

because you get frustrated with yourself. Managing what you think and how you behave are not set; you can manage and change your behavior.

## Responses to Stress

When stress strikes, the body goes on high alert. The sympathetic nervous system responds. The sympathetic nervous system is one of two parts of the body's autonomic nervous system. It is responsible for the fight-or-flight response through its nerve pathways, and it helps you deal with stressors. It gets the body ready to combat the stressor (fight), flee (flight), seek social support (befriending), or take care of someone (tending or nurturing).

Cortisol is the major stress hormone triggered under stressful conditions. It alerts the body of the need for more oxygen, blood sugar, and energy to cope with the stress. For example, the curtain call and the opening music cue the body to gear up and prepare for the beginning of the performance. The body gets into an action-ready state, addressing the demands placed on it by picking up cues from the familiar environment.

Developing good sleep, eating, fitness, and stress management habits will help maintain health, happiness, and freedom from illness. All dancers can develop good habits when they know how. Learning to cope with stress and creating healthy behaviors and habits are actions within your control.

## Coping Strategies

**Coping** is the deliberate effort to solve personal and interpersonal problems and seeking to minimize or adjust to stressful or challenging experiences. It consists of the thoughts and behaviors used to manage stressful situations. Coping is important for health and well-being. It helps you manage all the stressful life events that come your way. Styles of coping include the following:

- › In **approach-avoidance coping**, you either address the stress head on or largely ignore it.
- › In **problem-focused coping**, you put in the energy needed to solve the problem.

## GOAL SETTING

### Set Goals to Deal With Stress

At times you may feel overloaded with various demands. Goal setting can help you to manage your tasks and reduce stress levels. It enhances feelings of autonomy, competence, and control by enabling you to become more self-directed. This, in turn, increases concentration, motivation, and confidence. Goal setting also directs attention to specific task demands, encouraging increased effort, energy, and persistence even when difficulties are encountered. If you are feeling stressed, separate your tasks into those that need to be dealt with immediately and those that can wait. With the tasks that need to be dealt with immediately, set SMART goals so that you can achieve your goals in an effective and timely way. The acronym SMART is explained as follows:

- › **Specific**—What precisely needs to be done?
- › **Measurable**—How will you know that you have achieved your goal?
- › **Action oriented**—What actions do you need to take to reach this goal?
- › **Realistic**—Do you have sufficient skills to achieve your goal? Goals should be of moderate difficulty but within reach.
- › **Timed**—Set a time by which you want to achieve your goal. It could be a day, a week, a semester, or a year.

For example, you can use SMART goals to help you reduce stress systematically by employing relaxation techniques:

- › **S:** Use deep breathing and imagery techniques for relaxation and stress management.
- › **M:** Calmer mind (less distractibility or over-activity), lowered heart rate and improved concentration.
- › **A:** Practice deep breathing every night for 10 minutes.
- › **R:** Nightly breathing practice is an achievable activity.
- › **T:** In two months or by the 2-week run-up to a performance it will be easy for me to reduce stress whenever required by taking three deep breaths and focusing on my breathing.

- › In **emotion-focused coping**, you become upset, angry, anxious, or uncomfortable about the problem; energy is not invested in solving the problem.

When faced with stressful problems, dancers often use problem-focused coping. They identify the problem and figure out how to solve it. Keep in mind that everyone copes differently, and you might use more than one approach to cope with a problem.

Performance presents its own set of pressures, and you can develop ways to cope with these pressures. In addition, you may be a dancer who becomes highly anxious before performances. Developing certain approaches to performance can relieve some of this anxiety and make performing more enjoyable.

## Coping With Performance Pressures

Performance is loaded with expectations from others. The theatrical environment, the critical media, the audience, and your beliefs about what others expect influence how you perform. Performance is infused with certain societal values, dance traditions, choreographic specifications, and aesthetics that often run counter to healthy practices. Teachers, artistic directors, choreographers, other dancers, friends, and family have their expectations too. You have your own expectations. The constant messages about how you should move, look, behave, and perform can influence how you feel and lead to performance pressure and anxiety.

The variety of pressures can cause dancers to doubt themselves and their abilities.

Powerful images about the ideal body, the dancing body, or the famous star in the

company stand out in everyone's mind. You may start to believe messages in the ever-present images of perfect bodies, such as waiflike female dancers. You may start to question if this is how you should be. You may ask if you should have a perfect body, be a perfect dancer, and always give perfect performances. The world of dance and performance emphasizes this way of seeing the world, which may influence the way you see yourself. While not all schools and companies promote such a view, where it does exist it is detrimental to a healthy approach to dance and well-being. It creates unhealthy pressures, which can be major sources of stress, psychological distress, injury, burnout, unrealistic expectations, strained relationships, self-doubt, disordered eating, perfectionism, or dropping out of dance entirely. You can navigate performance pressures by establishing healthful routines for training, rehearsals, and performances.

## Coping With Performance Anxiety

Often considered synonymous with stage fright or "nerves," the familiar sensation of **performance anxiety** is defined as a perceived imbalance between the demands placed on a person and that person's ability to meet those demands. Note that this imbalance is perceived, and it may not be a rational perception. For instance, you might perform a sequence with little concern in the studio, but you are then filled with doubt about performing it in front of an audience. The presence of others watching can suddenly change how capable you feel. Performance anxiety is a situation-specific form of anxiety rather than a more enduring trait or stressor such as those discussed in the previous section, so you may experience it in the run-up to a performance, but it might dissipate quickly during or after the event.

**When dancers learn how to cope with stress and anxiety, they are able to perform at their best.**

Photo courtesy of Rachel Cherry, University of Bedfordshire.

