

ASK DIANE 12-09-2008 “My best student has become an alcoholic. . .”

Diane Jarmolow is the founder and director Ballroom Dance Teachers College, the first comprehensive vocational training program for ballroom dance teachers in the country. She is the former owner of the Metronome Ballroom in San Francisco and is widely regarded as the nation’s foremost expert on ballroom dance teacher training. She has trained hundreds of dance teachers including United States and world champions. She consults regularly at ballrooms across the country and around the world on a variety of issues concerning teacher training and teacher support at all stages of a teacher’s professional career.

Ask Diane is a regular advice column in which Diane will offer solutions for common problems and challenges confronting ballroom dance teachers working in the industry today.

This month Diane discusses how a teacher should deal with a student whose dancing is compromised by a burgeoning drinking problem.

Dear Diane,

I’m afraid my best student is becoming an alcoholic and I don’t know what to do.

In the past few months, “Dan” has started coming to lessons disheveled and unfocused. He seems uncharacteristically clumsy and I often smell alcohol on his breath. Sometimes he slurs his words and twice he failed to show up at all. I am terrified that he’ll get in a car accident. I find myself making up excuses to call him in between lessons just to be sure he’s all right.

I’ve known Dan for five years and he has always been kind, respectful, responsible, and hard working. I’m sure something must have happened in his personal life but I don’t feel it’s really my business. I’m very careful to maintain strict boundaries between my students and myself, but I wonder if I’m enabling his destructive behavior by pretending that everything is fine.

And, to be honest, I’m afraid to lose him as a student. Dan takes four lessons a week and pays for a year in advance. The economy is very bad in our area and I’m scared I won’t be able to fill his lesson slots. I’ve already lost several students due to financial issues.

I feel awful about what’s happened to my student and can’t figure out how to deal with this problem without making everything worse.

Sincerely,

Ruth in New Hampshire

Dear Ruth,

Thank you so much for this tough question.

This is quite a problem. Your student is on a downhill course that is making it impossible for you to continue professionally as his dance teacher. Worse, his driving while under the influence is placing both himself and others at deadly risk.

In this situation, it is your professional responsibility to confront your student. There are times a dance teacher can and should let a student's behavior slide, but this is not one of them. My rule of thumb is this: is the student's behavior profoundly compromising your ability to teach the lesson? If the answer is yes, as it clearly is here, it is irresponsible and dangerous for you to continue your lessons as if nothing were happening.

There are standards of conduct that both teacher and student must adhere to in a professional contract. Both student and teacher agree to be on time, to be dressed appropriately, to focus on the lesson, and to communicate with each other in a courteous and direct manner. I often find it helpful to spell out these expectations in advance and have each party agree to them.

It is an absolute violation of this professional contract for either party to come to the lesson drunk. You should never disrespect your own professional abilities by pretending to teach a student who is too incapacitated to learn.

The next time Dan arrives at your lesson drunk, I suggest that you stop the lesson and take Dan to a private place to talk. Be clear about your intentions for this conversation before Dan even arrives for his lesson.

1. You intend to make it clear that you respect and value him as a student and are proud of what he's accomplished in the five years you've been working together.
2. You intend to communicate in a non-judgmental way your observation that he has been drinking quite a bit before coming to his lessons.
3. You intend to communicate to Dan that you cannot be an effective dance teacher when he comes to his lessons inebriated.

4. You intend to state clearly that you will not teach Dan when he is too intoxicated to learn.
5. You intend to state clearly and warmly that you welcome the opportunity to teach him when he is sober, and you look forward to working with him again as you did before.

Remember that you are not Dan's therapist, AA sponsor, or priest. It is not your job to help Dan stop drinking, nor is it your job to counsel him about whatever personal crisis precipitated this downfall.

You will do Dan the greatest service by maintaining your professional boundaries and insisting he live up to his end of your professional contract despite his personal difficulties. By insisting on a code of professional conduct, you will support Dan in setting higher standards for himself.

I understand that this is risky for you in these times of financial uncertainty. There is a chance you could lose Dan as a student. But it would be far worse for you to lose your self-respect and professional standards by tacitly sanctioning Dan's dangerous behavior.

This conversation will take both courage and compassion on your part, Ruth, and I know you are up to the task. Good luck, and let me know if I can be of any help in the future.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Diane Jarmolow welcomes your teaching questions. Feel free to contact her by email at diane@teachballroomdancing.com. For more information about teacher training, support, and professional certification, visit Diane's web site at www.teachballroomdancing.com.