

The Cost of Connection: Performative Spirituality in the UK Ecstatic Dance Community

When I first stepped onto the polished wooden floor of an Ecstatic Dance space in London, I felt a wave of relief. Here was a room full of people moving without instruction, eyes closed, hands reaching for something unseen. No one was telling me to smile. No one was selling me a course. It felt raw, honest, and necessary. Over the months that followed, I attended sessions in Bristol, Manchester, and Brighton. Each space promised freedom, consent, and a temporary escape from the structures that govern our everyday lives. But as I became more embedded in the UK community, I noticed something troubling beneath the surface. The same spaces that championed authenticity often harboured dynamics of informal power, spiritual bypass, and a troubling lack of accountability. What I encountered was not always healing. Sometimes it was a carefully managed performance.

When the Dance Becomes a Stage

Ecstatic Dance, at its best, offers a rare opportunity for collective healing. Participants are invited to move as they wish, to drop the social mask and connect with their bodies in a non-judgmental environment. Facilitators guide the container with music and occasional verbal prompts, but the emphasis is on personal experience, not instruction. This model can be genuinely transformative. It can also, however, create a vacuum of accountability where charismatic individuals accumulate informal power without the checks and balances found in more structured organisations.

I remember a workshop in a community hall in South London. The facilitator, a well-known figure in the scene, opened the circle with a long monologue about vulnerability and surrender. He spoke of his own trauma and his journey through the wellness industry. People nodded, some wept. By the end of the weekend, several participants had signed up for his private coaching. I later heard from two women who felt pressured into sharing intimate details of their mental health struggles during closed sessions. When they tried to set boundaries, they were told they were "blocked" or "not ready to heal." This is where the language of spirituality becomes a weapon. The facilitator used the rhetoric of self-help and authenticity to shut down dissent, framing his own authority as a necessary guide. This is a classic example of spiritual bypass dressed up as enlightenment.

The UK community is not unique in this, but its relatively small size amplifies the effect. Everyone knows everyone. Speaking out against a popular guru or a beloved facilitator can mean losing your social circle, your support network, even your access to the dance floor itself. The informal power structures that emerge in these spaces are rarely discussed openly. They

are felt, but not named. And when you try to name them, you are often met with accusations of being "too analytical" or "not trusting the process."

The Roots of Performative Spirituality

[Performative spirituality](#) is a term that describes the use of spiritual language and practices to signal virtue, status, or depth without genuine commitment to the ethical and relational work those practices demand. In the context of the Ecstatic Dance scene, it manifests as a public display of openness, consent, and community standards that is not matched by private behaviour. I have seen facilitators preach radical vulnerability while gossiping about participants behind their backs. I have watched community leaders invoke concepts like "non-attachment" to avoid taking responsibility for harmful actions. The gap between the stage and the backstage is wide, and it damages trust.

One of the most damaging consequences of this dynamic is the effect on mental health. Participants come to these spaces seeking healing, often carrying trauma from previous relationships, institutions, or spiritual communities. They are encouraged to be vulnerable, to open up, to trust. When that trust is betrayed - by a facilitator who breaks confidentiality, by a community that protects a predator, by a culture that values positivity over accountability - the harm can be profound. I have spoken with people who experienced anxiety, depression, and even retraumatisation after their experiences in dance communities. They felt gaslit by the very language of healing that had drawn them in.

The wellness industry, of which Ecstatic Dance is a part, profits from this cycle. The spiritual marketplace offers endless workshops, retreats, and trainings, each promising deeper connection and personal transformation. But without strong ethics and clear accountability structures, these spaces can become breeding grounds for exploitation. The facilitator becomes a guru, the participant becomes a follower, and the community becomes a captive audience. Vulnerability, which should be a doorway to growth, becomes a tool of control.

Authenticity Versus Accountability

Authenticity is a core value in the UK Ecstatic Dance community. People speak of being "real," "raw," and "unfiltered." But authenticity without accountability is hollow. It allows people to claim their intentions are pure while ignoring the impact of their actions. I recall a conversation with a long-time dancer who said, "We talk so much about consent in the opening circle, but we never talk about what happens when someone violates it." She was referring to a well-known facilitator who had ignored a participant's request to stop touching her during a dance. When she reported it, the response was a gentle reminder that "we are all learning." No investigation. No apology. No change in behaviour.



THINK

ECSTATIC DANCE UK

PERFORMATIVE SPIRITUALITY, INFORMAL
POWER AND **THE COST OF SPEAKING UP**

FILIPBASTOS.COM

This is where community standards need to shift. It is not enough to have a list of agreements posted on the wall. Those agreements must be enforced. There must be clear pathways for reporting harm, independent of the people who hold informal power. And there must be a willingness to hold even the most beloved gurus and facilitators accountable. The UK community has seen some progress in this area, with groups like the Ecstatic Dance UK network developing codes of conduct and training programmes. But these efforts are still young, and they face resistance from those who benefit from the current lack of oversight.

Performative spirituality thrives in environments where the appearance of ethical practice is more important than the practice itself. A facilitator might open every session with a reminder about consent, but if they never address the power dynamics in their own relationships with participants, that reminder is a performance. Real ethics require constant reflection, a willingness to be wrong, and a commitment to repair when harm occurs. That kind of work is not glamorous. It does not sell tickets. But it is essential for collective healing.

What Healing Actually Requires

Healing is not a weekend workshop. It is not a playlist or a particular style of movement. It is a long, often messy process that requires support, consistency, and safety. The Ecstatic Dance community has the potential to be a powerful container for that process, but only if it takes its own ethics seriously. That means moving beyond the language of "holding space" and into the practical work of building accountable institutions.

Some of the most effective community standards I have seen come from groups that have learned from past harm. They have created clear policies on touch, photography, and the role of facilitators. They have established independent complaint processes and require regular training for anyone in a leadership position. They also encourage participants to speak up when something feels off, and they take those reports seriously. These groups understand that vulnerability is a gift, not a right. It must be earned and protected.

For anyone involved in the UK Ecstatic Dance scene, I encourage you to ask hard questions. Who holds power in your community? How are decisions made? What happens when someone is harmed? If the answers are vague or defensive, that is a red flag. Real healing communities welcome scrutiny. They do not hide behind spiritual language or charismatic leaders.

Ultimately, the choice is ours. We can continue to participate in a culture of performative spirituality, where the appearance of healing masks the reality of harm. Or we can demand more. We can insist on accountability, on transparent power structures, on ethics that are lived, not just spoken. The dance floor can be a place of liberation. But liberation requires trust, and trust requires honesty. Let us stop performing and start building something real.