

A woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a green athletic top and leggings, is sitting on a black yoga mat on a wooden floor. She is holding her right knee with both hands, looking down at it. The background is a bright, slightly blurred indoor space with a potted plant and a window. The text "IT'S NOT YOUR MUSCLES HOLDING YOU BACK, IT'S YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM" is overlaid on the left side of the image in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

**IT'S NOT YOUR
MUSCLES
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SYSTEM**

COMMON GROUND DANCE

We have a self-sabotaging misconception about our muscles that tightness equals weakness. In dance classes, we often end up sacrificing safety for aesthetics and sustainable movement for perfect lines. At the core of this issue is a gap in body knowledge—something rarely taught in a way that’s clear, digestible, and useful to dancers.

Ever notice your heart rate spikes and your body tenses up when you hit a deep or unfamiliar stretch? The moment you push too far, your nervous system steps in, activating the **myotatic reflex** to keep you from going past your limits.

Here’s the truth: **muscle tightness doesn’t mean weakness**—it’s just your nervous system trying to protect you.

Meet the Reflex Running the Show

I’m always struck by our body’s ability to guide movement, telling us what’s safe without us even thinking.

This is the sole job of the myotatic reflex—the body’s built-in stretch reflex. It’s a built-in safety mechanism that contracts muscles when they lengthen too fast or too far. Think of it like a car’s seatbelt locking when you jerk forward.

The purpose? **To protect you from injury.**

Why You Need This Safety Net

As a dancer, this can be a frustrating phenomenon—*what do you mean I can’t get my splits because my nervous system is holding me back?*

1. **Achieving a full stretch involves more than just your nervous system.** Muscle length, joint structure, strength, and consistent practice all play a role. The myotatic reflex is only one piece of the puzzle, but it’s a critical one that often gets overlooked.
2. **This frustrating experience might have saved you from injury countless times.** That sudden resistance or “locking up” you feel isn’t your body sabotaging you—it’s actively preventing you from unnecessary harm.

But *how* does it protect you?

- **Overstretching:** The reflex causes the muscle to contract when it senses too much length too quickly, protecting tendons and ligaments from damage.
- **Tearing:** By tightening at the right moment, muscles reduce the risk of microscopic tears that accumulate over time.
- **Sudden injury:** It helps your body respond instantly to unexpected shifts in balance or movement, preventing acute injuries like sprains and dislocations.

Here's the hard truth: dancers, athletes, and movers need this reflex. It doesn't hinder you from reaching your flexibility goals; **it supports you in getting there safely**, guiding your body to move further without crossing its limits too quickly.

Why Stretching Feels Harder Than It Should

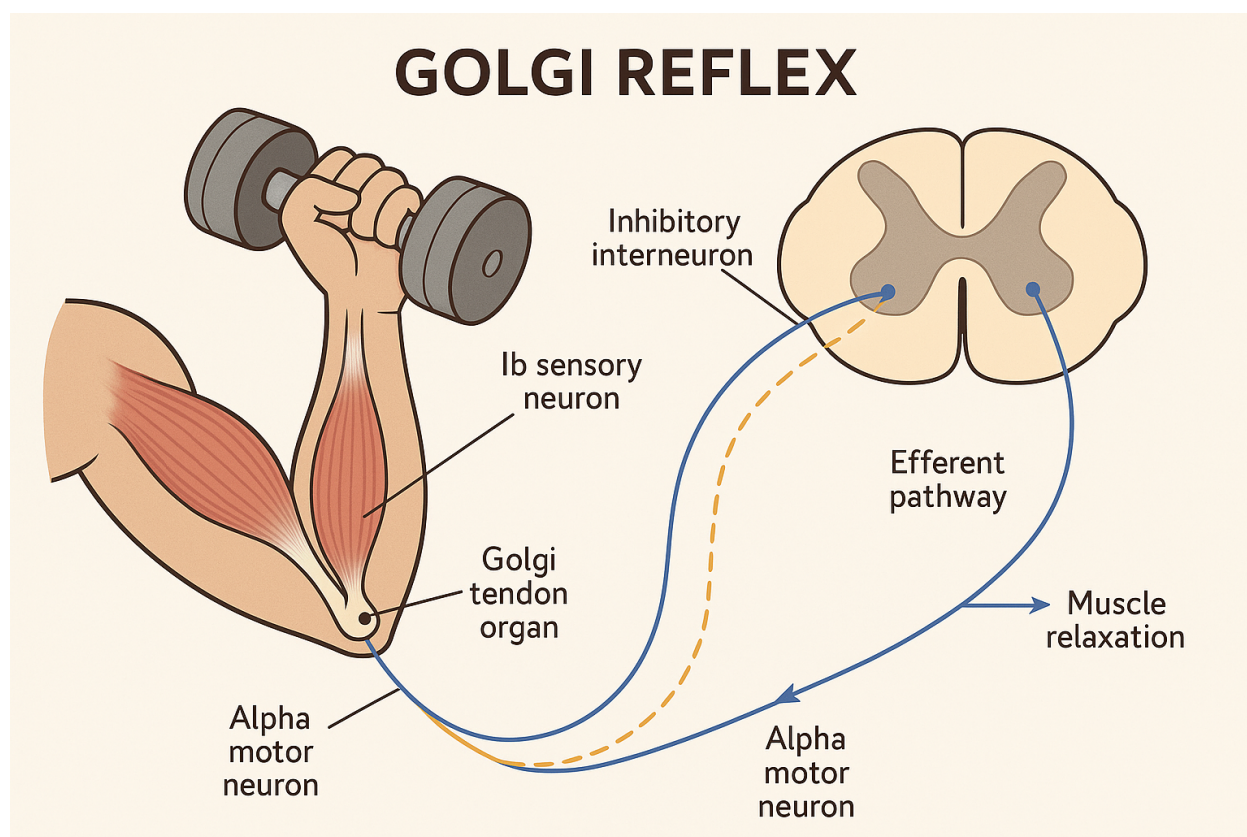
Stretching and mobility are two pillars for our daily lives, yet [more than half of the population](#) neglects them. When we finally do make time for them, our nervous system—unaccustomed to the new demand—often overreacts, making stretches feel harder and more frustrating.

A common frustration is feeling “tight,” even after lots of stretching—especially among men whose body composition consists of more muscle mass and, in turn, a more restricted range of motion.

But here's the paradox: the harder you push against that tightness, the more your body pushes back, locking you into the very limitation you're trying to escape.

How to Work With Your Nervous System

Your nervous system calls the shots. Instead of fighting against it, the key is to activate the [Golgi Tendon Organs \(GTOs\)](#)—tiny sensors in your tendons that help regulate muscle tension. Activating them signals to your body that it's safe to release and relax, giving you more range of motion without triggering that protective stretch reflex.



There are a few effective ways to let your system know a stretch is not a threat:

- **PNF Stretching (Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation):** A form of assisted stretching that involves contracting and then relaxing a muscle while stretching it, which helps train the nervous system to allow more length. This is best performed with a professional.
- **Isometric Contractions:** Holding a muscle contraction without movement before relaxing into a stretch can activate the GTOs and deepen mobility.
- **Static Stretching:** Holding a stretch at the end of the range of motion. While this isn't ideal for warming up—since it can temporarily decrease muscle power—it can be very effective as part of a cooldown to promote recovery and calm the nervous system.
- **Breathe:** This may sound intuitive, but intentional breathing in and out helps regulate your nervous system in high-anxiety situations. Slow exhales cue your nervous system that you're safe.

Strength, Mobility, and Art—All in One Place

Learning *why* your body moves the way it does is just as important as the movement itself. At Common Ground, we're not just about drilling steps or chasing lines—we're about educating dancers, building strength, mobility, and artistry in one place.

Through our **Common Ground Method**, you'll gain the tools to move smarter, prevent injury, and unlock your full potential. Everything we do is designed to give you more than a "Simon Says" dance class.

👉 Join us at Common Ground and discover how understanding your body can deepen your understanding of dance.