



Dancers and the Art of Stress Management

Originally written by Anita Shack, D.C., and Ruth Bittorf, R.N. (2014).
Revised and updated by Jo-Anne La Flèche M.Ps., M.A.Dance (2018).

Introduction

Mental, emotional and physical health is dynamic and interconnected. While stress is an inevitable part of everyday living, dancers must learn to cope with the added stress of 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. On the other hand, physical, mental and emotional stress can impede this ability.

What is Stress?

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). Even if 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, 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 careers.



For Dancers

As a dancer, you carry in your dance bag the essentials to meet the physical needs of each training day. You can also fill your bag with the tools you need to recognize and cope with mental stress and anxiety. 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. The first step is to become aware of the physical, emotional, cognitive and performance warning signs of persistent distress, that may eventually lead to burnout if left unattended. These physical symptoms may include frequent illness, complaints (ex: headache) or injuries, decreased appetite, chronic fatigue. Emotional distress may include feelings of depression, anger, decreased self-esteem or being easily overwhelmed. Cognitive symptoms include negative self-talk, decreased concentration and memory, distractibility and lack of engagement. Performance warning signs pertain mainly to a decline in the quality of dance and/or of school work. The second step is to learn to recognize these symptoms at early stages so you can make the necessary adjustments in your dance practice, in order to satisfy your physical and psychological needs (Taylor & Estanol, 2015).

Effective stress management programs are two-fold: 1) they help you respond positively to stress so that it can be used to your advantage rather than becoming a detriment to your health. The following positive attitudes may be useful: stay in touch with your love of dance; accept its challenges and unavoidable sources of stress and disappointment; develop self-compassion as a person and a dancer; adopt a positive perception of stress itself (as a means for optimal performance); set specific and attainable goals to enhance self-confidence and motivation and reduce debilitating stress caused by unrealizable expectations. 2) they help to reduce arousal levels through the use of coping skills (e.g. mental rehearsal, positive self-talk, pre-performance routines) and relaxation techniques so that you do not get overly stressed (Seaward, 2006; Taylor & Estanol, 2015; Wilmerding & Krasnow, 2017).

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 to practice from the ideas below 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.

Selfcare Ideas:

- Develop a daily meditative practice, including relaxation breathing techniques.
- Build strong personal boundaries (i.e. learn the art of saying “NO”)
- Trim your schedule: examine commitments and decide the importance and/or necessity of attending/participating in each.
- Literally take time to “smell the roses”; give yourself time to unwind and regenerate among life’s daily demands; allow yourself other interests.
- Try the tools in Healthy Dancer Canada’s dance resource, 10 Stress Management Tools for your Dance Bag.
- Utilize your personal support network.



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 unrealistic expectations.

It is helpful to listen attentively, respond compassionately, communicate clearly, and speak positively, respectfully, and encouragingly to dancers. In certain cases, it may also be helpful to ask open-ended questions to the dancer about internal and external sources of stress related to their dance practice, without giving direct advice. By gaining insight on the causes, the dancer may become better equipped to deal effectively with his/her worries or to seek appropriate help if needed. Teachers can suggest further resources or refer dancers to the appropriate health professional.

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