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Ballerina Isabella Boylston on Putting Pressure on Herself and Dining Solo

By **Isabella Boylston as told to Kathleen Hou**

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Isabella Boylston actively tries to find joy in her work. Photo: TIMOTHY A. CLARY/AFP/Getty Images

[Isabella Boylston](#) began dancing when she was 3 years old. After a stint in the corps de ballet, Boylston achieved the Center Stage dream when she became a principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre in 2014. This summer, she makes her debut in the role of Juliet in Sir Kenneth MacMillan's Romeo and Juliet. She talks to the Cut about approaching work with joy, the adrenaline of performing, and how she takes care of her body as a professional athlete.

How I start my morning: I try to wake up as late as possible, so that's around 9 a.m. or a little before. I'm really greedy about my sleep, especially if I have a show the night before. Often I won't get done until 2, and I have so much adrenaline, it's hard to sleep.

Then I'll make an iced coffee and add coconut milk. If I don't have anything, I'll run to get coffee around the corner. If I'm a little ahead of schedule, I'll order oatmeal and eat at the bar. On the morning of a show, my preferred show-day breakfast is an egg or bacon, egg and cheese. Although apparently [bacon is the devil now](#), so I try not to eat bacon anymore.

I start every day with ballet class. The point of class is to warm up and focus on improving your technique. For me, I find class is a meditation. Your mind is so in your body. You have to be so focused on your body and it takes you out of real life. After class, I spend the rest of day rehearsing. If I have a show, I'll rehearse, rest, warm up for the show, put makeup on, and then go out on stage.

How I sweat: My schedule is so intense I cannot imagine going to the gym and working out. With rehearsal and class, I could be dancing for up to 9 hours a day. That's not typical. A more typical day is going from 10 to 7, with several breaks. If I have a performance with three acts like *Swan Lake*, I will try to minimize my rehearsal to save all my energy to get through it. When I was in the corps de ballet, I would have all my corps, rehearse, and then do a three-act ballet at night. That was probably the most physically demanding part in my career.

But rehearsal is enough to stay in shape and be in peak condition, so I actually don't do a ton of cross-training. Some do. A lot of men go to the gym and lift weights, which is important for them because they have to do partnering. And whenever I have time to take vacation, I like going places where I can hike and be outdoors. But I would never consider taking a hike if I had a show that day.

What wellness means to me: The foundation is just health. If you don't have that, you don't have anything to build on. For me, that's sleeping nine hours a night, eating a well-balanced diet. Also, it's important to be at peace with yourself. Being a dancer is really competitive. You're always striving to improve and be better than the day before. It's also important to have a level of self-acceptance: This is me. This is what I'm working with. I have to do the best with what I have. Everyone has a different body type and strengths as a dancer. Accept what those are, and improve what you can. You need to find that balance of knowing what you need to work on and not beating yourself up for those things.

How has wellness changed for me: I'm more conscious of it over time. I take better care of my body versus when I was 20. I used to eat anything. Now I try to eat free-range organic, and fruits and vegetables. It's the same thing with my beauty routine. Now, pretty much all of the products are natural and organic. I started making my own deodorant.

I think we all feel the pressure. For me, it was self-imposed. I had this ideal in my mind. As I've gotten more mature, it's easier for me to accept myself, and recognize my qualities as well as things I need to work on. I was 17 when I moved to NYC, and 19 when I joined the main company. It was a lot of pressure. But you find your way, and you have great examples to follow. ABT is a very tight community, with family within it. There are people taking care of each other. It's a misconception to assume that all dancers are eating-disorder-ridden and having mental breakdowns all the time.

On eating: A lot of people ask me, "Do you have to watch what you eat?" I've been really lucky. It's so far seems like [I can eat almost anything](#) that I want. Maybe when I turn 30 that will all change. I eat a lot of pasta and fruits, vegetables, and chicken. The only thing I don't eat is sugar. It dehydrates my muscles and I don't crave it. I find that the more you eat it, the more you crave it. But I'm not crazy. I'll have ice cream if I want it. I don't eat sugar on a daily basis.

Ballet is an aesthetic art form, so there is a certain amount of pressure when it comes to appearance. But the other thing people forget about is that we are professional athletes and work out constantly. You have to treat your body as if you were a professional athlete, and that includes eating enough and eating well. It's not really sustainable if you don't take care of yourself. You wouldn't be able to keep up with the demands.

How I eat when I'm alone: I don't really cook. One of my New Year's resolutions is to learn how to cook. I love going out to dinner when I'm alone. I have no problem getting a table for one and ordering a glass and sitting at the bar. A lot of times when I'm doing a guest engagement and by myself in a foreign country, I'll do that. I still enjoy having the solo adventure. It's so fun!

On pain: My relationship to pain is obviously a lot different than most people, as a ballerina. Dancers do have a really high pain tolerance. I have pain every single day. I've been lucky. I haven't had too many debilitating injuries. I sprained my ankle pretty badly in a

performance and was out for a couple of months. I've had tons of little things and danced through it, and had to deal with. But all dancers do it. We just don't know when to stop. We do have a really good support system with physical therapy and massage therapy. ABT doesn't encourage you to push through injuries.

The reality is that ballet is hard on the body. It's just like any competitive thing at a high level: You will have injuries. But I definitely don't ignore the pain. I figure out the source of it. When I have that pain, it forces me to work more intelligently. I never endanger my body. I can tell the difference between something I can work through and something that is detrimental to me.

The great thing about performing is that all the adrenaline takes the pain away. I never feel pain in a performance. The next day that I'm like, *Owww*.

My wellness struggle: For me, it's probably not so much a physical one. It's more about trying to not be too hard on myself in my work. We all love what we do and take it really seriously. You judge yourself pretty harshly.

I make a conscious effort to approach my work with joy. It took me a while to not take it personally if someone gave me a correction. I used to internalize it as, *You're not mature enough, you're not ready*. Whereas now, I'm more able to hear the correction for what it is. I'm more like, *I'm going to try that and see if that works*.

My wellness advice is: It's paramount to take care of your health. Eat well, sleep, and exercise. Everyone is so different and you have to find what works for you.

This interview has been condensed and edited.