



# 10 Stress Management Tools for Your Dance Bag

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Balancing the demands of dance and daily life can be stressful. Regular use of relaxation tools can help manage anxiety. Our internal dialogue can also be a source of distress if it includes a running commentary full of destructive judgments and comparisons with others. "Shoulds" and self-defeating thoughts can be the greatest source of distress. What we tell ourselves and how we perceive stress creates our experience of stress, whether positive or negative. To deal with mental stress, one must recognize the stressful thoughts, release them, and replace them with positive and accurate thoughts. Below is a list of weightless stress-reducing tools to try – carry them with you in your dance bag and dance through life!

**"A mind-calming breath can also effectively reduce anxiety."**



## Physical Relaxation Tools



### 1. Deep Breathing

A simple yet effective way to manage anxious feelings is to use the breath. Take 1 to 2 very slow, deep breaths into the abdomen to the count of 1-2-3-4, hold for 1-2, and breathe out 1-2-3-4-5. This will elicit a relaxation response in the brain that counteracts the physical symptoms of distress. It may be necessary to repeat the breathing cycle a few times, with regular breathing cycles in between, to achieve an adequate response. It is important to breathe evenly and slowly and to exhale slightly longer than you inhale. If you feel yourself getting light-headed, slow your breathing down even more.



## 2. Mind-Calming Breath



A mind calming breath can also effectively reduce anxiety. Place the middle finger of your right hand on the point between your eyebrows and apply gentle pressure for 10 seconds. Place the thumb of that same hand on your right nostril and inhale slowly and deeply into your lower abdomen through the left nostril. Imagine bringing your breath to the 3rd eye point. Now close off the left nostril with your ring finger and hold your breath for 4 counts. Release your thumb and exhale through the right nostril. Inhale through the right nostril again, close it with your thumb and pause for 4 counts. Release the ring finger to exhale through the left nostril. Try repeating the breathing exercises until you feel more at ease.

## 3. Brush Away Stress



Physically brush away your reaction to stress! Gently stroke down your arms, shoulders, neck, legs, or wherever you are feeling tense with the intention of brushing away both the physical tension and any worries or feelings of anxiety.

## 4. Stress Triangle Relaxation



Gently and slowly roll your neck in an oval. Bring your right ear to your right shoulder then roll your chin to your chest; continue bringing the left ear to your left shoulder and then gently lift your nose to trace a rainbow as you bring the right ear to shoulder again. Continue until the movement feels smooth. Shrug your shoulders, squeezing up, then breathe out and release them down. Roll your spine forward and back up, vertebra by vertebra. Stretch your mouth open as wide as you can and stick out your tongue at stress and make a sound as you let out a deep breath. Imagine you are a lion roaring.



## 5. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Lie down on a comfortable surface and close your eyes. Breathe deeply, slowly and fully. Contract the muscles of your feet. Hold. Release. Remember to continue breathing during this. Do the same thing with your legs, hips, belly, and the rest of your body to the top of your head. When you have squeezed and released every segment of your body, squeeze all your muscles at once. Hold. Release. Let your whole body sigh. Relax and rest.

## 6. Constructive Rest Position

Lie on your back with knees bent and arms resting at shoulder height. Bend the elbows at 90 degrees with palms up. Breathe deeply with minimal effort, allowing your abdomen to rise and fall. For more benefit, try placing a rolled towel lengthwise under your sacrum and along your spine to the middle of your upper back.

### Psychological Tools

## 7. Gaining Awareness

Identify your stressors. What are the things that cause you stress? Include both external and self-generated causes. Write them down. Ask yourself:

- How do I know I am stressed? How do I feel? What happens to my body? What happens to my thoughts and my emotions?
- How do I deal and not deal with stress? What has been working and what hasn't?

## 8. Letting It Go Exercise

Write down all the things that stress you, as well as the negative feelings and thoughts associated with them. When you feel it is reasonably complete, for the time being, let it go. Make it physical: rip up the paper, crumple it up and throw it away, or walk away from it. Notice the changes in your body, mind and emotions.

## 9. Thought Transformation

### A. Mindfulness:

Sit quietly without distraction. Breathe deeply and reflect, without judgment, on your thoughts related to the stressors you have identified. Notice "Mental Traps" (E.g. over-thinking and/or unrealistic expectations).

### B. Changing your thoughts:

Look at your negative thoughts with curiosity like you are examining an object, not a factual statement. Ask yourself: Are they true? Do they help or hinder?

## 9. Thought Transformation (cont.)

### Thought-Changing Exercises:

- Divide a paper with a line down the middle. On one side, write down evidence that your thought is true. On the other side, write down evidence that your thought is false. This helps you find another way of looking at things.
- When you notice yourself thinking or making anxious or self-sabotaging thoughts, immediately ask yourself to, "Pause" and "Change the Channel." Replace the negative thoughts with positive, respectful inner dialogue. For example: "I'll probably blow this audition." Ask yourself to, "Pause" and "Change the Channel" to: "I'm going to give it my best no matter what. I'm not afraid to try." Notice your emotional and mental shift.

### C Changing your thoughts:

Set aside time for worries. Write down your concerns, thoughts and feelings. Dwell and reflect. Identify the problem. At the end of your session, write down an answer to the question: What are feasible solutions? Set clear and accessible goals and a realistic timetable. Now set the problem aside and do something relaxing that you enjoy! Schedule repeat sessions, until your worries gradually dissipate.

## 10. Meditation

Develop a meditation practice. Take a few minutes each day to sit or lie comfortably in a quiet place. Focus on your breath and/or use creative visualization that engages all of your senses to let go of stress. For example: Notice the sound and quality of your breathing. Imagine a beautiful sky, feel and hear the breeze, see the white fluffy clouds gently floating by; then send your stress into the clouds and let it be carried away!

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