



THE ART OF REST

Dance Your Way to Wellness

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Introduction

At the 6th Annual Healthy Dancer Canada Conference, participants were asked to share the single most important message they wanted to tell their dancers, teachers, or health professionals. One of the themes that emerged revolved around continuing to dance:

- “I need to continue dancing.”
- “Teach me/find ways for me to continue dancing[;] don’t just say I should stop, because I obviously want to continue dancing. Find good alternatives.”
- “[Saying] ‘You shouldn’t dance’ is not a helpful answer. Approach dancers like you would professional athletes who view their sport as their livelihood.”

These responses indicate that when dancers face health concerns or injuries, they need to maintain a connection to their craft. This resource will introduce the concept of relative rest, discuss when and how to practice it, and explain how dance educators and health care professionals can promote a speedy return to dancing.

Why is Activity Better than Rest?

Even short-term inactivity can greatly reduce your endurance, strength, muscle power, flexibility and cardiovascular fitness. With these declines, returning to your pre-injury fitness level can take longer than it should. By participating in modified activity, you will maintain as much of your fitness as possible, recover from injury, and return to dance safely and efficiently.

What is “Relative Rest”?

Relative rest is a safe way to protect your injuries while still remaining active. The first component of relative rest involves stopping the movements that cause you pain and could cause you further harm. This does not mean you need to stop dancing entirely. Instead, start with suggestions below, and talk with your teacher and your healthcare practitioner about what movements you need to avoid and for how long. The second component of relative rest involves gently activating muscles and maintaining mobility in the injured area when it is safe to do so. This will help to maintain the integrity of the injured joint so you may return to your full participation in dance much sooner.



How Do I Practice the Art of Rest?

Between Classes

- **Start dance conditioning and/or cross training:** Dance conditioning and cross-training involve participating in training that is not necessarily directly related to dance, but will help to improve your overall performance. By maintaining your strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular endurance, you will be able to ease into your optimal dancing routine much faster once your injury has healed (E.g. Alexander Technique, C-I Training, cycling, Feldenkrais, Gyrotonics, Pilates, strength training, swimming, walking, yoga).
- **Visit a health care professional:** Ask for a thorough examination so you know which movements may cause pain but no further damage (hurt), and which movements will cause further injury (harm). The rehabilitation process usually starts with exercise to prepare your body for technique class, because this work can be done symmetrically, and then progresses to choreography where movements will be more asymmetrical. Ensure your health care professional understands:
 - The structure of your class (E.g. warm-up/barre → centre floor → across the floor);
 - The forms of dance you do (E.g. ballet, ballroom, contemporary, hip hop, tap);
 - The number of hours you dance, including technique class, exams/competition, repertoire or choreography;
 - If your work is improvised or choreographed;
 - The conditions you dance in (e.g. temperature, floors, lighting, costumes, footwear).
- **Read:** Understand your injury and communicate with your support network using Healthy Dancer Canada's dance resource pages such as 1) *Translating the Language of Dance and Science*, 2) *Communication Form*, and 3) *Suggestions for Discussing Health Concerns with your Teacher, Choreographer, or Rehearsal Director*.

Before Class

- **Perform an individualized warm-up and cool-down:** Ask your teacher and/or health care professional about what you can do before class, and arrive early enough to do specific exercises, taping techniques, self-massage, etc. Your pre-class or pre-rehearsal warm-up should include activities that raise your body temperature and increase your breathing rate by using the large muscles rhythmically, moving your joints through their full range of motion.
- **Consider your dancing environment:**
 - Temperature: Use leg warmers, extra layers, or knee pads to keep yourself warm, especially if you are starting and stopping. If there is a dress code, discuss this with your teacher ahead of time;
 - Costumes and footwear: Ask your health care practitioner about how your footwear (and costumes) can help or hinder your recovery;
 - Floors: Sprung or not, raked, sticky or slippery



During Class

- **Keep the lines of communication open with your teacher.**
- **Only perform non-harmful movements.**
- **Decrease your range of movement** (E.g. performing demi-pliés vs. grand pliés).
- **Decrease the level of difficulty** (E.g. perform a sequence across the floor on flat/rise instead of with jumping).
- **Decrease intensity** (E.g. if weight-bearing is an issue, ask your teacher for alternative exercises that can be performed sitting or lying down).
- **If you can't do a movement, you can try mental practice.** Studies have shown that the brain fires the same signals whether the person actually performs a movement or whether the person visualizes or observes the same movement. This means that by engaging in mental practice, you can keep a strong connection between your brain and your muscles. Mental practice strategies encourage proper coordination of movement and quick improvements upon your return. Strategies you can implement for mental practice include:
 - Visualize yourself performing a movement fluidly and without pain. See yourself perform well in your visualization, using the same technical concepts and the same corrections as you would in class. Add as many details as you can (E.g. feel the floor under your feet, hear the sound of your breathing, see yourself dancing at the same speed as you do when you perform the movement);
 - Watch other dancers perform the movements and analyze the necessary components to completing the movements;
 - Watch a video of yourself performing a movement and think about what cues you would give yourself. Now imagine yourself moving to the cues you have given.

After Class

- **Now it's time for restorative rest!** Remember to rest, ice, and elevate the injured area.
- **Although it is important to get back to your normal routine as quickly as possible, doing too much too soon can prolong your recovery.** By acknowledging your pain and recognizing which movements cause pain and could harm your body, you will return to your full training capacity much sooner!

Conclusion

As dancers, we know how powerful a pause in the music, a change in pace or tempo, or a stillness between movements can be. Whether it is an injury or another health concern that has you taking a pause from full participation in dance, your recovery is an active process that requires discipline and practice, just as dance does. Master the art of rest and dance your way to wellness!



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