

Concerned for a friend – or yourself? TheSite.org can help

Teen to teen

It doesn't matter who you are or what position you are in, anyone can be affected by mental health problems. However, it is often people with stressful lives and high expectations placed on them, like dancers, who focus on food as a way to divert their attention away from these strains. There are often underlying problems connected with eating disorders. Traumatic events such as bereavement, bullying and family problems can act as a trigger. Whatever the cause, focus on the fact that you're not alone and that help is available.

Recovery is possible, but no one can force you to get help. First, you have to accept you have a problem. Start by talking to someone you trust, like a family member, a friend or another adult you get on with. The next step is to find the right help for you. Treatment tends to combine dietary control along with counselling to help sort underlying problems. Speak to your doctor and ask to be referred to a dietician or therapist. Speaking to other people who have been through similar issues can also help you to accept your problems and encourage you that it's possible to get better. Good online forums provide a safe, moderated environment to chat openly and get peer advice.

If you're concerned that a friend has an eating disorder, the most effective thing you can do is offer your support and encourage them to get help. Your friend may try to hide their condition. Here are signs to watch out for:

- Skipping meals or becoming obsessive about calorie content
- Sticking to very low-calorie foods
- Sudden loss or gain in weight
- Behaving defensively when asked about food consumption
- Wearing loose clothes to disguise body shape

Be patient: demanding to know everything or offering simplified solutions such as 'just start eating and you'll be fine' is not helpful. Instead offer continued support. Remind your friend of their good points and focus on personality rather than appearance. Low self-esteem is common in people with eating disorders, so let them know why they are special. Avoid blaming them or making them feel guilty. Instead, focus on acting as a role model by eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly. Do this openly without making it a big issue.

TheSite.org is run by online youth charity YouthNet, giving information and support. www.thesite.org



'Learning to dare'... Jeanine Stubergh, and opposite with researchers Barbro Renck and Erna Grönlund
Photos: Anders Porter

Anders Porter reports on the Swedish teenagers reclaiming their lives from depression

Walking back to happiness

As Jeanine Stubergh makes her way up the path that leads to the University College of Dance in Stockholm, there is a noticeable spring in her step. She skips up the stairs, her bouncing blond hair radiant under the mid-June Swedish sun. On reaching the summit, she warmly embraces Barbro Renck and then Erna Grönlund, after which all three women stand together smiling, the giddy threesome overflowing with infectious enthusiasm.

'Depression sits, in the muscles. Dance therapy treats body and soul at the same time'

While the scene is reminiscent of a family reunion – one where a young woman returns from a long voyage and is passionately greeted by her two favourite aunts – it is not. These three women are not related – but they have, however, been on a voyage together, one that began five years ago at the Child Guidance Clinic of Karlstad, Sweden.

Jeanine was 16 when she met Grönlund and Renck, a professor at the University College of Dance and a senior lecturer at Karlstad University, respectively. She was suffering from depression, and was living with a foster family. Coming from a broken home and having been sexually abused between the ages of 13 and 15 by her best male friend, the baggage that she carried with her rendered her withdrawn and insecure.

She had been referred to BUP (Barn-och Ungdoms-Psykiatri, responsible for psychiatric assistance for children and adolescents in Sweden) and had started traditional therapy, meeting with a therapist several times a week. Knowing that Jeanine was interested in dance and having heard that Grönlund and Renck were conducting a study on the effects of dance therapy on teenage girls with depression, the therapist suggested dance therapy to Jeanine. 'It sounded much better than just sitting there and talking,' Jeanine remembers, laughing, 'And besides, I danced a lot in my free time. I was in a dance group in Karlstad that met twice a week. I was ready and willing to give it a try.'

And so the journey began. Jeanine took part in dance therapy group sessions once a week for 10 weeks. She was one of three girls in her group, each with a unique background and family situation, and with differing degrees of depression.

How can dance therapy alleviate depression? 'Depression sits in the body, in the muscles,' maintains Grönlund. 'Dance therapy is a way to treat the body and the soul at the same time. These girls need to have an outlet for their anger and their sadness, and they need to be able to direct it at something, or at someone. Dance therapy provides that outlet.'

Grönlund and Renck's study involved 11 girls aged 13–17. Two of the girls were offered individual dance therapy; those remaining, including Jeanine, were divided into groups of three. While the subjects were suffering through various degrees of despair, all 11 had been diagnosed with depression in accordance to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

In addition to interviewing the girls before, immediately after and three years after the therapy period, pre- and post-therapy evaluation tests were also administered. Grönlund and Renck used four different quantitative scales to measure changes in the subjects' emotional landscapes. The Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire measured attention deficiencies and activity levels; Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence scale calculated coping capabilities; the Depression Self-Rating Scale evaluated degree of depression; and the Ouvinen-Birgerstam I Think I Am questionnaire assessed self-esteem levels. Comparisons of the test results show a noticeable trend towards improvement among the subjects.



'Most of the studies that have been done regarding dance therapy show the qualitative results only,' states Renck. 'It's harder to show quantitative results – difficult to get information, difficult to get subjects. We were lucky with this study to have 11 subjects to work with, and to be able to gather data before, during and after the sessions, which made statistical evaluations possible.'

The two researchers are no strangers to the potential benefits of dance therapy. Their research on its effects on boys with ADHD ('Wild child no more,' *dance gazette* Issue 1) has received international attention. 'The ADHD study is more widely known due to the fact that the mass media has given more time and consideration to boys with ADHD than it has to teenage girls with depression, despite the fact that depression in teenage girls is as widespread of a problem, if not more, than ADHD,' says Renck.

'We were looking for happiness – the lust for life that had been lost along the way'

Despite the very different general symptoms (the ADHD boys had trouble sitting still while the depressed girls had trouble getting going), dance therapy was shown to be an effective treatment method for both groups. 'It's about implementing different tactics to reach the same goal,' explains Grönlund, 'to teach the patient how to recognise physical and emotional energy levels and then set limits. The goal with the boys was to bring down the tempo so that they could experience and understand *calm*. But the girls were very passive, sometimes even apathetic, so the goal with them was to slowly get them to raise energy levels and bodily awareness.'

In addition to offering physical stimulus, the sessions for the girls, led by two dance therapists, were also aimed at building self-esteem, taking initiative and establishing trust. 'For various reasons, these girls were suffering with shame and had very low self esteem,' Grönlund continues. 'Our hope was to use dance therapy to establish self-worth and to minimise feelings of not being loved or not being good enough. Really, it's the happiness that we were looking for... the lust for life that had been lost along the way.'

While much of the therapy was planned and led by the therapists, the girls were often given control of the reins, each being asked to lead the others in a dance exercise. 'When we were given the responsibility of leading,' Jeanine recalls, 'we were pretty negative at first. We had no self-confidence, we were afraid to try. Once we got going, though, we realised that we did have something to give. When I watched the video afterwards, I realised that I took a lot of initiative during dance therapy, something I definitely did not do in my everyday life at the time.'

Jeanine's life back then was indeed tumultuous, but as the therapy progressed, her foster family began noticing improvements in her outlook. She became more and more aware of and talkative about her issues, including the sexual abuse she had endured. 'I know now that I don't need to be afraid of discussing what happened to me – it doesn't have to do with me, it wasn't my fault,' says Jeanine. 'I don't have to bear that weight and feel depressed, which is something that dance therapy helped me to realise.'

In 2006, Jeanine moved to Stockholm where she now works as a personal assistant. She also leads a crime victim support group for young girls who have gone through what she has triumphed over. Originally a member

of this support group, she took the initiative to obtain the training necessary to be its leader. 'I might not have dared to take over a support group if it weren't for dance therapy,' she says. 'I learned how to let go of negativity and take on challenges without being hindered by the fear of failure.'

'I don't need to be afraid of discussing what happened to me – it wasn't my fault'

Jeanine closes her eyes as she attempts to conjure up the exact wording of a favourite adage. And then it comes, in the words of Kierkegaard. 'To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily,' she says with a confident smile, Grönlund and Renck looking on. 'Not to dare is to lose oneself.'



Taking on challenges... Renck, Stubergh and Grönlund
Photo: Anders Porter

How do you remember your teenage years? Do you worry about the 'awkward age' in your students? And teenagers, can adults really understand and help?

dance gazette

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Joanna Nadin's hilarious new book captures teen angst. How does she remember that time?

Enjoy the ride

It is hard to believe that it's 25 years ago that I went through what Rachel goes through in *My So-Called Life*. It really does feel like yesterday. To be honest, my teenage years were pretty much like Rachel's – I had a bad wardrobe, bad hair, and a mother who banned Ribena, *Dallas* and *The Dukes of Hazzard*. I was hopeless with boys, hated the way I looked and found my family excruciatingly embarrassing. Luckily, I had good friends who helped me get through it, introduced me to hair products and let me sneak round their houses to watch banned TV programmes.

I do think girls deal with teenage years in a completely different way to boys. So much to do with being a girl is based on the way you look, rather than what you can do or who you are. And girls are their own worst critics. They judge themselves and each other more harshly than boys do. That's why friendship is so important – having someone, boy or girl, whom you can rely on, talk to. I know you're supposed to talk to your parents, but I never did, despite their encouragement. I needed to talk to someone who was going through the same thing at the same time. You feel emotion in such a raw way at that age. Love and hate are all-consuming, and the world seems to disappear in the face of them, putting you centre stage. It's terrifying, but exhilarating at the same time.

Without wanting to sound like a line from *High School Musical*, I'd say 'be happy with who you are.' I wasted so much time being angry that I couldn't dance like two of my friends, who went on to Urdang and London Contemporary. Or that I wasn't as pretty as another girl who ended up modelling for

Teen Vogue. Or that I would never get in to Cambridge. I know it's hard not to stress. But, when I finally accepted that I was never going to have straight hair or be a size 0 and that Goth clothes didn't suit me, I felt so much better! I'd also say, enjoy the ride, however bumpy. Because you will never get another like it.

I miss that time. Living round the corner from everyone I knew and loved, hanging out in their bedrooms, reading *Just Seventeen*, playing the Smiths late at night, wearing vintage clothes and thinking we were so amazing and different. There is a line in the film *Stand By Me*: 'I never had any friends later on in life like the ones I had when I was 12.' I still believe that. My best friends now were my best friends then. And we still play the Smiths, read magazines (*Vogue* now), wear vintage clothes and think we are amazing and different.

My So-Called Life: the tragically normal diary of Rachel Riley is published by Oxford (www.rachel-riley.com)