



Exploring Lived Experiences of Emotional Well Being Among Dancers: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: Dance has increasingly been recognized as a meaningful contributor to psychological health and wellbeing; however, existing research has predominantly focused on quantitative outcomes such as stress reduction, physical fitness, and mental health indicators, with comparatively little attention given to dancer's subjective experiences of emotional wellbeing. The present study sought to explore how dancers experience and make sense of emotional wellbeing through their engagement with dance. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with dancers representing diverse dance backgrounds and varying years of experience. The interviews were analyzed following IPA guidelines to examine the meanings participants attributed to their lived experiences. Collectively, these themes illustrate that dance functions as considerably more than an artistic or physical activity in Five superordinate themes emerged from the analysis: dance as psychological home: regulation, refuge and emotional survival, Dance as identity ,purpose and meaning, The embodied self-Body, emotion and performance, vulnerability, pressure and emotional cost and growth transformation and meaning making. Together, these themes suggest that dancer's emotional wellbeing cannot be reduced to the presence of positive feeling alone, rather it is shaped by a continuous interplay of emotional regulation, identity formation, embodied expression, resilience-building and personal change. Dance was described as both emotional refuge and deep fulfilment, even as it brought with its pressure around performance, self-doubt, physical fatigue and exposure

to vulnerability. Notwithstanding these difficulties, participants consistently positioned dance as core to who they are and as a vital channel for expressing emotion, constructing meaning and undergoing psychological growth.

These findings advance understanding of emotional wellbeing as dancers themselves experience and articulate it, underscoring the emotional, embodied and relational dimensions inherent to dance practice. The study carries practical implication for dance educators, mental health Practitioners, counsellors, and performance institutions seeking to build psychologically supportive environments that nurture dancers' overall wellbeing.

Keywords: *Lived experiences, emotional well-being, dancers*

1. Introduction

Psychological health is not just about the absence of illness anymore. Most of the current models treat emotional wellbeing as something with its own weight and structure, which directly connected to how people feel from day to day, how they deal with setbacks, how they relate to others, and whether their lives feel worth living in deeper sense. Keyes (2002), Ryff (1989) and Ryan and Deci (2001) all point to similar ingredients here: positive emotion, growth, purpose, resilience, acceptance to oneself. What's less clear, though, is how this plays out for people whose entire working lives are organized around movement and performance. Dancers are an interesting case precisely because so much comes together in what they do the physical demands, the mental focus, the emotional expression, the social world of a studio or company, the creative work itself.

Dance has always occupied an unusual place among physical activities because it doubles as a language. Dancers use movement to say things that might not come easily in words, and through that they build connections with others and work out their own experiences. There's a fair amount of evidence now linking dance to better wellbeing outcomes generally improved emotional regulation, higher self-esteem, stronger social bonds, better quality of life overall (Fong Yan et al., 2024; German-Molina et al., 2025). Some of this comes from structured interventions designed specifically to reduce anxiety or depressive symptoms, and the results tend to be encouraging: less distress, more resilience, more positive affect. So, there's reasonably good reason to think dance matters for mental health beyond just what happens in a clinical setting.

The problem is that most of this evidence comes from quantitative studies, which by design tend to isolate specific outcomes, stress scores, anxiety measures, body image scales, that sort of

thing. Useful, certainly, but limited. They can only explain that dance seems to help but does not focus on much about what it feels from inside or how dancers themselves talk about their experience of emotional lives . A couple of recent reviews have flagged this as a gap worth addressing (Dwarika & Haraldsen, 2023; Yu et al., 2025), and it's a fair point, wellbeing isn't really the kind of thing that reduces cleanly to a number. It's personal, it shifts with context, and it depends heavily on how someone interprets their own situation.

There's another issue too. A lot of existing work leans toward the negative side of things, perfectionism, performance anxiety, injuries, burnout, body image pressures. None of that is wrong to study, obviously; these are real problems dancers deal with. But if that's mostly what gets researched, it's easy to lose sight of what keeps dancers going through demanding careers the psychological resources, not just the risks. A phenomenological approach makes room for both sides of that picture, the struggles and the things that sustain people, whether that's a sense of identity, meaning, emotional control, or personal change over time.

This is roughly why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis fits the current study. IPA isn't built around predefined categories of wellbeing that participants get slotted into — it's built around trying to understand how people themselves make sense of experiences that matter to them, in their own terms, shaped by their own context. Working closely with individual accounts this way tends to produce a much more detailed picture of how something like emotional wellbeing actually gets built through a person's relationship with an activity like dance.

So that's what this study set out to do: explore how dancers experience emotional wellbeing, using IPA, with the emphasis on their own accounts rather than external measures. The hope is to add something the existing literature hasn't really captured yet, a sense of how dance shapes identity, embodiment, resilience, and growth as things dancers actually live through, not just outcomes measured before and after an intervention. In that sense the study tries to move the conversation about dancer wellbeing past symptoms and performance metrics, toward something closer to what dance means to the people doing it.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative design was adopted for this study, drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how dancers experience emotional wellbeing. IPA

is rooted in an interpretivist stance, where meaning is understood as something individuals actively construct out of their own experience, rather than something simply observed or measured from the outside. Because of this, the approach lends itself well to research concerned with how people understand significant experiences in their lives, and it has been applied fairly widely across psychology and health-related research for that reason. The study followed IPA's idiographic focus, meaning the intention was never to produce results that could be generalised to a wider population, but instead to understand, in real depth, what individual participants had actually gone through.

2.2 Participants

Six dancers took part in the study, recruited through purposive sampling, ranging in age from 18 to 35. All were engaged in dance at the time, some professionally, others as a serious recreational commitment and each had at least two years of dance experience. Participants were also selected on the basis that they felt able to talk openly about their emotional experiences relating to dance, since this was central to what the interviews were trying to capture. Six participants is a small number by most research standards, though within IPA this is standard practice; the method values depth over breadth, and larger samples tend to work against the kind of close analysis IPA is built for.

Table 1: *Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Dance Style	Years of Experience
P1	Female	23	Bharatnatyam	19
P2	Female	29	Zouk, Bollywood, Hiphop	8
P3	Female	24	Hiphop, Afro	7
P4	Female	25	Kathak, Hiphop, Breaking	6
P5	Male	29	Breaking, Hiphop, House, chicago footwork	15
P6	Female	22	Bharatnatyam, Hiphop	8

2.3 Data Collection

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted online, lasting between roughly 45 minutes and an hour each. A loose interview guide was used, made up of open-ended questions meant to draw out participants' emotional experiences of dance questions such as "How does dancing make you feel emotionally?" and "How has dancing affected your emotional wellbeing over time?" This

format gave participants space to talk in as much detail as they wanted, while still allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions when something unexpected or particularly meaningful came up during the conversation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed in full and analyzed using the process described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). This began with multiple close readings of each transcript, a step meant to build familiarity with each participant's account before any formal coding started. Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes were made alongside the text, and from these, emergent themes were drawn out for each participant individually. Once themes had been identified within a single case, the analysis then looked at how those themes connected to one another, before moving on to compare patterns across all six participants. This back-and-forth — moving between individual cases and the wider group — eventually produced a set of superordinate and subordinate themes, capturing both what came up across participants and what was specific to particular individuals.

2.5 Trustworthiness

The study's trustworthiness was assessed against the criteria set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported through extended engagement with the data and through member checking, where participants were sent their transcripts and asked to confirm they were accurate. Transferability was addressed by including detailed descriptions of the participants and the context in which the research was carried out. An audit trail was kept throughout to support dependability, and reflexive journaling was used to strengthen confirmability — a way of keeping the researcher's own assumptions visible and open to scrutiny rather than left unexamined.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee at Sampurna Montfort College before data collection began. Participants were given an information sheet explaining the study's purpose and procedures, and informed consent was obtained from each of them before interviews took place. Participation was voluntary throughout, and participants were told they could withdraw at any point without needing to explain why and without any consequence for doing so. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely in line with the college's institutional guidelines.

3. Results

Theme 1: *Dance as a Psychological Home: Regulation, Refuge and Emotional Survival*

Across all six interviews dance came through something closer to psychological safe house than a hobby or discipline. Participants described turning to movement When things felt overwhelming, using it to settle themselves, to release what had built up emotionally, and to hold onto a sense of stability when everything else felt shaky. What made the theme distinct was how automatically this happened, nobody has described consciously deciding to use dance this way, it simply became the place they went.

P3 said it about as directly as anyone could: "When I dance everything I feel emotionally is peace. Gives me peace, it gives me calmness. That is the place where I feel that I'm not with any tension." That last part is worth sitting with "that is the place." Not an activity. A place. P6 described something with a rougher edge to it: "I think it's a full escape from emotions. Like, I feel like it's very similar to taking drugs or something... it really helps with when you are going through things." P3 found stillness in dance; P6 found something closer to total distraction. Different words, same underlying pull dance as somewhere to set things down for a while.

Whatever form it took for each person, dance kept showing up as a steady source of emotional support, something participants could count on when they needed it most.

Theme 2: *Dance as Identity, Purpose and Meaning*

By the time I'd gone through all six transcripts, it was pretty clear dance wasn't just something these people did it had become part of who they were. When they were explaining about dance the statement always started with Dance and the line between "I dance and "I am a dancer" kept blurring and almost disappeared completely for them and it didn't stop at the personal level either. A lot of participants found real meaning in passing dance on to others, through teaching or mentoring, in ways that seemed to matter just as much as their own growth.

P1 put this fusion into words better than most: "Dance is my whole personality at this point... it's the only way I can keep myself alive." That's not casual language. That's someone describing dance as load bearing. Purpose showed up outward too, not just inward P2 talked about the care that goes into teaching properly: "Every student is different. You cannot teach everyone in the same way. You have to understand what works for each person." P6 measured success in a way that had nothing to do with technique: "If someone can leave class feeling even a little bit

happier than when they came in, then that's enough for me." And this wasn't confined to the studio, either P2 described reshaping their whole lifestyle "because I want to dance for many more years."

For these participants, dance wasn't just a defining part of who they were. It was also how they figured out what they wanted to give to other people.

Theme 3: *The Embodied Self — Body, Emotion and Performance*

One thing that came through again and again was how little separation participants felt between their bodies and their emotions. Feelings didn't seem to get processed mentally first and then expressed physically after the fact the movement often came first, and understanding followed. Once someone was fully dancing, there wasn't much room left for anything else to get in.

P2 explained this in a way that stuck with me: "I don't think that I'm feeling sad, so I play a sad song... I would just move and I would feel whatever I'm feeling at that point of time." They're not choosing music to match a feeling they've already identified - the feeling arrives through moving, not before it. P6 described a similar kind of total presence: "When you're moving, you're only thinking about the movement." That's not just focus. That's the mind having genuinely nowhere else to be.

For these participants, the body wasn't a tool for performing dance. It was where emotion actually got worked out.

Theme 4: *Vulnerability, Pressure and Emotional Cost*

None of this came without a price, and participants were honest about that. Body image struggles, burnout, money worries, the sheer discipline of showing up on days when nothing in you wants to. What was interesting, though, was that none of this pushed anyone away from dance. If anything, going through hard stretches seemed to tie people to it even more tightly.

P1 spoke about a genuine break in the relationship with dance "I stopped dancing for years because I hated my body" and then described coming back to it after recovering something that they had lost "Coming back to dance was like finding myself again". P6 gave a much more ordinary picture of what commitment actually looks like from day to day: "There are days when you don't feel like doing it, but you still show up." Nobody framed any of this bitterly. The sacrifices were just accepted as part of caring about something enough to keep choosing it, over and over.

Vulnerability wasn't something separate and secret for a meaningful connection with

dance; it always came with it for them.

Theme 5: *Growth, Transformation and Peak Experiences*

Over years of dancing, participants described becoming different people more confident, steadier emotionally, more resilient. Nobody pointed to one big moment that changed everything. It built up slowly, almost without them noticing until they looked back. And woven through that slow growth were these rare, standout moments during performance where something shifted into a different gear entirely.

P3 described the emotional core of those moments simply: "When I dance, everything that I feel emotionally is peace." P6 captured the way attention narrows completely: "When you're moving, you're only thinking about the movement." Neither of them reached for clinical language to explain it, but what they're describing sounds a lot like full presence, a kind of wholeness that's genuinely hard to find anywhere else in daily life.

Dance, for these participants, was never really finished shaping them. It stayed an ongoing process of becoming; one they kept returning to.

4. Discussion

Introduction

What I wanted to understand in this study was what emotional wellbeing actually feels like for dancers not from the outside, but from theirs. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis let me get closer to that than a survey ever could. Five themes came out of the interviews: Dance as a Psychological Home, Dance as Identity and Purpose, The Embodied Self, Vulnerability and Emotional Cost, and Growth Through Peak Experiences. These aren't neat, separate categories they blur into each other constantly. And one thing became obvious pretty fast: wellbeing here wasn't about things being easy. Difficulty and wellbeing kept showing up together, sometimes almost feeding off each other.

Dance as a Psychological Home

Participants kept describing dance as somewhere they went emotionally when things got hard, which fits the broader, more layered understanding of wellbeing already out there, one built on meaning and functioning, not just mood (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). This lines up with what German-Molina et al. (2025) and Fong Yan et al. (2024) already found about dance supporting emotional regulation, but what this study adds is what that feels like from the inside.

The sense of refuge described here went further than what Kelly and Leventhal (2021) found around dance and isolation, it wasn't just for crisis moments; it ran through everyday life. This also echoes Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001): autonomy through honest expression, competence through growth, connection through community, much like what Quested and Duda (2011, 2021) found comparing different training environments.

Dance as Identity, Purpose and Meaning

Dance had become so tangled up with who participants were that separating "the dancer" from "the person" barely made sense anymore which fits Ryff's (1989) emphasis on purpose and self-acceptance. Worth noting: a lot of that purpose came from helping others rather than personal achievement. Teaching and mentoring mattered just as much as participants' own progress, sometimes more. That pushes the existing literature somewhere useful, suggesting wellbeing isn't only built through what dancers accomplish but through what they give back — something Dwarika and Haraldsen (2023) and Yu et al. (2025) both flagged as missing from a field too focused on performance and risk.

The Embodied Self

Participants described emotion as something their bodies handled directly, often before conscious thought had even caught up which pushes back against the old idea that the mind processes feeling while the body just follows orders. This fits the biopsychosocial thinking covered earlier, and lines up with Chappell et al.'s (2021) point that movement is its own way of understanding, separate from language. It also connects to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) idea of flow nobody used that word, but the total absorption they described fits it closely. What this adds is that dance's psychological value doesn't come from exercise alone. It comes from the relationship dancers build with their own moving bodies.

Vulnerability, Pressure and Emotional Cost

Dance asked a lot of participants, body image struggles, burnout, money pressure, but none of them treated that as proof dance was bad for them. This fits where wellbeing research has generally been heading: flourishing isn't the absence of struggle, it's the ability to keep going through it (Keyes, 2002; Ryff, 1989). It also reframes vulnerability in a way existing research hasn't quite managed. A lot of work on dancers leans heavily toward risk (Dwarika & Haraldsen, 2023; Yu et al., 2025), but here, vulnerability and wellbeing sat right next to each other, not on opposite sides.

Growth, Transformation and Peak Experiences

Years of dancing changed who these participants were, confidence, maturity, resilience, all built up slowly, alongside rare moments of total immersion during performance. This fits positive psychology's broader shift toward treating wellbeing as growth and meaning, not just an absence of distress (Ryff, 1989; Keyes, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2001), and fills a gap left by research too focused on hardship (Dwarika & Haraldsen, 2023; Yu et al., 2025). These accounts don't reduce to risk dance gave participants some of the most meaningful experiences of their lives.

5. Conclusion***Summary of Findings***

Dance worked as a psychological home. It shaped identity and purpose so deeply that dancer and person became hard to tell apart. It lived in the body as much as the mind feeling got recognised through movement, not just expressed afterward. It came with real cost, and yet that cost seemed to strengthen participants' commitment rather than weaken it. And over time, it produced real growth, marked by peak moments that reminded participants why it was all worth it. Wellbeing, for these dancers, was never one fixed thing. It kept getting built, again and again, through regulation, identity, the body, hardship, and growth.

5.1 Contributions

Most existing research on this topic relies on surveys measuring symptoms. This study instead tries to capture what wellbeing actually feels like, in dancers' own words. It resists reducing wellbeing to simple happiness, and it makes a case for taking the body seriously here, given how consistently participants described emotion as something physical rather than purely mental.

5.2 Practical Implications

For teachers and choreographers, this suggests training shapes emotional life, not just technique. Spaces that feel safe and respect dancers' autonomy could support both wellbeing and artistic growth. Schools might build wellbeing support directly into training rather than treating it separately. For therapists, recognising dance itself as a coping resource not something left at the studio door could open up understanding that talking alone doesn't always reach.

5.3 Limitations

Six participants suit the depth IPA is built for, but it limits how far these findings can be generalized. The range of backgrounds added richness, though the picture might look different for

dancers elsewhere. The data came from retrospective interviews, so memory and framing shaped what surfaced. And like any IPA study, this is an interpretation, not a neutral record.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

A longitudinal study could track wellbeing across a dancer's whole career. Comparing across styles and cultures could test whether these patterns hold more broadly, and testing actual dance-based wellbeing programmes could build stronger evidence for using dance therapeutically.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

For these participants, dance wasn't just art or exercise. It was a psychological home, a core part of who they were, a language for emotion lived through the body, a source of strength through hard times, and a path toward ongoing growth. Their stories make one thing clear: wellbeing isn't fixed, and it isn't the absence of struggle. It gets built continuously — through movement, through relationships, through working through whatever comes next. By centring dancers' own voices, this research hopefully adds something more human to how we understand what dance actually means to the people who live it.

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