. Dance is all about connecting to our bodies and using our bodies to connect to others. Therefore, as responsible educators, we have to be aware of cultural, historical, and gender issues.

As we know, trauma is an embodied response to an event. We cannot separate our bodies from their context, not can we separate our trauma from our bodies. All of this is tied together.

- Try:
- Actively engaging in anti-racist learning, gender equity, disability justice, and other political issues important to your local community.

We cannot know everything that may activate everyone in our space. We can, however, take steps to make our spaces as welcoming to risk-taking and compassionate to complicated humans as possible.

