

Coping with Stress on Stage and in Life: The practice of mindfulness and self-compassion

With society's fast and forever-changing life style, health problems related to overbearing stress have exploded over the years. While stress is an unavoidable fact of life, dancers must also cope with the challenges of intense training and high demands, which may trigger anxiety and affect their ability to dance freely and safely. This paper will help you learn more about stress and gives suggestions for coping strategies.

What is stress?

Stress is an instinctive bodily response to a perceived threat to one's physical and/or psychological well-being, which may create the impression of being unable to cope correctly with a challenging situation (e.g. audition). Physical responses include increased heart rate and sweating; heightened level of energy, awareness and focus. Stress responses act like a warning signal that helps identify unmet needs and discomforts (i.e. thirst, fatigue, pain), helps set firm boundaries (i.e. saying "NO"), and restores balance, once one has dealt with the situation. Studies have shown that optimal amounts of stress are energizing and often heighten dancers' performance, even more so if they perceive stress as a positive reaction than an obstacle to control, and then act upon it.

However, when stress becomes prolonged or chronic, physical and psychological distress sets in. Dancers may experience one or more of the following warning signs that eventually lead to burnout.

- **Physical:** muscular pain or stiffness; frequent fatigue; loss of appetite; sudden weight changes; somatic ailments (i.e. headache, digestive pain); disturbed sleeping; frequent illness and injuries; slow recovery; changes in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate; menstrual irregularity.
- **Emotional:** excess anxiety, worry, guilt, nervousness; sudden panic attacks; decrease of motivation; frequent or excessive anger and frustration, hostility; feelings of depression/mood swings; crying often; social isolation; fear of competition; lower self-esteem and self-confidence; feeling overwhelmed; decrease of sexual desire/performance.
- **Mental:** decreased concentration and memory blanks (i.e. choreography); negative and/or rigid thinking excessive self-criticism; frequent mistakes and forgetfulness; impaired judgment; tendency to give up; lack of engagement; obsessive thought (i.e. ruminating over flaws).
- **Performance:** decrease in technical and/or artistic abilities; stress fractures; repeated injuries; mistakes while performing; obsessive behavior (i.e. overtraining).

Types of stressors and tips to cope with stress

Effective stress management starts by identifying and correcting our main sources of stress, called stressors. The following tools (*italics*) have shown to be helpful for artists and athletes in dealing with stressors.

1. Known and avoidable (related to personal attitudes or behaviors)

- Unconstructive life habits: incorrect eating; work/life imbalance; postponing action; being late all the time; lack of rest and recovery; poor social network; alcohol or drug abuse.
Instead, practise everyday self-care (body, mind and soul); place priority on your needs; do and think of other things than dance.
- Negative self-talk that create negative emotions and self-fulfilling prophecies (predicting failure):
 - Filtering: to focus only on the negative events despite our successes.
Instead, celebrate joys and small victories, and practise moments of gratitude every day
 - Personalizing: to view falsely every bad event as related to oneself.
Instead, look at the problem as if it were someone else's.
 - Catastrophizing: to blow disappointing situations out of proportion.
Instead, place the event in a larger time frame (e.g. in five years) and look at the big picture.
 - Polarizing: *all good/all bad* thinking; lack of mental flexibility, fixed view of self and life.
Instead, see yourself as a growing artist. Seek ways to improve and to be creative. Add the word YET to negative self-judgments (i.e. I haven't YET succeeded in doing this turn).
- Perfectionism: the excessive quest for perfection leads to obsession; critical self-talk and comparisons with others; dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression; poor social relations and a great need for approval.
Instead, pursue excellence (being and doing YOUR best); set clear and realistic goals as a dancer and a person; recall past successes to build self-confidence; accept mistakes, learn from them and go on dancing with joy!

2. Known and unavoidable (related to a predictable and chosen event, i.e. show, audition, exam)

- Performance anxiety: fear of not being up to par with artistic demands; anticipating catastrophies and personal failure during the performance; memory blanks, feelings overwhelmed; physical stress reactions (see above); at times, panic states.
- Lack of resilience: inability to relax, to stay focused on priorities and to concentrate under pressure; dealing badly with setbacks or the unexpected while performing (i.e. slippery floor); taking corrections negatively; feeling attacked by outside forces (i.e. bad luck or others).
- Lack of motivation or sense of purpose: feelings of emptiness or confusion about our artistic practice.
- Inter-personal factors: unhealthy competition between dancers; experiencing or witnessing situations of bullying, shaming, harassment and discrimination.

In dealing with known and unavoidable stress, start as early as possible with advance planning/goalsetting, analysis of the task and take action, broken down in baby steps (i.e. make travel arrangements, lodging and personal needs early). Have back-up plans for anything that might go wrong. Employ psychological skills that are useful to you; such as, breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, positive self talk and thought; journalling, visualization and imagery; and arousal management. Also, you may also need guidance from a trusted mentor.

3. Unknown and unavoidable (related to an unpredictable event)

- Unexpected losses and mourning: i.e. loss of a loved one, a pet, a safe place etc. *Participating in grief support groups; allowing yourself to cry; journalling.*
- Career disappointments: i.e. casting setbacks, injuries, unexpected pregnancy, hasty retirement. May lead to professional turning points and difficult decision-making (i.e. redefining life choices, priorities). *Trying to find meaning in your experiences, self-reflection (what can you do differently next time?), focus on improvement and on positive aspects.*

Coping with all three types of stressors requires adequate support from family, friends and trusted mentors. Professional help may be needed. Counselors may suggest psychotherapy and specialized techniques such as Mindfulness, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy. The practice of self-compassion is also very useful.

Mindfulness

Definition: The practice of a non-judgmental and moment-to-moment awareness toward our experience (bodily feelings, emotions, thoughts or activities). It develops an open-hearted and compassionate attitude about oneself and the world: taking things as they are and letting go, without striving for an end result.

Effects: 1. Promotes emotional balance, focus, engagement, mental flexibility and creative problem-solving. 2. Reduces overcritical self-talk that contributes to dancers' anxiety and unhappiness. 3. By learning to relax and let go, mindfulness enhances dancers' resilience and helps them achieve peak performances and flow states.

Mindful practice: Usually involves learning specialized breathing techniques, mental imagery, body scans (reviewing each body part and noticing one's sensations) and focused attention on oneself, in an accepting way. These practices are generally learned in group sessions over a number of weeks and are led by an accredited specialist.

Self-compassion

Definition: attitude of unconditional kindness and comfort toward oneself and others, as human beings who share a common humanity of being fallible and having to face challenging experiences. This self-kindness is viewed as an extension of mindfulness: being aware of and accepting one's experience as such, in a clear manner, without condemning or finding excuses.

Effects: 1. Promotes interpersonal connectedness and diminishes toxic competition between artists. 2. Strengthens personal growth by reducing anxiety (i.e. performance anxiety), obsessive thinking over flaws, enhances self-acceptance of one's qualities and limits. 3. By lowering their harsh self-criticism, energy becomes more available to complete dancers' work. 4. Helps dancers balance their goals and expectations with reality, and cope with injuries and setbacks.

Exercises: 1. Mindful activities such as deep breathing, body scans, relaxation and imagery. 2. Identify harsh self-judgments and replace them by compassionate and constructive thoughts (i.e. change the thought *my performance was totally awful* for *I will work on this move tomorrow*). 3. After a relaxation period, imagine a safe place in vivid detail and imagine meeting *The perfect nurturer* (for oneself).

Additional information

Breathe for iOS, <http://breatheapp.co/>

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<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Self-Compassion>

Disclaimer: *The information presented here is to help guide and inform the dancer and training staff, 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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