

auSDANCE
NSW



ON DANCER WELLBEING

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For the Australian dance community

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Image courtesy of Maxine Carlisle

1. Dancer Wellbeing

This document gives an overview of safer dance practices beyond COVID-safety as the NSW dance sector returns to the studio. How do dance practitioners teach and work with dancers and their dance community in ways that prioritise dancer safety and wellbeing? Spotlighting physical, psychological, mental, social and emotional wellbeing, the following information is designed to offer considerations to ensure an incremental return to dance in your studio that is 'dancer-first'.

Issues addressed include:

- Physical health including injury prevention and training time and workload, changing dance surfaces, expectations for dancers
- Nutrition, sleep, the importance of recovery in ensuring peak performance and emotional wellbeing
- An understanding of dancers' psychological states, mental health and emotional needs
- A focus on social interactions and managing dancer, student, parent and teacher expectations
- There may be a sense of increased competition between students both in terms of performance goals and also in terms of social cliques.
- Students who are introverted are likely to have withdrawn with online learning and may be anxious about returning to the social group.
- Students who are extraverted are likely to be excited and may quickly gravitate towards established social groups and exclude others.

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1.1 Introduction: Overview of considerations in return to dance

Dancers, companies and teachers have shown tremendous resilience, ingenuity and adaptability throughout the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. It will continue to be a challenge as we all adapt to the new normal. These notes are some general considerations as we return to dance – from time off due to COVID lockdown, injury or other reasons – considering a dancer's wellbeing in physical, mental and social domains. We acknowledge that, for illustrative purposes, many examples are based on ballet, however the same principles around safe loading, recovery, mental and social health and wellbeing are broadly applicable.

Please take what is useful to your situation with your unique expertise and situation.

One of the challenges in returning to activity after a period off is managing enthusiasm and excitement at returning to dance. Some dancers may not have danced at all, and even if dancers were doing some exercises at home, it's unlikely that they were able to put the same loads through their body as in a class situation. The body is pretty efficient and will only maintain its capacity for work as long as it needs to – we know that people lose strength within about 2 weeks, and it will take about the same amount of time dancing at a lesser load, to get back to pre-break condition.

One of the biggest risks for injury is returning too rapidly to activity, so remember to take it slow, listen to your body. It's a balancing act – enough to challenge (and enjoy!), but not so much that you hurt yourself, and enough time to adapt to that challenge. If you feel niggles or soreness that isn't resolving, then get it checked out by a health professional, preferably one experienced with dancers and athletes.

Be kind to yourselves, your friends and your students – expectations may need to be lowered as we all learn and adapt together. Avoid putting pressure on extrinsic goals at least for a couple of months such as high stakes performances or assessments. Rather try to focus on the process of returning to an activity you love doing. If you are having a performance, perhaps consider it a celebration of coming together and returning to dance, rather than as the pinnacle of the year's training. Have an awareness of how different everyone's experience of the pandemic and lockdowns have been. While we were all in the same storm, we were all in different boats and people may have had widely varying experiences so kindness is crucial as we all come together again.

1.2 Class return to dance progression

Across the country different states have endured different amounts of time in lockdown and altered states of training. The time the dancer has had out of the studio will determine how long they need to take to get back to a full load: 8 weeks in lockdown = 8-10 weeks getting back to a full class with jumps and big moves. This is to protect the bones and the tendons of the dancers, as these structures need gradual reloading to allow adequate adaptation to changing forces and loads. Even if a dancer has been jumping whilst training at home, when they return to the studio they will be jumping on a different surface. This is an important consideration as the forces will be different and the body (bones and tendons) needs the time to adapt to the change.

For example, in a ballet class, with students having had variable times in lockdown, or having completed different regimes and amounts of loading whilst in lockdown, you could think about trying any of the options below:

Option 1: Creating different classes to begin with for each different group until they are all up to barre, centre and some allegro, then getting them all back in their original classes

Option 2: You could consider bringing all the dancers back to a simple barre and build them all back together (this could lead to some dancers becoming bored)

Option 3: Make sure each dancer is aware of how much they should be doing and they need to know to stop at their limit for that week/class. For those that haven't been jumping they could start simple things while the rest of the class is doing allegro, like jogging on the spot, simple plyometric (jumping and rebounding) work at the back of the studio.

When trying to plan the 'dancers' return', think about how you return to dance after a holiday and stick to similar ideas. Starting with a flat barre, add in 2 leg rises and then finally single leg rises, over the first 2 weeks. Before recommencing allegro and pointe work make sure all the dancers can do at least 20-30 rises on each leg with good form and technique

For younger dancers 10-13yrs: 15-20x each leg,

For older dancers- 14+yrs : 25-30x each leg.

When adding in allegro/jumps start with a warm up jump, then add more allegro exercises without progressing in consecutive classes. Keep the same load for one to two classes before progressing. Leave single leg repetitive work until the dancers are back doing a whole class- from barre to jumps. Try not to add two new things in one class, eg: don't start big jumps AND pointe work on the same day/ or in the same class, don't start higher load acro moves AND more complicated beats or wings in tap on the same day.

1.3 Diet and Sleep

When you are training, it is important to give your body the raw materials and time it needs to adapt to the higher levels of load. This is achieved through eating a balanced, healthy diet with enough energy and nutrients for you to repair, adapt and grow. The only time you can consolidate your training – both mentally and physically – is with sleep. Aim for at least 8 hours of good quality sleep, with regular bed and wake times. This is particularly important and challenging through your adolescence as it is such a busy time with school, exams, probably increasing training in dance, increasing expectations, social life, relationships etc. If you have any concerns or questions, please consult with a trusted healthcare professional.

1.4 Recovery

What is recovery? Recovery is a complex (e.g, physiological, psychological) restorative process relative to time and is one of the most important parts of any dance training or exercise program.

Recovery allows for:

- Time for the body to heal itself in preparation for your next dance class,
- Improved dance performance, and
- Most importantly decrease the risk of potential traumatic/overuse injury and illness.

Professional dance careers require years of intensive training. Stress experienced during training must be balanced with adequate recovery to prevent overtraining and burnout. Therefore, dancers need to be able to monitor and manage their own recovery – stress state to consistently perform and minimize the risk of negative outcomes associated with long-term recovery – stress imbalances. However, little is known about how dancers achieve a balance between recovery and stress (Blevins et al., 2019).

How should I try and incorporate recovery?

- Once a week take a break from extracurricular activities (e.g., Pilates, gym sessions)
- Start off the week with heavier strength/endurance sessions and then taper down at the end of the week
- Add in a creative week every 4-5 weeks. For example, this might be a week focusing on artistic expression, mental, emotional or spiritual aspects of your dance practice.
- Complete active recovery after every session (substitutes for an effective cool down)
- Passive recovery (or a total rest day) no more than once a week.

How can I recover?

There are different types of recovery – active and passive.

- **Active recovery:** Also known as “active rest”. This recovery method involves low intensity exercise that is performed shortly after higher intensity exercise to improve recovery and performance (Ezequiel et al., 2018).
- **Passive Recovery:** Requires minimal movement by giving the body optimal opportunity to rest. Simply doing “almost nothing” (Ezequiel et al., 2018).

Which is better?

There is mixed evidence that suggests one is better than the other. It will depend on factors such as the exercise intensity of recent sessions and how your body feels. If your body feels completely beat up, your sleep was erratic, and/or your resting heart rate is higher than normal, then use the passive recovery (Blevins et al., 2021). On the other hand, if you are just a bit sore and can't go all out in your workout, keep your body moving with active recovery instead.

Examples of recovery

Active

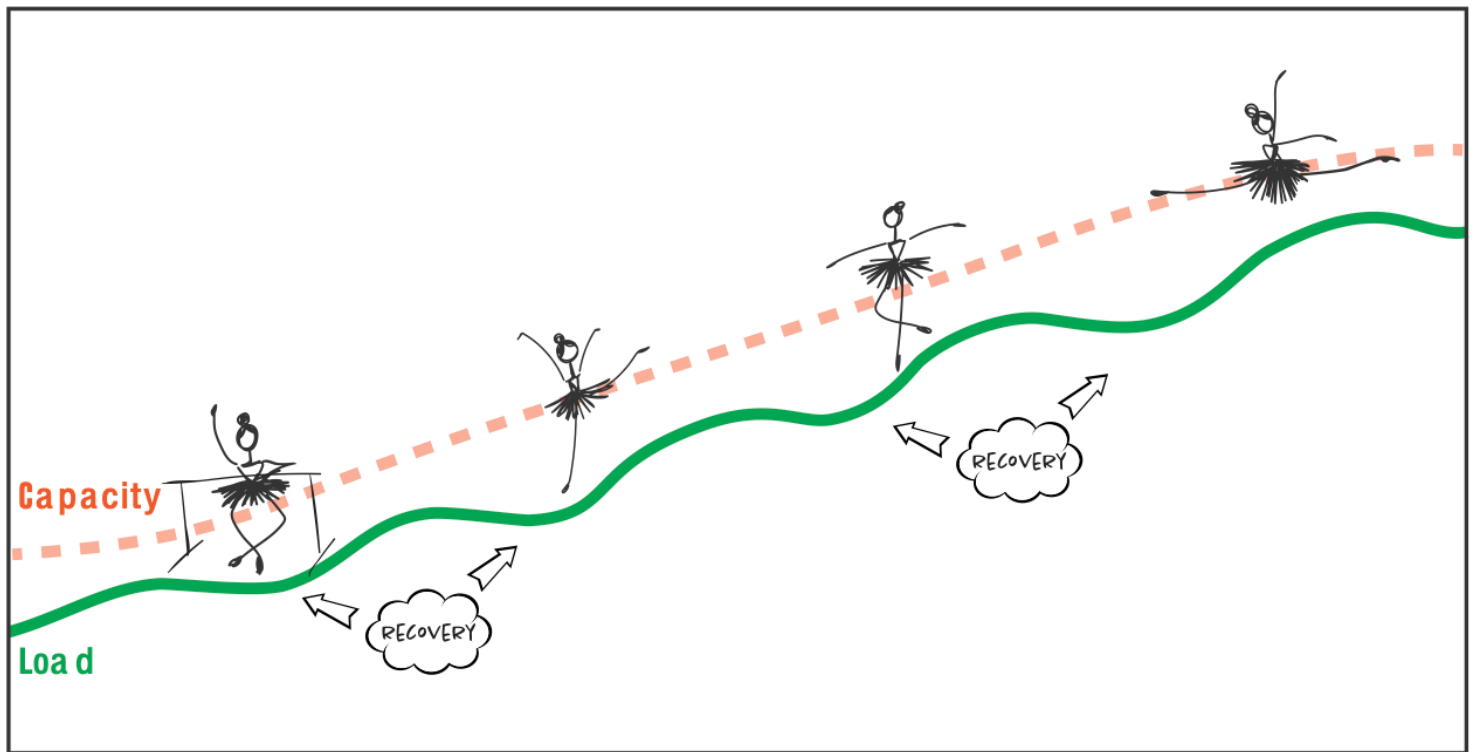
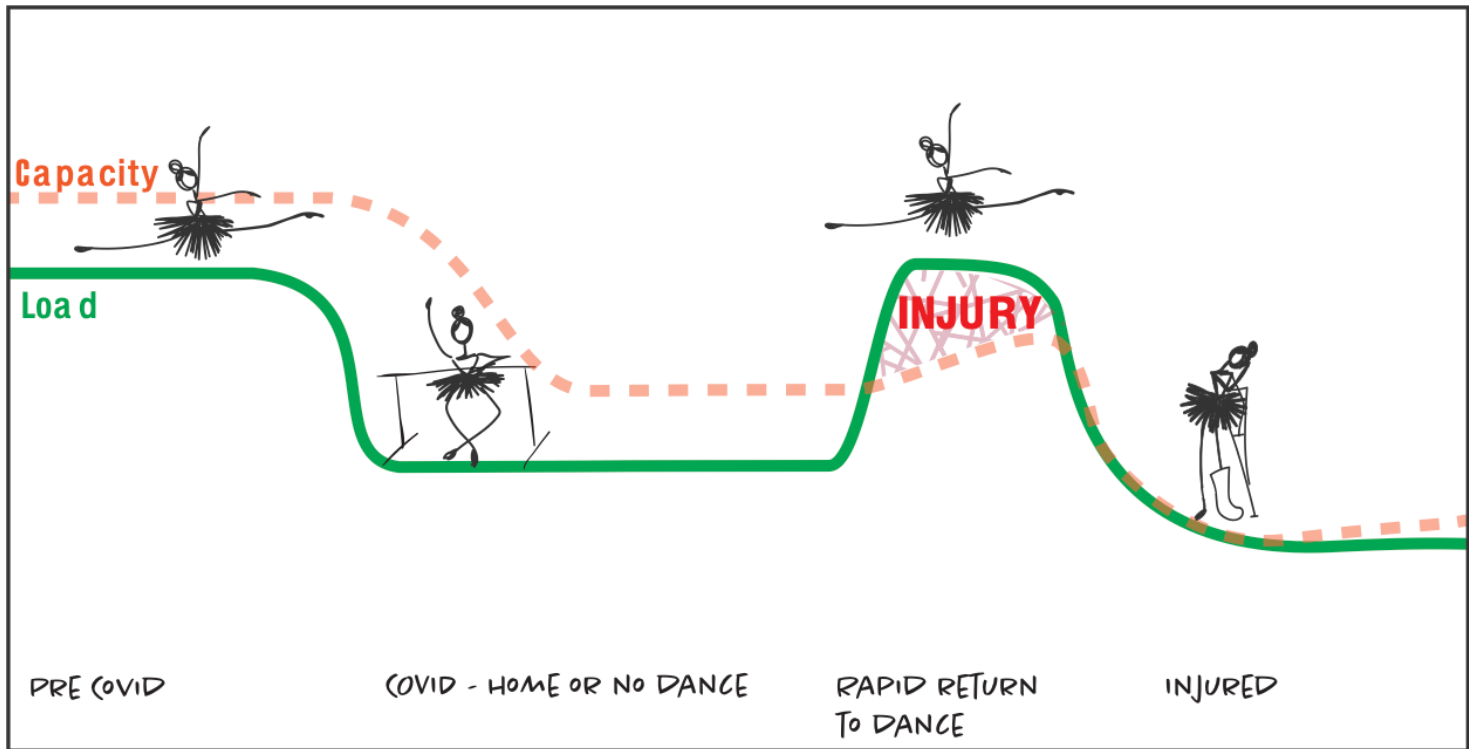
- Tai chi
- Yoga
- Water based activities
- Walking
- Pilates

Passive

- Foam rolling
- Cold water immersion (eg ice bath)
- Massage
- Sleep/naps
- Stretching

***Note focus on breathing and correct technique when completing active recovery exercises.**

4.5 Loading



Ideal loading - note time given for recovery.

1.6 Social, Emotional, Cultural, Psychological Considerations

COVID-19 is a dynamic situation and impacts everyone differently. The pandemic has set in place conditions for the perfect mental health storm: fear of safety (self and loved ones), isolation and loss of social connection, scarcity of resources, reduced income, consistently changing situations, information overload, added roles and responsibilities (e.g. homeschooling), and disruptions to routine.

As we come out of lockdown it is more important than ever to consider social, emotional, psychological and cultural factors. As all of our situations are different, the suggestions below are not comprehensive or exhaustive. They are a selection of considerations and strategies that may be put in place to ensure our return to dance supports the wellbeing of dancers, teachers and dance artists.

Reduce your expectations

- Don't pick up where you left off. Approach your return as if it were Lesson 1, Week 1.
- Allow more time for connection, play, and fun in your classes.
- Clearly communicate to your students that you do not expect perfection. For example, "I don't expect this grand battement to be high right now, so just take it easy". Or "I don't expect you to remember the exercise. It's ok if you've forgotten it. I've forgotten things too. We can help each other to remember it". Create the expectation that there will be variability from lesson to lesson, 'Some classes and moves will be easy while others may be more challenging than you recall'. We want to congratulate everyone for simply being here and for creating a warm space in class. At this stage of the return, discourage competing to 'be the best'.
- For dancers, know that it's highly likely you won't be returning to your peak performance levels right away and that's ok. Focus on the joy of dancing and be patient and kind to yourself.

Create a culture of communication and connection

- Create a class that is warm and welcoming despite the "Covid" barriers
- Find ways to connect to your students as people, not just as dancers.
- Reinforce considerate and respectful behaviour amongst dancers, for example, 'That was really nice of you to.....'
- Encourage students to reach out to each other and particularly to those they have not had any contact with throughout lockdown. If there are group exercises, use numbering techniques to mix the groups up as much as possible.
- Approachability is important for dance teachers, rehearsal directors, or other leaders. Establish and remind dancers of the importance of communication and ensure your dancers know that they can talk to you. Be willing to listen and then to refer on to established wellbeing support services.

Find ways to enable dancers' agency

Build more creative movement, improvisation or choreography into your lessons. These will give dancers' the chance to make choices and enact agency

Bring more awareness to your instruction and language

- Avoid phrases such as ‘getting back into shape’. Instead, talk about ‘getting back into dance’ and emphasize that we’re doing things that we love to do.
- Consider reducing the number of ‘parts’ to instructions. Instead of “Ok let’s go to the back of the room and stand in three lines facing the right and have your right leg in front and do our turns combination”, try “Ok, we’re going to do our turns combination. Let’s go to the back of the room and make three lines” [wait for students to follow]. “Ok, face the right, and put your right leg in front of you”.

Check-in with your students

- Check in with your dancers and teachers regularly and meet them where they are at. For example, students one week they may be keen on dancing and learning combinations and choreography, while the next week they may feel more exhausted after recommencing school and may need a low-key lesson with more stretching, breathing exercises and creative movement.
- Be aware of other things happening in your dancers and teachers’ lives. For example, are HSC exams coming up soon? Have students just started back their first week of school and are exhausted? Be attuned to the possibilities behind people’s behaviour and aim to act with patience, empathy and kindness.
- Assume appropriate levels of responsibility and refer dancers/families to professionals where needed.

Reduce uncertainty by informing dancers and families what to expect

- Clear communication about new procedures and routines can help reduce uncertainty. Social scripts can be used to educate younger students. These are simple ‘stories’ with visuals that clearly explain what students might see, do, say and feel in a given setting. For example, you might let students know that their teacher will be wearing a mask, they will need to sanitise hands, and that we won’t be hugging or holding hands for now. By showing students what they need to do ahead of time, you give them more time to acclimatise and a greater chance for successful uptake.
- Establish a new routine and remind people of it regularly (e.g. hand washing, cleaning etc.).

Participation and engagement takes on many forms and may be different to usual

- Some dancers and teachers may be excited to return to dance. Others may be more anxious or nervous. Acknowledge that different people will respond in a variety of ways, and that everyone will ‘recover’ from lockdown at different rates.
- If you are talking as a group and someone does not wish to participate, make sure it is known that not talking is a valid option.
- Attention and engagement levels may be very high in some people, and low in others. Be patient and deliver instructions or feedback more than once if needed.
- Use multimodality to increase engagement by building in visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic modes of communication.

1.7 Accessing Additional Support

Reach Out is an online mental health resources for teenagers and their parents. They provide relevant mental health resources, guidance to helpful apps and tools that can be used and free individual coaching: <https://about.au.reachout.com/home>

Raising Children Network is an Australian Parenting Website with resources relevant to parenting children of all ages: <https://raisingchildren.net.au>

Emerging Minds – Advancing Australian children's mental health develops mental health interventions and evidence-based resources in response to the needs of professionals, children and their families: <https://emergingminds.com.au> Resources are freely available.

The Kids Helpline provide 24 hour telephone or webchat support and email contact for children & teenagers. It also provides excellent parenting resources including step by step guidance on how to respond to anxiety: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/anxiety-kids-and-teens>

The NSW Department of Education provides links to numerous agencies to access support for mental health and wellbeing: <https://bit.ly/3FYD7q0>

1.8 Summary Table of Considerations

Dancers (students, company dancers and everything in between and Parents)	Leaders (teachers, company directors)
Dancing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It may be super exciting being back in the studio, try and reign in your enthusiasm and follow the plan set by your teacher to safely return you to dance. • Listen to your body – if niggles don't settle down seek advice from your physio or doctor who preferably has expertise with dance athletes (see 'flags' below). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware dancers may be extremely excited and enthusiastic about returning to dance. Temper both your dancers and your own expectations. • Touch base with your students – check in on where they're at – mentally and physically.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents: touch base with your kids re physical health, dancers are notorious for hiding pain and injury. • Be kind to yourself mentally and physically: you've had a lot of time off, and it will take some time before your body is back to where it used to be - and it will get back to where you were and better. Trust in your own resilience and ability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open conversations about injuries and health with your students, discussing injury. Talk about different things they may be feeling and what should be reported. For example, you might feel tight or achey or sore, but if things feel 'sharp' or have persisted then let your teacher know and look into it further.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carefully plan return to activity. As a rough guide, it takes about 1x as long off to return to the same level. Eg if they've have 4 weeks since grand allegro, aim to return to full grand allegro in about 4 weeks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents: touch base with your kids. They may also be feeling a lot of pressure from themselves, peers or teachers to do more/be better. Try to avoid jumping/ acro on different surfaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid scheduling high stakes events in the first 2 months of return – however, if one is scheduled, celebrate the return to dance, rather than framing it as a showcase or an example of peak performance.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid repetitive choreography in the beginning of reloading- best to make sure the dancer is back to a full class before adding repetitive steps into class. Eg. in ballet, repeated ballone releves, cabrioles down the diagonal, fouettes, single leg temps leves If your dancers are going to be dancing on different surfaces (Eg. home and the studio) make the decision about where they will jump/ do acro, so it's a consistent surface for them. Avoid swapping the higher load choreography from one surface to another
<p>Recovery</p>	
<p>You will perform better with rest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider adding in short periods of rest or reduced training load (this could be decreased volume or intensity). It's actually better for your body to take time to recover from training. If you have other activities, sports etc, consider reducing those or doing some recovery activities (water based exercise, sleep/naps or massage) this will help reduce the risk of injury, illness and improve your dance performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Like any athlete, dancers need time for their body to adapt. They will do better with rest! Consider building in rest weeks - perhaps in the middle of term have a 'creative week' where they exercise their creativity in choreography, and less physical intensity. Within the week consider tapering intensity/difficulty towards the end of the week when fatigue levels are likely to be high.

Emotional/social/mental	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents: Expect students to return home with a range of feelings. Do not try to “talk” or “unpack” feelings but allow your child to take their time as they adjust back to face to face classes. Lower your own expectations of their progress. If your child is naturally more dominant, discuss the warmth that they show other members of the class who may be more nervous or passive. It is an excellent time for espousing values of care and consideration towards others in our dance community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider social media posts that promote inclusion of all members of a class. Do not focus on particular student accomplishments but instead on the class working together to create an enjoyable warm atmosphere.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating behaviors that may have arisen during lockdown. The priority should be on mental health ahead of reaching performance goals in the return to classes post lockdown. Reinforcing messages around a balanced return to normal life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid talking about ‘getting back in shape’, or body shapes in general. <p>Suggest talking about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We’re getting back into dance – emphasise that we’re doing things that we love and enjoy doing.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider building in some guided meditation, breathing exercises at the end of class
‘Flags’	
Green flags - Normal change and adaptation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mild soreness after training that resolves overnight 	<p>For younger children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> increased reluctance to separate from parent more interrupting, excitability, pushing in, general decrease in turn-taking skills many questions about the new procedures and routine. Questions about things that are different

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initial reluctance or uncertainty re: participating in certain activities or discussions (generally solved by some words of encouragement or acknowledgement that it's ok to feel nervous when we try something new or something we haven't done in a long time) • increased recognition/expression of 'pain' or different bodily sensations. Not injuries - just kids feeling different things and being uncertain about it • reports of tummy aches (which, upon discussion is often just a feeling of 'butterflies' or nerves) • Students used to self management at home may be more inclined to walk off and bring food to the dance floor, or pick up a phone. Requires acknowledgment of the change and scaffolding back into the studio with clear expectations.
<p>Yellow flags (alert but not alarmed)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots of recurrent mild upper respiratory tract infections • Persisting delayed onset muscle soreness - feeling achy for a few days after exertion • Intermittent cramping under the feet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing a dancer pull out of certain exercises repeatedly • Repeated reports of pain from the dancer • Favouring a limb/side
<p>Red flags (seek advice)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain at night/waking from sleep due to pain • Restrictive eating, focus on weight or appearance • Periods stopping or changing significantly and persistently. • Excess extra 'training' at home • Persisting ache and pain not resolving over a week or with rest • Pain with normal activity (walking etc) • Sharp pain on activity - like jumping • Constant crampy feeling in feet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking constant reassurance. • Difficulty sleeping over several nights. • Lack of energy. • Withdrawal from all family interaction • Lack of interest in pre-lockdown activities

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