

The Hidden Risks of Holding Back During Exercise

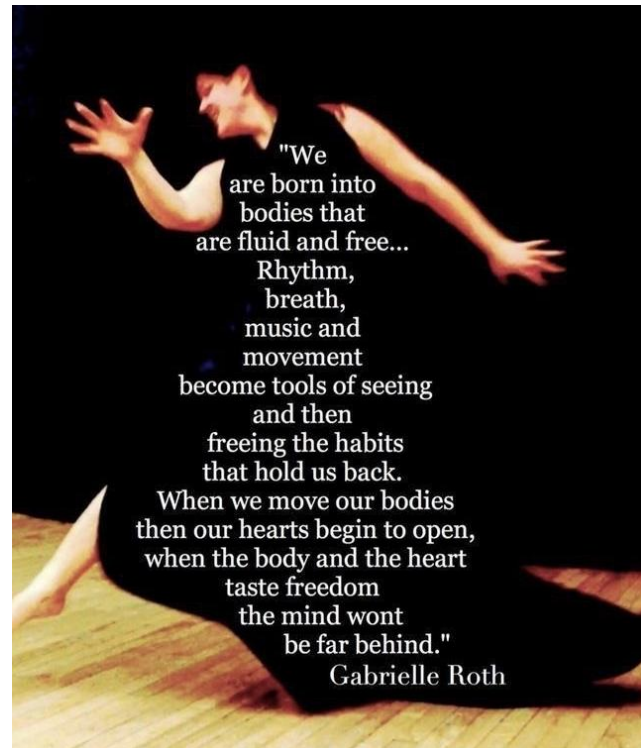
~ Alessandra Colfi, PhD, RYT-200, ZIN®

For a short time, I taught a Zumba class on Zoom, recording in a small studio where I had to keep my movements tight and stay within a limited space to remain visible on camera. After just a couple of weeks, I began experiencing aches all over, especially in my hips and knees. That discomfort ultimately led me to stop teaching the class after a couple of months.

Recently, during a Zumba class with patients, a conversation brought this issue back to mind. Many individuals who have sustained injuries, undergone surgery, experience fatigue, or live with chronic inflammatory conditions tend to hold back in their range of motion and effort. While it may seem like a protective measure, restricting movement too much can actually create more strain and discomfort over time. That's why I wanted to address the potential risks of holding back during exercise and how to move safely without compromising form and function.

When moving and especially dancing, it might seem like holding back slightly could help prevent injuries. However, avoiding full engagement can actually do more harm than good. Restricting effort too much can lead to improper movement patterns, increased muscle tension, and even greater strain on your muscles and joints.

In my low-impact Zumba classes, I tailor routines for newcomers, easing them into a progression of range of motion, intensity, and pace. I focus on engaging all muscles with good alignment to keep joints working properly. As students become more familiar with typical moves and songs, they start to “loosen up” and have more fun! This natural progression allows them to move safely, putting more intentional effort while executing a move, while enjoying the many benefits of dance-based exercise.



Why Holding Back Can Be Problematic

Muscle Imbalances

Avoiding full engagement of muscles during exercise can lead to imbalances, where some muscles remain underdeveloped while others take on excessive strain. According to the **American Council on Exercise (ACE)**, muscle imbalances can contribute to joint instability and increase the risk of injury over time (ACE, 2021).

Poor Form

Holding back may cause your body to compensate with improper mechanics, increasing stress on joints and ligaments.



Mayo Clinic emphasizes that poor form is a major cause of exercise-related injuries, particularly when lifting weights or performing high-impact movements (Mayo Clinic, 2023).

Increased Tension

Restricting movement can cause unnecessary muscle tension, making movements less fluid and more stressful on the body. The **National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM)** explains that excessive muscle tension can lead to dysfunctional movement patterns and even chronic pain (NASM, 2022).

What to Do Instead

- **Progressive Overload:** Instead of avoiding effort, gradually increase workout intensity over time. This principle, endorsed by **ACE**, helps the body adapt safely while minimizing strain (ACE, 2021).
- **Proper Form:** The **Mayo Clinic** recommends focusing on technique over intensity to engage the right muscles and reduce injury risk (Mayo Clinic, 2023).
- **Listen to Your Body:** Discomfort from muscle exertion is normal, but sharp pain is a warning sign. The **American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM)** advises stopping an exercise if pain occurs and reassessing form or intensity (ACSM, 2022).
- **Warm-Up and Cool-Down:** According to **Harvard Health Publishing**, dynamic stretching before exercise prepares muscles for movement, while static stretching afterward helps with recovery and flexibility (Harvard Health, 2023).

By fully engaging in your workouts with the right approach, you can maximize benefits while minimizing the risk of injury. Rather than holding back, focus on controlled, purposeful movements that strengthen your body in a balanced and safe way.

“If we could write a prescription for exercise, if we could bottle it in a pill, we’d be prescribing it for all of you. Physical activity can reduce death from breast cancer by about 40% in early-stage

patients. It has the most powerful effect of any lifestyle factor.” — Dr. Julie Gralow, Fred Hutch / SCCA / UW physician-scientist

“Those who exercise”, Dr. Gralow said, “have improved healing and recovery after surgery; reduced pain; decreased [lymphedema](#); higher energy levels and less depression, nausea and fatigue.

I found all of this to be true with my unofficial “[N of 1](#)” exercise study, particularly the part about reduced fatigue. I had none during 33 rounds of radiation and I know it was because I continued to bust a move during treatment. Other patients have found physical activity so beneficial they’ve gone on to start [exercise retreats](#) or [fitness fundraisers](#) for others dealing with cancer.

Exercise benefits everyone, and research proves it. It [decreases heart disease](#) and [osteoporosis](#) and helps to [prevent weight gain](#), a common driver of many diseases. And biologically, it’s a major cancer buster. Regular moderate physical activity [reduces estrogen](#), fuel for ER+ cancers, and helps to repair DNA damage, another prime cancer driver.

Simply put, exercise is medicine. It has the most powerful effect of any lifestyle factor.” ~ Gralow

And why specifically dance?

“Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is premised on an interconnected body and mind. It has known benefits for cancer patients’ physical and psychological health and quality of life.” (Ho, R.T., Lo, P.H., Luk, M.Y., 2016)

“Dance movement therapy (DMT) helps patients (1) cope with cancer, treatment, and physical symptoms; (2) improve mental well-being, attention, and appreciation for the self and body; (3) improve total functioning; (4) bridge back to a normal and better life; and (5) participate in shared positive experiences.

The findings reinforced the benefits of DMT while adding the new perspective that delivering DMT intervention throughout cancer treatment can have different and even additional benefits for patients.

In addition, the pleasure of dancing and the psychological and physical relief from dancing to music help patients cope with treatments. This could decrease treatment dropout rates when administered in clinical settings.” (Ho et al., 2016).

Seeing participants in my 10+ years of teaching low-impact Zumba beaming with smiles, clapping, giggling, focusing to learn new routines, and sharing friendships has been pure joy; through their dedicated practice many patients continue to experience many health benefits and don’t like it when they have to miss a class! See you on the dance floor 😊.

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