

Healing and Recovery: Coming back from an injury and dealing with Self-doubt By Ma*Shuqa Mira Murjan©

Will I ever dance again?

Moments of panic and thoughts of “Will I dance again?” have run through my mind several times in my life. Numerous times this experience has occurred for me as I held my breath and now have these memories etched in my brain as if frozen in time: post dual bunion surgery on both feet at the same time, ankle surgery times two to repair then remove a metal plate, a fractured wrist, cancer surgery and chemotherapy, and back pain from several severe falls. After experiencing limited mobility, and adaptive movement just to complete normal activities of daily living – it was always the same thought rushing through my mind. Will I ever be the same? Is how I feel and move today my “new normal”?

Psychological triggers and defense mechanisms

Yet, beyond this mental moment of anticipation and physical capability assessment is the recurring fear of self-doubt, and depression. When you sustain a serious injury or have undergone surgery to repair something you encounter mental as well as physical healing hurdles. Unconsciously, according to Dr. Alan Goldberg, a sports psychologist who works with professional athletes and dancers, your nervous system memorizes and records every aspect of trauma to the body. If the surgery is due to an accident, then your body sustains the memory of the movement, physical sensation, emotions, and thoughts that you experienced when you sustained the injury. And, anything that triggers latent memories or familiar scenarios with that injury can cause a psychological impact. For dancers, this means that when you approach a particular step or step sequence with a specific piece of music – you may become fearful. Self-protective defense mechanisms start to kick in and we can freeze and be unable to do what we could do before the injury. Mentally, we know what we were able to do before injury, but our bodies and mind balk at performing the same movements.

Pain can freeze us

As we heal and recover to return to dance oftentimes we can freeze from fear when we feel pain. In general, no pain is good pain. Yet, we know as dancers that using our bodies can cause muscle discomfort and mild pain. Fear of re-injury can be a real barrier to our healing and recovery progress. We have a heightened awareness of our bodies and pain becomes a very scary signal after experiencing trauma. Therefore, it’s important to understand and define “normal pain” from “harmful pain”.

Helpful and harmful pain

As a dance coach, and health educator, and also one who has personally experienced multiple episodes of healing and recovery to return to dance, I offer dancers this guide to pain during recovery. Normal pain occurs in recovery and healing as a result of muscle soreness located around the injured area. Or, referent pains can be associated with the physical adaptations you make as you recover, e.g. use of the other side of your body to support the injured side. Some muscle tension and tightness occurs from extra use of muscles as you compensate, or can be felt in the process of stretching and using muscles again in the traumatized area of the body. Generally, if pain subsides within a day – it is normal. Harmful pain that indicates further bodily trauma or injury may be: sharp, confined to a small area, and will linger beyond a day. If you experience harmful pain, it’s important to seek medical assessment and care.

Stumbling blocks to recovery

In teaching dance and coaching dancers I have found pain and mental triggers of latent memories are “hidden barriers to performance” that exist because of past trauma. Personally, I am well aware of these physical and mental stumbling blocks and have experienced the lack of confidence that may result. Working through these personal barriers and hurdles requires focused positive thoughts for

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continuous improvement to create a “new normal” of movement that becomes you.

Dancing feeds the soul

One of the side-effects of sustaining an injury or recovering and healing after trauma or surgery is the impact to your sense of self. For every dancer, their movement and performance feeds their soul, makes them proud to be who they are, and defines us. Dancing may be the way we have dealt with stress and helped us cope with life stressors.

Feeling loss and trepidation

Now as we heal and recover and return to dance we do so with trepidation and question our body and dance ability. We have lost the comforting feelings and exhilaration, and the former confidence and satisfaction we gained from dancing. We might become depressed that we are “no longer who we once were” and that “we no longer recognize ourselves.” Even if you have never sustained body trauma – you recognize the feeling of loss and being an outsider in a dance class if you have taken an extended vacation and missed a few weeks of dance class and choreography.

Creating the New Normal

The first step to continued healing and recovery of your identity as a dancer is to focus instead on your mental health and emotions. Realize and accept the fact that you are experiencing and creating a “new normal” for your body and dancing. Recognize that exploring your emotions and fear is a requisite first step in positive coping with your situation to assist you to remove the body’s fear response which can cause rigidity and make you prone to re-injury. Consider if you don’t work on developing a positive mental attitude, you could impede your recovery and return to dance.

Mental and Physical well being

Both mental and physical conditioning is important in healing and recovery. Remember that body conditioning and muscle strengthening and

lengthening are requisite to a return to your new normal and ability to perform again. Being in a positive frame of mind and focused on setting physical goals for recovery will help empower you. Rather than be depressed by comparing yourself to your former glory and other top-notch dancers, focus on performing the basic movements. Don’t try to rush the recovery process, but instead focus on the creation of your own goals and “new normal” dance movement and performance.

Your new dance persona

Another key aspect is formulating and developing your new dance **personae**. For me, I know that for several years after “surviving cancer” – my performances held that “wow, I’m still alive and dancing” quality. While it’s OK to celebrate life and survival, others noted this performance **persona** and provided supportive feedback when I finally adapted and became comfortable with my own new normal.

Recovery and the change process

How did I manage this change? When I took workshops and classes, I moved and danced as well as I could; and when I couldn’t I stopped and made notes about movements I could perform “in my own way and style.” This new focus in learning assisted me in avoiding the depression from obsessive comparison with great dancers and my former performing capability that I had lost. Bottom-line, work on your own recovery and new normal and stop worrying about impressing people or worrying about people remembering and comparing your performance to previous performances. If you do, you will find you enjoy receiving compliments about your new dance image, rather than taking comments as negative commentary of your dancing.

Mantras can help the healing

Make up your own mantra to say when you start to feel your own fears returning. Silly as it may seem: my mantra was “I can’t die or stop performing – I still have costumes I haven’t worn.” Or, “I can’t believe that I have to give up my passion and what

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makes me happy. I won't, I'll push through this difficulty. I'll come out the other side of this traumatic situation and will dance again." With this mantra I was able to take pride and joy in the process of healing and recovery. Whatever I could manage became a good sign of my recovery.

What we survive makes us stronger

The old adage is indeed true: "**What doesn't kill us makes us stronger.**" Or, "**What we survive makes us stronger.**" Fortunately, I find myself often congratulating and complimenting a dancer who dances with a zest for life and then we share life stories and compare notes finding we have a common bond and sisterhood of survivorship. For me, my own survivorship gives me the opportunity as a teacher and coach to offer support for dancers dealing with recovery and healing from trauma. Having "been there and done that" – I can offer coaching support from personal experience that lets dancers know – all is OK and there will be more dancing in your future as you heal. You will again enjoy a life with dancing in your life.

Author Bio

Ma*Shuqa Mira Murjan has been performing, teaching, and coaching for over 40 years. Her **Ma*Shuqa Method** gives dancers a structure for developing improvised choreography while performing with individualized styling. She has authored many articles on aspects of professionalism and performance in Middle Eastern dance. Her personal **Cancer Discovery and Recovery story** may be found at www.MaShuqa.com Ma*Shuqa offers dancers extended study opportunity through her **Diva Dancer Professional Development Workshops** which offer dancers topics on cultural aspects of music, rhythm, and dance theory to enhance their weekly studies and performances. As a dance photographer – what she sees through the camera lens reflects a dancer's professionalism. Her husband, **Carl Sermon** is well known for his festival and performance photography of Oriental dancers. Ma*Shuqa and her husband Carl work together to provide artistic direction and performance photography for photo sessions with Oriental dancers. See their work in *The Belly Dance Chronicles magazine*, *The GildedSerpent.com E-zine*, and www.CarlSermonPhotography.Zenfolio.com

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