



Healthy Dancer Canada

The Dance Health Alliance of Canada

DANCERS AND THE ART OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Mental, emotional and physical health is dynamic and interconnected. Dancers cope with the stress of daily life and the inherent demands of being a dancer. Dancers experience high demands for consistently stellar performance which can increase anxiety. They cannot disengage from their instrument; their medium is their body and their art is dependent on their ability to allow movement to flow through it. Physical, mental and emotional stress can impede this ability.

For Dance Educators and Health Care Professionals:

Dancers need to practice self-care and stress reduction daily. They also need to be open to accepting help. Dance culture can make dancers reluctant to seek help and advice; therefore it is essential for dance educators and health care practitioners to work as a team to understand and support dancers in their goals to reduce stress. Health care providers and educators need acute awareness of the dancer's subjective personal reality to appreciate the contributing stress factors. Professionals interacting with dancers can themselves be part of the problem increasing a dancer's stress level through ignorance, attitude, poor communication, and expectations. It is helpful to listen attentively, respond compassionately, communicate clearly, and speak positively, respectfully, and encouragingly to dancers.

For Dancers:

As dancers we carry in our dance bags the essentials to meet the physical needs of each training day. We can also fill our bags with the tools we need to recognize and cope with mental stress and anxiety. Stress is the inability to cope with a perceived threat to one's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, which results in a series of physiological responses and adaptations (Seaward 2006). Stress has been linked to injury, reduced immunity, and chronic disease. Not all stress is negative. In fact, some stress helps us rise to challenges and give our best. Stress can help everyone grow and develop; distress is negative stress and distress is usually what we mean when we talk about stress.

Stress can be short-term or chronic. Our bodies adapt to stress and when we no longer perceive stress, our physiology should return to equilibrium. Prolonged stress responses tax our ability to sustain adaptation; a detriment to our physical, mental, emotional and behavioural health. Prolonged stress results in muscle tension, aches and pains, frequent colds, eating more or less, headaches, digestive disturbances, skin irritations, depleted immunity, inflammation, susceptibility to injury, sleep disturbances, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, lack of focus and concentration, poor judgement, moodiness, sense of loneliness, nervous habits, depression, and anxiety. The lived experience of anxiety in our lives may resemble the 'fight or flight or freeze' response, causing an accelerated heart rate, excessive perspiration and a sense of impending doom or an inability to act. This experience may feel incapacitating and can potentially curtail our careers. Stress management is an important component of health

care for dancers as stress affects our health, moods, relationships, productivity, energy, stamina, creativity, performance, and quality of life.

It is impossible and unhealthy to try to eradicate stress. Therefore the goal of stress management is to find ways to reduce negative reactions, and change the perceptions of stress. “Effective programs are twofold: (1) finding out where the optimal level of stress is for you and working with it so that it can be used to your advantage rather than becoming a detriment to your health, and (2) to reduce arousal levels using coping skills and relaxation techniques so that you do not get overly stressed” (Seaward 2006).

Our Resource Page, *Stress Management Tools for your Dance Bag*, includes methods for calming, reducing the negative effects of stress, and also developing awareness of the causes of stress and coping suggestions. Dealing with stress centres us, brings mental clarity and physical relaxation, enabling us to cope with stressors. De-stressing techniques are simple and free! Pick one thing from the list to practice and focus on that. See how it works for you. If it is helpful, add it to your “dance bag”. Then try another. To sustain mental wellness, practice a nourishing personal lifestyle with the same discipline and commitment you make to dancing.

Tips to incorporate self-care include:

- Develop a daily meditative practice, including relaxation breathing technique. (3,4)
- Build strong personal boundaries (i.e. learn the art of saying “NO”). (5)
- Trim your schedule: examine commitments and decide the importance and/or necessity of attending/participating in each. (2,4)
- Literally take time to “smell the roses”; give yourself time to unwind and regenerate among life’s daily demands; allow yourself other interests. (2,3,4,5)
- Participate in a Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy course.
- Utilize your personal support network.

Available resources include:

- The Al and Malka Green Artists’ Health Centre, UHN, Toronto Western Hospital
- Patient and Family Library at Toronto Western Hospital, Main Floor, West Wing
- The Dancer Transition Resource Centre (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and on-line)
- www.danceusa.org/informational-papers Dance USA Task Force on Health
- <http://my.clevelandclinic.org/heart/prevention/emotional-health/stress-relaxation/mind-body-exercises.aspx>

Sustaining mental wellness IS possible! One day at a time!

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