

She Ruined Her Career and Wreaked Havoc on Her Body: The Dangers of Body-Shaming and Disordered Eating

By: A.E. Lee

From a young age, dancers experience severe scrutiny from instructors and directors. This scrutiny causes a higher degree of eating disorders among dancers, said Robin Lindenberg, Licensed Clinical Social Worker. These adolescent dancers internalize this scrutiny and often carry it with them for the rest of their lives, explained Lindenberg.

There are many long term consequences that can come from adolescent body-shaming, said Marcia Lawton, a Mental Health Counselor in Schenectady, NY. These consequences often include a poor relationship with food, difficulties accepting weight gain during a pregnancy, and relationships with one's children. "It's very severe...and it affects everything. Their whole lives." Lawton believes the ballet world is a contributing factor to poor body-image, pressuring adolescents to be as thin as possible by whatever means, regardless of the consequences such choices could bring.

Medical research has found evidence of a higher risk for disordered eating behaviors and a desire for thinness in women who participated in dance as young girls. Dancers are twice as likely to engage in eating disorders than non-dancers, according to this [study](#) by Suzanne Abraham. The study continued by stating that ballet dancers should be considered an at-risk group for the development of eating disorders. Participating in dance at a young age has a long-term effect on a woman's eating behavior said an [article](#) published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*.

Emily Read, a former dancer, opened up about her struggles with her body image and the long term consequences of her choices. After a lifelong pursuit toward a career in ballet,

Read was forced to give up her dream when a foot injury unveiled complications created by years of malnutrition. “My body has been through so much; it’s just a mess now,” said Read.

Adolescents, explained Lindenberg, lack a sense of self; their identity has not yet fully developed. Authority figures such as teachers and parents help to define self image. Therefore, when a dance instructor comments on or criticizes their body, the adolescent internalizes those comments and they impact their future decisions. “Even if [an eating disorder] isn’t full-fledged, your adolescent maturity is thwarted because you’re so focused on the eating disorder,” explained Lindenberg. Some of the developmental tasks of adolescence every individual should experience are missed because of the amount of focus given to the disordered eating.

Beginning in eighth grade, around age 12 or 13, Read enrolled in an arts school where she attended academic classes in the mornings, but attended ballet classes each afternoon and evening. While Read did not immediately feel ashamed of or insecure in her body, she explained that many around her had already begun to conscientiously limit their food intake. “Oh, they’re not eating,” recalled Read, “Should I be eating?” She noticed when older dancers began puberty, they were often ignored in class, criticized, or even sexualized simply because their bodies were undergoing natural changes from a child’s body to a woman’s. “I was so afraid of that happening to me,” Read said. If her body changed, said an instructor, Read would have no value to this profession. “So don’t allow it to ever change,” she was instructed. Read explained that in the ballet world, amenorrhea, or not menstruating, is glorified and desired among female dancers. “Which,” Read said, “is really unhealthy and I definitely partook in that.”

Lawton, who has treated dancers both during and after their careers, said body-shaming leads to disordered eating, anxiety and depression. If not caught and treated, disordered eating often leads to eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia and even death. “A lot of people with eating disorders end up having fertility issues down the road; hormonally they’re all screwed up,” added Lindenberg. She explained that osteoporosis and dental problems are also common consequences of eating disorders. “It really does wreak havoc on your system and anorexia could be fatal.”

Read hit puberty at age 18. “I had been conditioned my whole life to fear [menstruation] and not want it.” When her body began changing, teachers began asking if her routine had changed. Was she eating more? Going to the gym less? When, in fact, Read said she worked harder to stop these natural developments, including eating less and working out more.

Read said age 18 was when she shifted from disordered eating habits to consciously measuring, limiting, and regimenting her food intake. “It just escalated from there for the next few years, from 18 to 21.” At no point, even her lowest and most unhealthy weight, did anyone ever encourage Read to stop losing weight, or check up on her health and nutrition. “All it did was just reenforce the rhetoric that was already in my mind: ‘You never will be thin enough; you will always have to control what you eat,’” said Read.

Instructors, directors, and others within the ballet world, in Lawton’s experience, are not the people who identify these health problems and encourage youths to seek help; they often, according to Lawton, contribute to the problem by praising individuals for weight lost.

“I think the instructors kind of look the other way,” said Lindenberg. She believes instructors realize what is going on, but, in the pursuit of success, ignore warning signs. Lindenberg added that many instructors have and continue to struggle with disordered eating and eating disorders. “It’s just a vicious cycle,” she concluded.

In 2019, at age 21, Read moved to Portland, Ore. to dance with Oregon Ballet Theatre’s new junior company, OBT2. During a company class, when landing a jump, Read’s plantar fascia tore. “I was so afraid of getting out of shape, on top of being injured,” said Read, “It went full-blown anorexia. I was really unhealthy.”

“Someone with anorexia nervosa will see themselves as fat even though they are thin,” Lindenberg explained, “Their body image is very distorted.” This, she explained is caused by a cognitive distortion, defined as “thought patterns that cause people to view reality in inaccurate — usually negative — ways,” by [Healthline](#).

Ignoring her doctor’s instructions to rest during the healing process, Read continued to exercise, utilizing ellipticals and Pilates for hours at the gym; she also stopped eating almost entirely. When her foot failed to heal, her doctor informed her malnutrition was a likely cause. Read ignored these concerns, believing she did not suffer from an eating disorder or malnutrition. At a return visit, the doctor found the injury had worsened. Read was told to stop dancing and sent to a sport psychologist who diagnosed Read with anorexia. “If you keep doing what you are doing, you will die,” said Read’s psychologist. “That is literally what it took to snap me out of it,” said Read, “I was in complete denial. I thought I was just being healthy and exercising and trying to maintain my body.”

Recovery, according to Lindenberg, is a long and complex journey. Dealing with body image and the patient's relationship with food are merely the surface layer of recovery. "It's the bottom layers that fuel the eating disorder," Lindenberg explained. "Generally, the younger a patient shows symptomatology and the more severe it is, the longer they need treatment." These struggles can be overcome if the patient is willing to do the hard work; "It is a fulfilling and life changing journey if both the patient and therapist are dedicated," Lindenberg concluded.