



# Supporting Wellbeing in Dance: A Trauma- Informed Approach

This resource has been developed by Care to Dance for One Dance UK.

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## Who we are

Care to Dance is a charity, led by qualified social workers and dancers, that supports hundreds of care-experienced young people across England through trauma-informed dance communities. We give them a sense of belonging, freedom and connection, a space where they feel safe, supported and can develop relationships built on trust so they have people to turn to.

## What do we mean by trauma-informed practice?

Trauma-informed practice is an approach that recognises that many people carry experiences which shape how they feel, move, and relate to others. In dance, this means teaching with an awareness of emotional and physical safety, the nervous system, and the importance of trust, choice, and connection. Trauma-informed practice does not require teachers to know a dancer's personal story or to take on a therapeutic role. It is about how we hold our spaces, shape our teaching, and respond to what we see in the room.



## Why trauma-informed practice matters

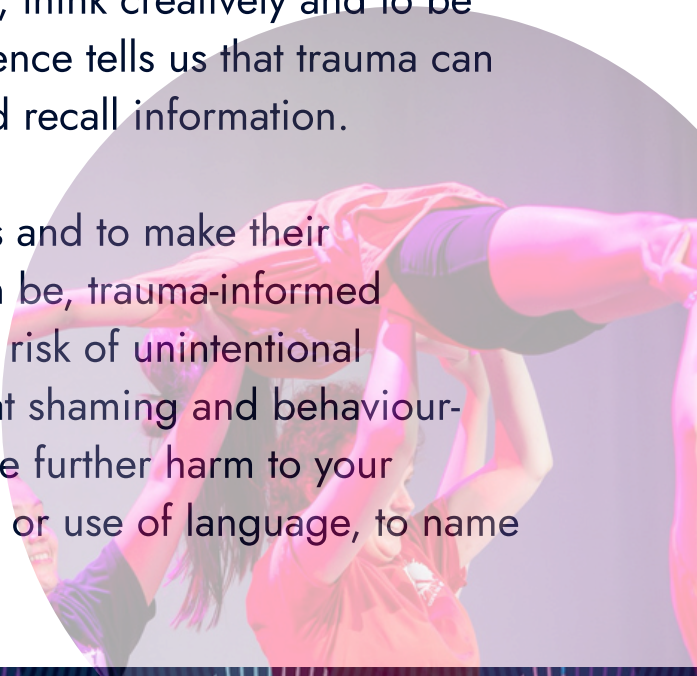


At Care to Dance, we know that trauma doesn't stay neatly contained in someone's past, it lives in the body and can shape how a person experiences the world, including the dance environment. With 1 in 3 people having experienced a traumatic event, it's likely that every dance teacher, whether knowingly or not, will work with young people and adults impacted by it. Trauma can deeply affect a person's sense of safety, belonging, and identity, all things that are essential for someone to be fully present and engaged in a dance class. Whether you're working with care-experienced dancers or simply want to create a more inclusive studio, this approach helps build trust, confidence and belonging.

Trauma-informed dance is about recognising that every dancer brings a story with them, and choosing to respond in ways that are empathetic, empowering, and rooted in care. It's a way to not only teach technique, but to help rebuild self-worth, agency, and joy through movement. Dance has the power to heal, and when teachers are trauma-informed, that healing can be transformative.

When someone doesn't feel safe, we know that they cannot fully engage in learning. This means that without a felt sense of safety, your learners might struggle to develop skills, learn choreography, think creatively and to be fully present in your class. Research and evidence tells us that trauma can significantly impact their ability to process and recall information.

Therefore, to get the most out of your learners and to make their experience in your class as enriching as it can be, trauma-informed practice is vital. Alongside this, it reduces the risk of unintentional retraumatisation. What we mean by this, is that shaming and behaviour-based strategies can trigger trauma, and cause further harm to your learners. This might be through tone of voice, or use of language, to name a few.



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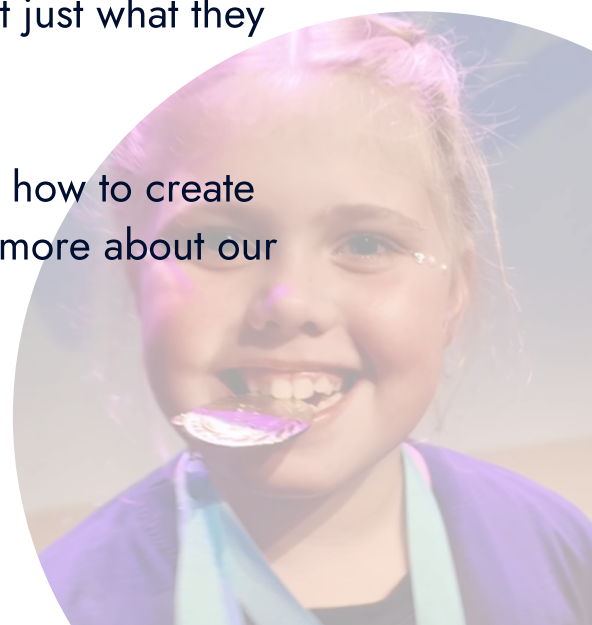


## How trauma impacts relationships

Trauma impacts the way we see and view the world, particularly relational and developmental trauma. When someone has experienced trauma in the context of relationships, such as child abuse, domestic abuse or neglect, this can result in their brain telling them that people are not safe and cannot be trusted. This can follow into adulthood even when the abuse occurred as a child. Relationships can be difficult for those who have experienced trauma; within dance they might be seen to always keep people at arm's length, be very clingy to others and the teacher; struggle with dynamics in the room or may need to dominate the class seeking control and agency.

It is important to notice this, as often such behaviours are seen to be socially different to the norm, causing them to be isolated and marginalised, when actually it is their brains and bodies doing everything they can to keep them safe. Slowly, you can support them to rewire their mental map of relationships through intentional micro-strategies. You can provide a space where everyone feels valued, that they matter for who they are, and that they belong in your dance class. This could be through small gestures such as praising them for who they are, not just what they achieve.

If you want to learn more about these strategies and how to create relational safety in your class, contact us to find out more about our training.



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## How trauma might show up in dance

When someone has experienced trauma, their body and brain are often on high-alert for new threats. This means that the smallest of triggers might make them feel like they are in a life or death situation and that their body needs to respond as if they were experiencing the traumatic event in this moment. This can trigger their body to be in survival mode where certain parts of their brain are activated in order to overcome the threat. There are many triggers that can cause this in a dance context, and it can be difficult to know when someone feels under threat without having an understanding of certain presentations and behaviours that might indicate someone has been triggered.

When someone's nervous system feels they are under threat, often they enter fight, flight, freeze and fawn mode. Fight mode is when their body prepares to overcome the threat; flight is preparing the body to run away from the threat; freeze is when the body needs to mentally escape the threat, fawn is when they need to befriend and appease the threat to avoid harm. See the diagram below for some examples of presentations that could indicate an individual does not feel safe in the environment. Please note, this is not an exhaustive list.

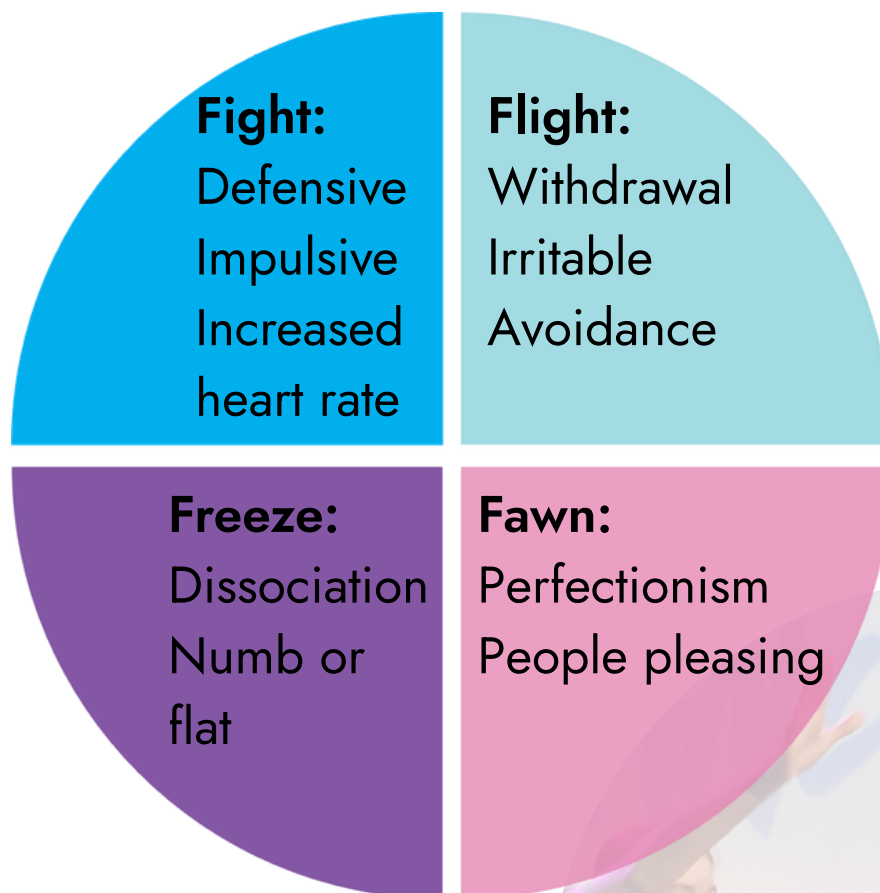


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## How trauma might show up in dance

Responses to stress and trauma are not one-size-fits-all. In dance classes, this might look like withdrawal, shutdown, or low confidence; heightened emotional responses to feedback; strong perfectionism or fear of getting things wrong; difficulty settling; or high energy and impulsivity. These behaviours are often protective responses when they do not yet feel psychologically, relationally and physically safe, rather than deliberate choices. A trauma-informed lens invites us to move from judgement to curiosity, asking what a dancer might need in that moment.



## Reflective considerations across a dance class



Part of class	Reflective considerations
Arrival	Noticing the energy in the room; offering a time to check-in.
Warm up	Use music and movement to support regulation; consider warming up in a circle.
Learning choreography and creative tasks	Using language that supports learning without shame; recognise that feedback can land differently for different dancers.
Creative tasks, including group tasks	Offering choice in how dancers engage; being mindful of tasks that may feel emotionally or physically exposing.
Cool down	Use this time to guide your learners through a cool down that brings in a somatic approach.
Ending the session	Ensure that you always mark an ending with your learners.

If you would like to find out more around how you might apply these considerations within your practice, alongside many more strategies to create an emotionally, relationally and physically safe, sign up to our trauma-informed CPD for dance teachers.

<https://www.caretodance.co.uk/cpd>

## Developing your trauma-informed practice



Trauma-informed practice is a journey. It involves learning, reflection, and ongoing adaptation, alongside caring for ourselves as practitioners. High-quality training can support dance teachers to deepen their understanding, build confidence, and develop practical approaches that align with their values and settings.

Care to Dance's Trauma-Informed Dance Practice CPD supports teachers to explore theory, reflect on their own practice, and develop strategies that can be applied ethically and confidently in dance spaces. The CPD is designed to strengthen inclusive practice while maintaining clear professional boundaries.

To find out more about our accredited trauma-informed training and how you can sign up, please visit our website or get in touch with the Care to Dance team. We would be happy to share upcoming dates, formats, and opportunities to start your trauma-informed journey!

