

Managing Anxiety: What do dancers need to know?

Anxiety can be considered a normal and natural response to life's challenges. Most dancers can recall having experienced at least one episode of anxiety in everyday life or during their dance practice. Anxiety is defined as a worrisome reaction to an anticipated future event or a situation that does not exist or is unlikely to exist. Anxiety disorders vary in types and degrees of intensity and are the most common mental illness in the U.S. affecting approximately 40 million adults per year.

Given the prevalence of anxiety and the high levels of stress dancers typically go through in their dance practice, artists should learn to recognize the difference between pre-performance jitters, performance anxiety, and other anxiety disorders, and know when and how to respond to the more serious signs of anxiety. The following paper aims at helping dancers better understand and cope with anxiety, in order to channel these states in a positive way.

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

1. General Anxiety Symptoms

What your body may experience:

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

What your mind may experience:

- Worrisome thoughts, anticipating disaster
- Concentration issues, difficulty focusing, memory blanks
- Excessive fears, self-doubt, fear of failure and/or social criticism

Social/behavioral Symptoms:

- Avoidance behaviors, social isolation
- Body-focused repetitive behaviors such as hair-pulling, nail-biting
- Compulsive behaviors such as overeating/undereating, substance abuse, excessive checking related to self-doubt, overuse of social media

2. Performance-Only Anxiety Symptoms

- Negative thinking, anticipating poor performance
- Fear of forgetting, distractibility
- Fear of criticism or disapproval
- Irritability, mood swings, feeling out of control
- Self-sabotage, procrastination

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety disorders are not the “fault” of the person experiencing them, but most likely result from a combination of biological and psychological factors. This explains why some people are born with anxious personality traits that affect the way they perceive and react to everyday situations, while others experience anxious states only when faced with a challenging situation.

Biological/physical factors include genetic or familial factors and changes in brain chemicals. Psychological factors include the ways dancers learn to think about certain situations or cues; fears they associate with events; and, the amount of control they believe they have over situations. In addition, traumatic or humiliating childhood experiences can have an impact on the way adults deal with anxiety. Anxiety symptoms can be brought on 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?

1. Generalized Anxiety Disorder: excessive worry and anxiety on most days, lasting more than six months

2. Panic Disorder: a sudden onset of severe anxiety and/or fear that involves marked physiological symptoms, such as increased heart rate, sweating, shaking, and shortness of breath. Someone suffering with Panic Disorder often experiences worry about having a panic attack in public and may avoid social situations as a result.

Due to the resemblance to a heart attack, the panicked dancer may experience an overwhelming fear of dying from heart failure and feel the need to consult a medical specialist. Given that panic symptoms mimic heart problems, this real concern must be ruled out by a medical examination.

3. Agoraphobia: involves anxiety and avoidance of public settings due to a fear of not being able to escape. Common examples include avoiding public transportation, enclosed spaces, or being in large crowds.

4. Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia): 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.

5. Performance-only Anxiety Disorder: a form of social anxiety disorder, commonly referred to as “stage fright”, that can be a distressing and disabling condition. Performance-only anxiety is defined as a fear of not being able to meet artistic challenges and events, such as dance exams, auditions, or shows. Regardless of age, gender, objective talent or level of experience, at least half of all performing artists report problems related to performance anxiety. Other dancers may only experience performance anxiety in specific situations, such as rehearsing with new choreographers, or dancing at opening nights. Anxious performers may feel torn between the need to display one’s artistry publicly and the fear of proving inadequate and suffering humiliation and rejection.

Research shows that a certain degree of “nervousness” or “jitters” prior to performance, provides a level of arousal that actually enhances artistic excellence. Usually, this fear will subside during or after a performance.

However, if the performer is perfectionistic, hyper-competitive, seeks social recognition, or is overly focused on end-results, excessive anxiety during a production may back-fire and trigger debilitating levels of stress that inhibit one's ability to dance.

7. Adjustment Disorders: Although it is not classified as an anxiety disorder, an adjustment disorder is characterized by an onset of anxiety symptoms stemming from an acute stressor. Common events in the dance world such as an injury, a contract renewal, a poor performance, or relationship issues, may trigger an adjustment disorder with anxiety symptoms.

8. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: These intense maladies may have a significant anxiety component but are not considered anxiety disorders.

What helps performance anxiety and anxiety disorders?

1. General health and wellness: Healthy nutrition, any dietary supplements recommended by a practitioner, and good sleep hygiene heighten energy and concentration, which reduce the risk of mistakes and injuries. Given that some physical illnesses such as thyroid conditions are associated with anxiety, regular medical screening is vital to good health. Artists 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.

2. Good preparation: Dancers need to prepare ahead of time for a performance, in every way possible. Establishing a well-rounded physical and mental preparation routine will reduce stress and increase performance success (e.g., healthy life habits, arriving early for dance).

3. Arousal management: Meditation, yoga, breathing training, Autogenic Relaxation technique, Mindfulness, Progressive Muscle Relaxation training, have all proven to be useful tools. These techniques should be taught by an accredited provider who is registered with a professional organization. To restore energy more effectively, breathe deeply *during and outside* dance training and performance. Learn to slow down the pace of daily activities, such as talking, walking, eating, and doing errands.

4. Active stress management: Identifying triggers for anxiety may help target how to effectively respond/cope with stressors, minimize avoidable stresses and reduce negative anticipations. Learning to manage inevitable disappointments and using positive self-talk can help dancers stay calm in the face of artistic challenges.

5. Focus on the process, not the outcome: We can only control what we can control. Therefore, it is best that dancers concentrate on their own preparation on and off the dance floor and enjoy the *experience* of dancing their best. Artistic performance will normally come with time, as a result of the dancer's efforts, but may also fluctuate due to factors outside one's control (e.g., working conditions).

6. Awareness of the *here and now*: Focusing on the present moment helps reduce negative thoughts and useless dwelling on past disappointments. It also helps minimize worries about the future.

7. Becoming friends with the unknown: In reality, we truly do not know the outcome of many things until they happen. Therefore, dancers must learn to be okay with not knowing the outcome and trusting that they are adequately prepared to meet the challenge. Mindfulness training is very effective in that sense.

8. Self-confidence: Poor self-esteem and insecurities can create debilitating worries about one's performance, body image, etc. Believing in oneself builds confidence which will likely lead to better preparation and performance on stage.

9. Mental imagery: Mental imagery in dance increases learning efficiency, because it reduces distractions, reinforces memory, and helps to identify memory blanks or errors of movement (we cannot remember what we don't grasp). Visualizing a dance variation improves technical and artistic performance, allows training without physical effort, and helps identify weaknesses and causes of error. Imaging successful dance scenarios before a performance cultivates motivation, self-confidence and overall wellness and may even be used as part of pre-performance routines. By feeling better equipped mentally before a dance production, imagery helps reduce performance anxiety.

10. Social support and outlets: Hobbies and enjoyable social relationships 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 to colleagues is their personal decision. The relevance of sharing personal feelings with company management and staff may depend on many factors, including the nature of the dancer's contract. Dancers must carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure within the dance world.

11. Medications: Prescribed medications may be recommended by health professionals to target the brain neurochemicals that are altered in anxiety states. Beta-blockers have been prescribed for use successfully for 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. Other medications are also used intermittently or regularly but should always be prescribed and managed by a physician. Self-medicating or using medications that belong to others can be very dangerous and is highly discouraged.

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Disclaimer: The information on managing anxiety contained in this paper is intended to help guide and inform the dancer. 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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