

Music and Dance Scheme

Promoting health and wellbeing in young dancers and musicians

Beyond physical practice

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Psychological skills to boost training and performance

Training and performing in the arts is demanding: physically, mentally, and emotionally. Not only must musicians and dancers execute a series of precise movements in order to convey their expressive ideas to an audience, they must also maintain an appropriate focus while not allowing pressure and expectations to distract them. In order to cope with these demands, performers benefit from having a range of physical and psychological skills at their disposal, developed through years of practice and experience. Psychological skills can speed up learning, boost performance and help you feel better about yourself, too. Remember psychological skills, like other skills, need to be practiced to gain their full benefit. Top performers find ways of incorporating psychological skills practice into their daily training and practice activities. Younger performers need training on how to develop psychological skills, as well as how best to incorporate them into their regular practices. Here we introduce some of the key psychological skills.

Goal setting

Everyone engages in some form of goal setting, whether compiling a 'to-do' list for the day's activities or long-term dreaming of career ambitions. Regular, effective use of goal setting can offer a range of benefits to performers at all stages of their development.

In particular, goal setting can:

- >> **provide direction and focus** to practice and performance preparation
- >> allow dancers and musicians to **monitor and chart their progress**
- >> help to **create and maintain motivation** to improve
- >> **develop consistency** in practice and performing behaviours
- >> **foster the patience** needed for long-term development

There are three main types of goals that can be set:

- >> **process, performance, and outcome** goals

Process goals refer to how you go about doing something, or the specific methods and procedures employed within training and performance activities. Keeping a relaxed technique during a practice session, maintaining a positive attitude through injury rehab, and studying a useful video or recording twice a week are all examples of process goals. Process goals are especially useful for keeping performers focused, for boosting self-confidence and reducing anxiety because they put the performer in charge, helping them feel in control. Generally, they can be seen as the stepping stones to reaching performance and outcome goals.

Summary

Being successful within the performing arts requires much more than just high levels of technical facility. Efficient use of psychological skills is a key part of effective training and performing. Central to this are the skills of goal setting, imagery, arousal control and self-talk, which can be used within the studio or practice room and when preparing to go on stage.

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Performance goals refer to the quality of a performance, either in practice or in a public context, in reference to yourself and your own abilities. A dancer might set a performance goal of accomplishing a difficult sequence by next week, while a musician might have a performance goal of playing their concerto from memory by the end of the month. Performance goals are particularly useful aims for the medium- to long-term, and should always be self-referenced: they should be focused on improving skills in relation to oneself.

Outcome goals can be thought of as win/lose goals. These are goals focused on the quality of a performance in reference to others. They include placing in or winning a competition or being awarded an orchestral or company spot in an audition. Ultimately they rely on the behaviours, decisions and actions of others and are therefore the most unstable of the three types of goals, but can be highly motivating as well. Because of this 'doubled-edged sword' nature of outcome goals, they should always be set together with process and performance goals to help performers feel both motivated and in control. Those setting outcome goals alone risk not only failing to meet their goals, but also high levels of anxiety.

When setting goals, it is useful to employ the SMART approach. This means that goals should be:

- >> Specific
- >> Measurable
- >> Actioned
- >> Realistic
- >> Timed

Consider the example of James, a contemporary dancer who would like to improve his jumping technique. Making this goal SMART will improve the likelihood of him achieving his aim.

- >> **Specific:** rather than simply say he wants to 'improve his jumps', James should identify a specific performance goal e.g. to be able to do a particular set of four jumps with good technique
- >> **Measurable:** perhaps the trickiest aspect of goal setting in a subjective discipline such as dance or music is how to measure goal achievement. James could try to get several people to help evaluate his jumps rather than relying on one person, and also trust his own kinaesthetic awareness of how jumps feel: easier? Less tense? More fluid? He might also focus on jump height, and so decide to improve by 5cm
- >> **Actioned:** it is critical to realise that setting long-term goals alone does not improve performance: it should inform daily practice by way of process goals. James could set process goals such as asking his teacher to give him extra tips on jumping during classes; working on his leg strength in the gym or via plyometrics; and watching online videos of dancers who jump especially well, making notes about what they do
- >> **Realistic:** goals should also be realistic about what improvements can reasonably be expected within a given time, with regard to resources. Consulting at least a couple of people can be useful: even expert teachers may differ in what they consider realistic for a particular individual. Outcome goals need to be especially realistic, because they partly depend on other people
- >> **Timed:** to keep performers focused and on-task, goals should always be set with a time frame in mind. Crucially, however, goal setting is not a perfect science. So it is more helpful to think of the 'deadline' as a time after which one will reflect and review, rather than a point after which a person is either successful or not. In other words – timelines are crucial, but so is flexibility!

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Imagery

Imagery can be thought of as the cognitive or imaginary rehearsal of a skill or situation without overt muscular movement. The basic idea is that all of the relevant senses should be used to create or recreate an experience that is similar to a given event. Just like we experience the real world with multiple senses, so imagery should be multisensory; so, do not just visualise but feel the movements in your body and hear the music. Touch may also be important, as may emotional sensations. Imagery can be used when physical practice is not possible, or in conjunction with physical practice to aid and enhance learning.

Imagery can be particularly beneficial for learning and memorising music or sequences. It can also be used to explore for expressive possibilities and then help project those expressive intentions during performance.

When using imagery within practice or rehearsal, aim to develop three types of images.

First, an image of the desired performance goal, or the technical and expressive point you would ideally like to get to with your music or sequence. **Second**, an image that reflects where your performance is currently. **Third**, an image of the music or sequence in terms of its production aspects: what you need to do physically in order to be able to produce your ideal performance. The goal of practice and preparation is to develop these three images to as vivid a state as possible, striving to bring the **first** and **second** in line with each other, using the **third** as the means of doing so.

As well as its use as a practice strategy, imagery can also be useful for enhancing the quality or expressiveness of your dancing or music. For instance, a dance teacher might help her students develop an appropriate quality of movement by suggesting, 'When doing this step, imagine that you are as bouncy as Tigger' or 'This exercise needs to feel as though you are stepping onto a red carpet and the world is watching!' A musician, meanwhile, might imagine someone dancing to the music they are playing to get the correct flow or rhythm, or imagine a particularly emotion-laden scenario to develop a certain mood and motion in their music. It is important to note as well that metaphorical imagery is often highly idiosyncratic and personal, meaning that dancers and musicians should strive to develop their own types of images.

Many, if not most, performers feel that the amount of rehearsal they get in the actual performance space is inadequate. While imagery is not as effective as actual physical practice, it can give a sense of 'having been there and done that' – in essence feeling like one has had more rehearsal. To feel this way, performers can try spending some focused time on imagery 'pre-hearsal' of the upcoming event. The technical as well as artistic content should be imagined in a multisensory fashion, including such things as surroundings, lights and other performers. Once a good level of imagery control has been established, performers can try imagining potential problems that might arise, and how they could deal with them. For instance, they can imagine feeling nervous but doing really well regardless.

In order to get the most out of your imagery, try to keep the following principles in mind:

- >> **practice regularly:** just like normal physical practice, imagery probably will not have an immediate effect and both diligence and patience will help. Try to set aside a few minutes in the morning to set you up for the day ahead, evaluate via imagery for five minutes after each class or lesson, or go over the learning points of the day in your head before going to sleep
- >> it is better to carry out **short, regular imagery sessions** than long, infrequent sessions. A few minutes make a good start – and should ensure that concentration stays on task!
- >> **mentally rehearse** specific skills or qualities you are working on in your technical training, above and close to your current level of performance
- >> **use all of your senses** so you feel you are actually in the situation executing the skills

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Arousal control and relaxation

While over arousal is a common concern for many performers, under arousal can be just as debilitating to your performance. Arousal symptoms differ for each person, so it's important to understand how over or under arousal manifests itself in you.

The basic question is: 'How do you want to feel, and what can you do to help yourself feel that way?'

The most common arousal control strategies involve breathing exercises and muscle relaxation. These can be quick and easy to do, either when you're at home, in the studio or practice room, or just about to step on stage.

Focused breathing exercise: begin inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Focus on your breathing for a few moments, slowly breathing in and out. Next, focus on slowing your breathing down and begin inhaling more deeply through your nose. As you are breathing in, imagine warm air flowing into your lungs and to all parts of your body. Slowly exhale to the count of four. As you are breathing out, imagine that any tension in your body is also flowing out of your body. Pause one second after breathing out. Repeat the deep breathing in, holding the air in for one second, and breathing out to the count of four. Continue focusing on this relaxed manner of breathing for a few more minutes.

Progressive muscle relaxation: this technique involves the systematic tensing and then relaxing of the various muscle groups throughout your body one at a time. Begin by clenching your hands into fists, hold them that way for several seconds, and then relax them. Repeat this a few more times. Next, work your way up your arms through each of the different muscles groups, doing similar repetitions of tightening and relaxing. Do this same process throughout the muscles in your face, continuing down your body all the way to your toes. Working this way from head to toe generally takes around 15 minutes, but you can use this process on a specific part of your body quickly before going on stage.

Self-talk

When training and performing, it is important to be aware of our self-talk, or the things that we say to ourselves. Typically, self-talk is used to give instructions or reinforcement, state convictions, and interpret feelings and perceptions. For example, a musician might say to herself, 'Remember to stay relaxed and open as the phrase climbs higher here' when doing well, but 'Wow I really blew that top note! I bet the panel heard that one; so much for this competition' when not doing so well. Although self-talk often arises spontaneously in this way, it can be more helpful to design self-talk statements for oneself deliberately. This way, the self-talk is more likely to be positive, constructive, and helpful.

Prior to performing when pressure is high, it is vital to avoid negative self-talk which can undermine confidence and induce greater levels of anxiety. Inversely, positive self-talk can be used before performing to enhance feelings of confidence and self-worth, develop and maintain an appropriate focus, and help to stay in the now. For instance, self-talk statements about the artistic intent of a piece can help a performer focus on communicating with the audience rather than worrying about how she looks, or whether she is good enough.

Further Reading

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See also: Music and Dance Scheme INFOSHEET #1
Losing yourself in the work, or lost to nerves?

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