

End of Year Synthesis:

At the beginning of the year, we introduced the idea that performance is not only physical or technical. Performance is also psychological.

Mental performance includes:

- attention
- emotional regulation
- confidence
- self-talk
- motivation
- adaptability
- self-awareness
- response to stress
- interpretation of feedback

Many dancers initially think mental performance means:

- “being mentally tough”
- “being confident”
- “thinking positively”

But over the course of the season, we discussed that mental performance is actually much broader and more flexible than that. Psychological growth often appears in more subtle ways:

- recovering faster after mistakes
- staying engaged despite discomfort
- noticing comparison without spiraling
- redirecting attention more quickly
- tolerating uncertainty
- becoming less reactive to external evaluation

Reflection

- “Compared to the beginning of the season, how are you mentally different as a dancer?”
- “What mental challenge still shows up for you most consistently?”

HOW THE CONCEPTS CONNECT

One misconception athletes and performers often develop is believing that mental skills exist separately from one another.

In reality, these systems constantly interact.

A dancer compares themselves to someone else →
which influences self-talk →
which shifts attention toward evaluation →
which changes confidence →
which impacts physical execution.

CONFIDENCE

Many dancers think confidence is: “feeling good about yourself.”

But confidence in sport psychology is better understood as:

- trust in your ability to respond effectively.

This distinction matters because feelings fluctuate.

A dancer can:

- feel nervous AND still perform effectively
- feel uncertain AND still execute skills
- feel disappointed AND still stay engaged

Reflection

- “When does your confidence tend to feel strongest?”
- “What tends to weaken your confidence most quickly?”
- “What helps you rebuild confidence after difficult experiences?”

SELF-TALK

Many performers assume mental strength means: “never thinking negatively.”

But cognitive science suggests something different.

Human brains naturally produce:

- doubt
- fear
- criticism
- prediction
- comparison

- evaluation

Trying to force thoughts away makes things worse!

This is sometimes called cognitive fusion (becoming overly attached to thoughts as literal truths)

The goal is NOT: “replace every negative thought”

The goal IS: “respond intentionally even when difficult thoughts are present.”

Psychological flexibility is one of the strongest predictors of performance consistency and emotional well-being.

Reflection

- “What kinds of thoughts tend to show up for you under pressure?”
- “Which thoughts tend to hook your attention most strongly?”
- “What helps you continue functioning effectively even when difficult thoughts are present?”

SOCIAL COMPARISON

Comparison is developmentally normal and psychologically natural.

Humans automatically evaluate themselves relative to others.

Comparison is not inherently harmful.

Sometimes comparison:

- provides information
- increases motivation
- identifies goals

However, excessive comparison often shifts attention away from:

- learning
- process
- bodily awareness
- artistic expression
- personal growth

Reflection

- “What situations trigger comparison most strongly for you?”
- “How does comparison affect your focus or emotions?”
- “What helps redirect your attention back to yourself?”

OPTIMAL ZONE OF FUNCTIONING

One of the biggest misconceptions in performance psychology is the belief that ideal performance always requires calmness.

Some dancers perform best:

- energized
- emotionally activated
- intense

Others perform best:

- grounded
- steady
- calm

The goal is not: “eliminate nerves”

The goal is: “identify the state where YOU perform most effectively.”

This is important because many dancers become afraid of normal physiological activation:

- elevated heart rate
- adrenaline
- butterflies
- tension

But physiological activation is not automatically harmful.

Interpretation matters.

EXTERNAL VS INTERNAL FEEDBACK

Dance environments often prioritize external evaluation:

- corrections
- applause

- scores
- placement
- casting
- teacher approval

External feedback can absolutely be useful.

However, performers who rely exclusively on external feedback often develop:

- unstable confidence
- fear of mistakes
- chronic self-monitoring
- emotional volatility

Internal feedback helps dancers evaluate:

- effort
- attention
- intentionality
- improvement

This does NOT mean external feedback should be ignored.

It means external feedback should not become the sole determinant of worth or progress.

Psychologically healthy performers can:

- receive feedback
- experience disappointment
- adjust behavior
- continue functioning effectively

without collapsing into self-criticism.

Reflection

- “What kinds of external feedback affect you most strongly?”
- “How do you personally know when you’ve danced well?”
- “What internal qualities do you want to value more moving forward?”

ATTENTION & FOCUS

Attention is one of the most important and trainable performance skills.

Under stress, attention naturally shifts toward:

- mistakes
- outcomes
- evaluation
- audience
- comparison
- fear

This is normal.

The problem is not distraction itself.

The problem is becoming unable to redirect attention effectively.

Skilled performers are not perfectly focused all the time.

They are simply better at:

- noticing attentional drift
- redirecting attention efficiently
- reconnecting to relevant cues

Reflection

- “What most commonly distracts your attention during class/rehearsal/performance/etc?”
- “What helps you refocus most effectively?”
- “What cues help keep you present?”

INTEGRATING THE SKILLS

One of the major goals of mental performance training is integration.

Psychological skills are most effective when performers can:

- combine them
- adapt them
- personalize them

Reflection

- “Which mental skill do you want to continue strengthening?”
- “What is one thing you want to carry forward into next season?”
- “What is one thing you want to leave behind?”
- “What kind of dancer do you want to continue becoming?”