

DANCER HEALTH TIPS FROM UAB SPORTS & EXERCISE MEDICINE

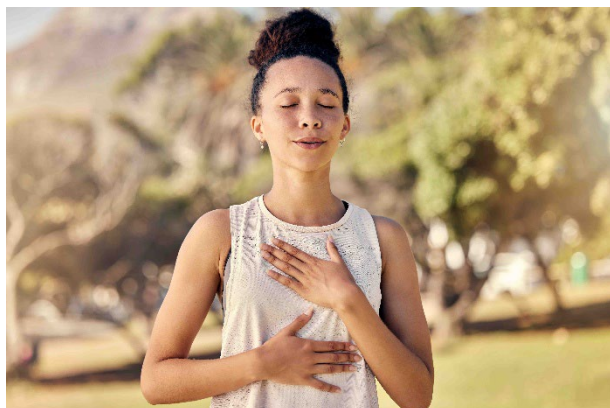
Overcoming Performance Anxiety

Paige Skelton, MS, LAT, ATC

Performance anxiety affects dancers of every age and level—from young students to professional company members. In fact, research shows that some degree of pre-performance anxiety can actually enhance performance. The goal isn't to eliminate nerves altogether, but rather to learn how to manage them, so your mind and body are prepared to perform at their best.

When your brain recognizes that something important is about to happen, it activates your sympathetic nervous system—often called the "fight-or-flight" response. This causes your heart rate to increase, your breathing to quicken, your muscles to tense, and your senses to become more alert. The objective is not to become completely calm—it's to find your optimal performance zone.

Breathe Before You Dance



One of the quickest ways to calm your body is also one of the simplest. Breathing. Research has shown that slow diaphragmatic breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system—the body's natural "rest and recover" response. Just a few controlled breaths can decrease muscle tension, slow your heart rate, and improve concentration.

Examples: Physiological Sigh, Box Breathing, Extended Exhale

Many dancers hold unnecessary tension in their neck, jaw, fingers, and even their toes before stepping on stage. Releasing those areas allows your technique, not your anxiety, to take center stage.

Release the Tension

Another way you can physically prepare the body is through Progressive Muscle Relaxation. PMR is a relaxation technique that involves intentionally tensing and then

relaxing different muscle groups throughout the body. This helps increase awareness of unnecessary muscle tension and teaches the body to release it.

For dancers, nervousness often shows up as subtle tension before they even begin to move. You may find yourself clenching your jaw, gripping your toes inside your shoes, lifting your shoulders toward your ears, or tightening your hands without realizing it. While these habits may seem minor, they can interfere with fluid movement, balance, breathing, artistry, and even increase fatigue. This technique can help dancers recognize where they hold unnecessary tension so they can release it before stepping on stage.

Picture the Performance

Mental preparation is a skill, just like flexibility, strength, and technique. It becomes stronger through consistent practice, not only before performances, but during everyday classes and rehearsals.

Visualization, or motor imagery, has become one of the most researched mental skills in sports psychology. Brain imaging studies show that mentally rehearsing movement activates many of the same neural pathways used during actual movement. Imagine feeling the Marley floor beneath your feet. Picture the stage lights. Hear the music. Feel your breathing settle into rhythm. Imagine your opening position and the confidence in your first movement. And



then, imagine handling the unexpected! Talk yourself through it. Research consistently shows instructional self-talk improves performance. Preparing your mind for both success and recovery builds resilience long before performance day arrives.

Performance Playlist

Research shows that preferred music improves mood, confidence, motivation, and readiness. Music is already at the heart of performance, making it an especially powerful tool for mental preparation. Consider creating a personal performance playlist—a collection of songs that help you feel calm, confident, and focused before stepping on stage. This playlist doesn't have to match your performance music. Instead, choose songs that help regulate your emotions and prepare your mind for the task ahead.

So, the next time you have butterflies before stepping onto the stage, create a consistent pre-performance routine and practice it during rehearsals so it feels automatic on performance day. Use breathing techniques in the wings to calm your nervous system without making yourself feel sluggish. Visualize the first moments of your dance, including how you'll recover if something unexpected happens. Replace negative thoughts.

Remember that feeling nervous doesn't mean you're unprepared—it means your body is recognizing that this moment matters!

Is there a dancer health related topic you want to learn more about? Or maybe you have a specific question? Send those to us via email (rachel@alabamadancecouncil.org) and we will try to answer them in future articles.

About the Author:



Paige Skelton, MS, LAT, ATC is a certified athletic trainer with a deep-rooted passion for dance medicine and injury prevention. With a Master of Science in Athletic Training from Samford University and a Bachelor of Science in Exercise and Sport Science from The University of Alabama, Paige specializes in rehabilitation and performance optimization for dancers and athletes across all venues. She currently works for UAB Sports & Exercise Medicine as an Athletic Trainer and Clinical Care Coordinator for **Dale Colorado, DO, MPH**.

Paige has experience working with local dance companies and studios, evaluating, and treating professional dancers, implementing rehabilitation programs, and providing post-performance care. She also served as an athletic trainer for various sports teams, orthopedic clinics, and physical therapy settings, refining her expertise in injury management and movement science. In addition to her clinical work, she has shared her knowledge at national and regional conferences, presenting topics such as hip dysplasia in dancers and exercise considerations for performing artists. With a background as a dance instructor and choreographer for competitive teams, she brings a unique perspective that blends her firsthand understanding of dance with her medical expertise. Paige continues to advocate for the health and wellness of performing artists through her clinical work, serving as a performing arts liaison for UAB.

For an appointment with the UAB Sports & Exercise Medicine team, please call us at **205-930-8339** or visit us online at uabmedicine.org/sports.