

firstperson



WENDY WHELAN: INSTAGRAMMING THROUGH INJURY



While many dancers hide their injuries, New York City Ballet star Wendy Whelan writes about how she took ownership of hers by sharing her recovery on social media.

Denial, confusion and frustration are the words that come to mind when I recall the months I spent trying to figure out how a minor slip in ballet class could have ignited such a physical retaliation within my body. I still wonder: If I'd been standing in a less slippery part of the studio, or if I hadn't tried to explore the teacher's correction, maybe I wouldn't have injured my hip and been forced to endure such a lengthy return to normal.

The emotional challenge of dealing with a mysterious injury is often as painful as the physical aspect. When I consider why I turned to social media during my recovery, I think about how very lonely it can be when your vocation has suddenly been crossed off your "to do" list. You are driven out of your practice, and feel lost without answers. My friends were dancing all day and night, and all I wanted to do was be there with them.

I tried everything to help the pain: acupuncture, yoga, cranial-sacral therapy, active release therapy. I had X-rays and MRIs. I had

injections into my hip. Eventually, one of my doctors discovered I had a complex labral tear. I was told that torn labrums were common among dancers, and that many of my friends who had tears were dancing beautifully, without a lot of pain. But after months of failed attempts at finding relief, I was forced to realize that my tear required surgery. At the recommendations of my physical therapist and orthopedist, I put myself into the hands of Dr. Marc Philippon, the renowned hip surgeon at the Steadman Clinic in Vail, Colorado. Dr. Philippon told me he would clean up the tear, as well as the debris floating in my hip that had accumulated as a result, and he would also shave down impingements along the bone that had developed over my lengthy dance career.

Since I'd never had surgery before, I began using Facebook as a research tool. I reached out to some friends who'd had

the surgery, and through them I was connected with other dancers who told me their stories. I wanted to understand as best as I could from a dancer's perspective what I was looking at: what their symptoms had been, how long the recovery took, if they had any complications from the surgery, if they felt they'd made a full recovery. I learned that my surgery would require a four- to six-month recovery period—and a tremendous amount of patience. I scheduled it for late August, a week after the premiere of my new duet project, *Restless Creature*, which meant I had to clear my calendar of any *Nutcracker* gigs or outside engagements, and miss New York City Ballet's four-week fall season.

While I was in Colorado for surgery, I posted photos of my experience on Facebook and Instagram for my family and friends to see. Since I'd never had surgery, I took a picture

1. #sothishappenedtoday
2. #4hourslater #newlabrum #SOHAPPY
3. #andshesoff #alreadywalking #onestepinfrontoftheother #slowlybutsurely
4. #progress #transverseabdominal #corestrength #narrowing
5. Finally not afraid of me anymore #curiouscat #charleyrose
6. Question of the day... #willthelegswalk after #56daysoncrutches
7. #lookma #passe #nohelpnecessary #progress #nextphaseturnout



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Each image became a statement of where I had been, and the positive direction in which I was heading.

Whelan at lunch with Marcelo Gomes, who was also injured: #brokebutnotbroken



of my hospital wristband to prove that I hadn't chickened out. One of the nurses took a picture of my first steps on crutches. A friend took a picture during the operation. I wanted to show that I wasn't afraid anymore, that I was now on the upswing—I had finally begun to heal.

I felt so proud of every new accomplishment: riding a stationary bike, learning to walk with my crutches, gently stretching in ways I couldn't possibly do before the surgery. The little things became cause for celebration, and I shared them all. I focused my posts on all the good that was finally happening, because to me it felt miraculous.

Through my photos and updates, I took ownership of the process and the progress of my recovery. Each image became a statement of where I had been and the positive direction in which I was heading. It became my healing diary. I watched my bruising subside and my scars heal, and I could take pride in my own regeneration. To be able to see my musculature and pointed toes was comforting; it showed me that even though I was on crutches, there was still a dancer living inside of me. The first time I tried passé was a particular milestone, and I wanted a photo to keep as a reminder that my hip joint was beginning to open up again.

Only later did I absorb the fact that I had a much larger audience. My nearly 6,000 followers on Instagram were also

sharing in my healing process—and commenting on it. My posts were hitting close to home for some of them. In comments, young dancers wrote that they'd found out they had labral tears and asked for advice; other dancers had recently gone through the surgery themselves and offered me their wisdom and good wishes. One follower even commented that

watching me work through a lengthy recovery was inspiring “and represents the best of what social media has to offer.”

It was a virtual melting pot of well wishes, and although I wasn't yet back in the studio, I was invigorated to receive such supportive words from total strangers. I have always found that good energy feeds upon itself and magnifies and grows and generates more of the same, and I could feel the power of that “good” developing not only within my photo feed, but within my own healing body as well.

I look forward to the day when I am back to dancing and don't have quite as much time for social media. But for now, I am grateful for the outpouring of warmth, creativity, humor and support that has fueled me over such an emotionally and physically challenging time. ■

Wendy Whelan, a principal at New York City Ballet, will be back on stage next month in her freelance project, Restless Creature, and will appear in NYCB's spring season.