



Self-screening

The beginning of another new year provides the perfect opportunity to step back and assess physical and psychological wellbeing. **Imogen Walker** offers a guide to self-screening for dancers

Do you ever feel that another year has rolled around and you are suffering from the same patterns of injury, stress and fatigue? As dancers, sometimes we can forget to take a step back and consider how we can make positive changes. The new year is a good time to assess both physical and psychological wellbeing by conducting a mini self-screening programme. The following advice explains how to go about it.

Injury

Screenings in dance institutions are designed to reduce and prevent injury by assessing injury risk factors^{1a}. If you find that you suffer from frequent

injuries, it might be useful to keep an injury diary to help you to track your injuries and where they occurred. This is particularly useful for chronic and/or overuse injuries (those that are more persistent and long-lasting) as it could help you to understand what causes the occurrence in the first place. The following information is useful to include:

Date and time of day

Site on the body

Location of occurrence

Perceived cause

Treatment and recommendations

Noting the time of day could be important because, for example, if you find that your injuries occur during the evening, fatigue could be a major factor in the cause.

Writing down the location may also help you to assess the facilities you are using to practise in – for instance, rehearsing on hard floors or in cold environments could be contributing to injury risk. Finally, writing it down is a good way of making sure you stick at your treatment plan.

Injury SOS

One of the worst things a dancer can do is to ignore an injury. If it hurts, stop dancing. Try to see a specialist as soon as you can following the injury occurrence to avoid adding any further damage to the injured body part; this could be a physiotherapist or alternatively ask for a referral to a specialist (such as an osteopath) from your GP. →

Psychology: stress

Mental health is just as important as physical health. Dancing can stress the body and mind: learning choreographies; organising travel to competitions; late rehearsals. Considering the long-term impact stress can have on the body – such as high blood pressure and increased risk of heart failure – it is worth taking steps to deal with it. Furthermore, the ability to cope with stress has been associated with injury prevention and successful injury rehabilitation^{1b}. Some common symptoms are:

Physical:

Stiff back, neck and shoulders

Rapid heartbeat

Tension headaches

Stomach upsets

Behavioural:

Irritability

Self-doubt

Difficulty focusing on tasks

Worrying over small things

Stress SOS

If you recognise the above symptoms and feel that you often experience stress, there are many strategies that can help. Try some of the following and see what works for you.

- Separate your worries into a list of things that you can control and things that you cannot. Put aside the things you cannot control and focus on the others by making an action plan.
- Deep abdominal breathing can have a strong effect on anxiety symptoms, as can moving about: exercise can have a positive effect on stress and anxiety

symptoms. Dancing can also work – but preferably in a style or class that you don't usually take.

- Get back to nature and take a walk – fresh air can do wonders.
- Take a bath, watch comedy DVDs, listen to relaxing music – anything that helps you to feel that you are getting some "me" time.

Nutrition

Food diaries are often used in research to assess eating patterns, and keeping your own can be very useful. This can help you to understand your dietary needs and areas where you might be missing out. Standard food diaries usually cover three days (two weekdays and one weekend day). Try recording the following for three days:

| | Food, date and time |
|-----------|---------------------|
| Breakfast | |
| Lunch | |
| Dinner | |
| Snacks | |
| Drinks | |

“The ability to cope with stress has been associated with injury prevention and successful injury rehabilitation”



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Using your food diary to improve your nutritional intake can be as simple as making sure you're getting your "five-a-day" or by looking at your energy intake balance and vitamins. We should get 60-70 per cent of our daily intake from carbohydrate, 11-20 per cent from protein and 20-25 per cent from fat. A diet with plenty of complex carbohydrates, such as wholegrain cereals, pasta and vegetables, is essential as it forms the main energy source for dancers².



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Nutrition SOS

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is to eat breakfast. Although many people skip breakfast, it really is the most important meal of the day. Not only will it improve your concentration and performance, giving you the energy you need to start the day, it will also improve your mood³.

There are other ways you can self-screen. Test your proprioception by trying to balance in dance poses with your eyes closed; see how long you can hold the static plank for to test your core stability, and have a go at improvising in a different dance style or to different music than you usually use to tap into your creative

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abilities. It always helps to look at our own patterns and see where we can make positive changes. Keeping track of these could be a New Year's resolution that lasts the whole year long. ●

*Please note: this is a basic guide only and does not substitute medical help or guidance. If you have concerns about any of the above, see your GP or a specialist who will be able to help you further.

References

- 1a. Plastino, J.G. (2005). Physical Screening Procedures. In Solomon, R., Solomon, J. & Minton, S.C. (Eds.) *Preventing Dance Injuries: Second Edition*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- 1b. Novaco, R.W. (2005). Stress, Performance and Dance Injuries. In Solomon, R., Solomon, J. & Minton, S.C. (Eds.). *Preventing Dance Injuries: Second Edition*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
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3. Bradshaw, S. (2003). *Food facts: a healthy breakfast – the best to start your day*. Accessed from bda.uk.com