

Tips for Dancer on Anxiety

What do dancers need to know about anxiety?

Anxiety can be considered a normal and natural response to life’s challenges. Most dancers can recall at least one episode of performance anxiety. Anxiety is an interior cognitive reaction to an anticipated future event or situation that does not exist or is unlikely to exist. By recognizing the difference between pre-performance jitters, performance anxiety, and other anxiety disorders dancers are better able to understand and control anxiety. Every dancer should know when and how to respond to the more serious signs of anxiety.

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

General Anxiety Symptoms

- Racing pulse, heart palpitations
- Shortness of breath and dry mouth
- Blushing and mottled skin
- Nausea, vomiting, appetite disturbance
- Trembling, shaking, and muscle tension
- Dizziness
- Hot flashes, sweating or chills, clammy hands
- Difficulty with sleep
- Social withdrawal

Performance Only Symptoms

- Catastrophic and negative thinking
- Fear of forgetting
- Fear of criticism or disapproval
- Distractibility
- Irritability
- Procrastination
- Self-sabotage
- Emotional volatility
- Feeling out of control

What causes Anxiety?

Anxiety disorders are not the “fault” of the person experiencing them. These disorders are most likely a combination of biological and psychological factors. Biological/physical factors include genetic factors or familial factors and changes in brain chemicals. Psychological factors include the ways dancers learn to think about certain situations or cues, the fears they associate with events and the amount of control they believe they have over situations. Some childhood experiences can have an impact in adulthood reactions to events and shape the way adults deal with anxiety. Anxiety symptoms can be induced by medication and certain substances such as caffeine, alcohol, and drug use, as well as certain medical conditions.

What are types of anxiety related disorders?

Generalized Anxiety Disorder : excessive worry (apprehensive expectation) and anxiety lasting more than six months on most days.

Panic Attacks: can occur with out warning and are sudden feelings of terror. The physical symptoms predominate. It may include fear of losing control or going “crazy”, fear of dying, or fears of unreality and being detached from oneself. When a person avoids certain situations fearing a panic attack may take place this reaction is called Agoraphobia. There are Specific Phobias with dread and overwhelming anxiety when a feared object, situation or activity is present.

Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia) is a paralyzing feeling of self-consciousness about social situations and an intense fear of doing something wrong in front of others or of being observed. Performance only Social Anxiety Disorder commonly referred to as “stage fright” can be distressing and disabling condition that affects performers. At least half of all artists, regardless of age gender and talent or experience report problems associated with performance anxiety. There is a conflict between the need to display one’s artistry publicly and the fear of proving inadequate and suffering humiliation and rejection. It may be situation specific such as rehearsing with new choreographers, auditions, or opening nights.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder are disorders that may have a significant anxiety component but are not considered anxiety disorders.

What can be done about performance anxiety or anxiety disorders?

1. Good Preparation: Dancers need to prepare for a performance in every way possible.
2. Active Stress Management: Minimizing stresses, anticipating interruptions, positive self-talk can reduce anxiety.
3. Arousal Management : Meditation, Yoga, breathing training, Mindfulness, progressive muscle relaxation training, taught by an accredited provider who is registered with a professional organization.
4. Social Support and outlets; a hobby and social relationship can help to release muscle tension, distract oneself and remind oneself of what else is important in life. Dancers who develop positive social support systems have less performance anxiety. However, the extent to which a dancer shares the details of his or her anxiety symptoms is their own prerogative. Sharing with company management and staff may depend on many factors including the nature of the dancer's contract. The dancer has to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure carefully.
5. General Health and Wellness: Healthy nutrition, dietary supplements and good sleep hygiene. Lack of sleep is related to poor concentration, mistakes and injuries. Some physical illnesses such as thyroid conditions are associated with anxiety. Regular medical screening through company screening or with your own medical team is vital to a dancer's health. Dancers without a company physician or family physician should consult their local dance protection organization for advice on health services that understand the needs of dancers.
6. Medications: Prescribed medications may be recommended by health professionals to target the brain neurochemicals that are altered in anxiety states. B-blockers have been prescribed for use, successfully, in some artists such as musicians and actors. However, further research is suggested before recommending their use in dancers as these medications may interfere with muscle tension and performance.

References:

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Disclaimer

The information on traveling tips listed above are to help guide and inform the dancer and training staff while traveling, it is not meant to take the place of the advice of a medical professional. This information is provided by Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.

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