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Georgina Lewis

Loyola Marymount University, gina.lewis29@gmail.com

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Preventing Burnout: Rest, Relaxation, and Reduced Stress

Georgina Lewis

Dance History

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Burnout is a complex clinical condition that can manifest among training and professional dancers if a safe dance practice is not enforced. Dancers, among other athletes, can suffer from acute or chronic burnout because of their heavy stress load, high expectations, and constant rigorous training. From thorough research, I have discovered that burnout can be prevented if a dancer has adequate rest, relaxation, and reduced stress.

According to Weinberg and Gould (2007, p.492), burnout is “an exhaustive psychophysiological response exhibited as a result of frequent, sometimes extreme, and generally ineffective efforts to meet excessive training and competitive demands.” The key to this definition of burnout is the emphasis on both psychological and physiological responses. Overtraining to a point of burnout can have a detrimental effect on both the body and the mind. This can be seen in the diverse list of symptoms designated to burnout specifically among dancers. These symptoms include constant fatigue, inability to perform well, inability to recover, loss of desire and enthusiasm for dance, loss of appetite, increased susceptibility to injury, and increased anxiety and depression (Koutedakis, 1995). Burnout has an impact psychologically, such as loss of motivation and desire to dance, as well as physiologically, such as the susceptibility to injury and constant fatigue. To prevent symptoms of burnout and ensure a safe dance practice, a dancer must minimize both the psychological and physiological impact of their demanding career. I believe this can be achieved through proper rest and relaxation of the dancer’s body and mind.

The exact causes of burnout are not apparent, however recent research has found one key factor to burnout among dancers. According to Koutedakis (1995), burnout is caused from “an imbalance between physical activity and recovery from it.” If training demands increase, there needs to be adequate rest to compensate for the increased physical activity. Some dancers

understand how to balance their life and create time for rest and recovery, however certain personality types are more prone to suffer an imbalance. Koutedakis (2000, p.123) has identified the specific type of dancers, who are prone to burnout, as “highly motivated, the overachievers, and those who set high standards for themselves.” This type of dancer tends to confuse “rest” with being “lazy.” As a result, the constant training, rehearsals, and performances cause an imbalance in their life, which puts them at risk for burnout. To minimize this risk, it is important to implement optimal rest into a dancer’s training.

Physiologically, rest is crucial in a safe dance practice because it helps the body systems recover. In burnout, the physical mechanisms of the body are overloaded and create problems in the muscle tissue, immune system, and hormone system (Koutedakis, 2000, p.122). A healthy muscle system is crucial for a dancer to achieve optimal physical performance. After intense dance activity, there is micro-damage to the body’s muscle fibers. In order for the muscle to recover and prevent further damage as well as adapt to become stronger, there must be a rest period to allow for the repair-adaption process (Koutedakis, 2000). In this process proteins are laid down, enzymes are synthesized, and oxygen is supplied but the body needs rest to succeed in all of these tasks. This repair-adaption process peaks at about twelve to fourteen hours after the workout (Koutedakis, 2000). According to this research, a dancer must allow ample time to rest so their muscles can begin the adaption process and correctly recover.

In recent research, burnout has been found to have a greater effect on the body than preventing muscle recovery. Research shows that athletes who suffer from chronic burnout have a loss in their maximal voluntary muscle strength (Koutedakis, 2000, p.124). Koutedakis and colleagues discovered that an added electrical stimulation to the quadriceps, of an overtrained participant, would increase the quadriceps’ torque. When participants voluntarily activated their

quadriceps, they were not able to activate the same amount of muscle fibers that were activated with the electrical stimulus (Koutedakis, 2000, p.124). This research shows that an impaired central nervous system, which is responsible for voluntary muscle activation, is correlated with burnout (Koutedakis, 2000). This is evidence that in order for the central nervous system to perform properly and allow for maximum physical performance, burnout must be prevented.

It is very apparent that rest is crucial for the body to minimize negative physiological impacts and reduce the likelihood of injury. However, there is also a psychological impact of burnout that deserves equal attention. It is unanimous among sports and dance scientists that burnout is both physiological and psychological. As mentioned earlier, Weinberg and Gould (2007, p.492) call it a “psychophysiological response” to excessive physical exercise and high demands.

Taylor and Taylor express that the psychological symptoms and warning signs of burnout involve emotional and performance changes. Emotionally, there may be increased irritability, anxiety, and depression (Taylor and Taylor, 1958, p. 118). These emotional changes can have an influence on a dancer’s training, performance, as well as their everyday life. In research by Morgan and his colleagues, it was discovered that mood state disturbances increase as the training stimulus increases for competitive swimmers. The researchers found that “the heavier the training...the greater the mood disturbances” (Weinberg and Gould, 2007, p. 500). Such mood disturbances included depression, anger, fatigue, and decreased vigor (Weinberg and Gould, 2007). This type of emotional change can have a detrimental effect on a dancer’s career as well as their everyday life. The emotional changes discovered in the previous study were caused by an increase in training. This relates back to the crucial balance between physical

activity and rest needed to avoid burnout. If training is increased there must be adequate rest to compensate.

Emotional changes can coincide with performance changes for dancers during burnout. Such modifications can be classified as “reduced motivation, lack of enjoyment, loss of enthusiasm and interest in dance and other areas of their lives” (Taylor and Taylor, 1958, p.119). If a dancer develops this attitude towards dance, it is a critical symptom that he or she may be on their way to burnout. The “lack for enjoyment” is also characterized as a psychological concern among athletes suffering from burnout (Weinburg and Gould, 2007, p.498). If athletes or dancers no longer enjoy his or her activity, a psychological symptom of burnout, they may be at risk to drop out of their activity (Weinburg and Gould, 2007). Care should be taken to evade burnout in order to avoid negative changes in performance.

Burnout can be prevented if a dancer takes time to recover and relax. Recover simply refers to the time after intense physical activity when there is little physical activity in order for the body to repair itself. However there is another component to rest, which is relaxation. The mind needs to repair itself as well as the body. Psychologically, relaxation can be very beneficial to calm and focus the mind. There are many different ways to relax and they differ for each individual. It is important for a dancer to identify relaxation techniques that are beneficial to them and then use these techniques in their daily life. Simple activities such as taking a hot bath, reading, journaling, or meditating can help allow for the relaxation of the mind. According to an article in *Dance Teacher* magazine, burnout can be avoided through proper rest but also acknowledges that relaxation is an essential component for optimal rest (Rist, 2011). The article suggests the use of relaxation tapes and massages to achieve relaxation as an effective form of

rest (Rist, 2011). Through extensive research, it is evident that rest and relaxation are critical if a dancer wants to avoid burnout, both psychological and physiological.

There are many different sport-specific models of burnout, which can be referenced for more information about burnout among dancers (Cox, 2007, p. 428). Two of these models are Silva's Training Stress Model and Smith's Cognitive-Affective Model of Stress (Cox, 2007, p.428-433). These two models give insight into the complex system of burnout among athletes. Understanding the existence of burnout in sport can help prevent burnout from happening in a dancer's career. As discussed earlier, rest and relaxation are obvious tools to avert burnout; however, these two models reveal the importance of reducing stress to avoid this phenomenon.

In both models, stress is a powerful factor that causes burnout among athletes (Cox, 2007, p.428). Since burnout is a complex clinical condition, it has been difficult to create a cohesive definition among researchers. "One element common to all definitions, however, is an emphasis on burnout as a response to chronic stress" (Smith, 1986, p.37). Stress is a significant precursor to burnout and needs to be handled in a positive way. In Silva's Training Stress Model, burnout is a response to the training stress imposed on the athlete. Her theory is based on the belief that training stress is necessary for an athlete to improve their performance; however, the adaptation to the stress is what determines improvement or possible burnout (Silva, 1990, p.5). There are two different adaptations to training stress, either positive or negative. The positive adaptation leads to training gains; however, the negative leads to a lag in training gain (Cox, 2007, p. 428). Silva believes, "too much training, however, can result in negative adaption. This negative adaption is hypothesized to lead to negative training responses, such as overtraining and staleness, which eventually will result in burnout" (Weinburg and Gould, 2011, p.498-499). It is evident that a dancer will experience stress within his or her career, similar to a sport athlete.

Negative adaptation may occur if there is too much training and the dancer is not able to handle the stress. To prevent burnout from stress, a dancer must have coping mechanisms so he or she can have a positive adaptation to the stress of his or her career.

Coping with the stress of a dance career is important if a dancer wants to stay physiologically and psychologically healthy. Researchers in the sports psychology field have identified a couple coping strategies, which prove helpful in response to stress (Cox, 2007, p.249). These strategies include thought control, attentional focus, emotional control, and behavioral strategies (Cox, 2007). Many of the strategies can be adapted for the use of dancers in their stressful and demanding careers. Thought control is one of the most important coping strategies and involves the use of positive self-talk and positive thinking. In order for a dancer to experience a positive adaptation to their training stress, a positive thought control is crucial. Positive self-talk consists of a person's internal thoughts that increase energy, effort, and a positive attitude. Specifically, positive self-talk is generally positive thoughts that are not task specific, such as "I can do it" (Weinburg and Gould, 2011, p.380). A study performed on figure skaters discovered that positive self-talk enhanced performance. During a follow up of the same participants a year later, researchers found that participants still used self-talk because they believed it enhanced their competitive performance (Ming and Martin, 1996, p. 227-238). Dancers can use positive self-talk as a means to handle their training stress and, according to Silva's Training Stress theory, a positive adaptation to training stress will cause training gains and prevent burnout.

Smith's Cognitive-Affective Model of Stress can be used to identify parallels between stress and burnout. This model includes four different components that are relevant to cultivating stress among athletes. The four components are situational factors, cognitive appraisal,

physiological response, and output behaviors (Smith, 1986, p. 37). As mentioned previously, clinical stress is a significant factor in burnout. To prevent burnout, stress must be reduced, but in order to reduce stress, the origin of the stress must be identified. Smith's Cognitive-Affective Stress model helps to identify the source of stress among athletes.

Situational factors are a component that recognizes the relationship between demand and resources as a source of stress. In Smith's model, situational factors involve the interaction between environmental demands and the resources available. When there is an imbalance between the two and the perceived demands outweigh the resources, stress occurs (Smith, 1986, p. 38). Similarly, in burnout the "person feels outweighed by the demands of the situation," which can cause overload (Smith, 1986, p.38). Demands for athletes as well as dancers can be both external and internal. For dancers, external demands can come from choreographers or teachers while internal demands are the dancer's own personal goals and standards. If these demands are not met, it can cause anxiety, anger, and stress (Smith, 1986, p. 37). If this stress becomes chronic, it can lead to burnout.

In order to cope with both environmental and personal demands, dancers need access to adequate resources. Resources for athletes and dancers can be both environmental and personal (Smith, 1986, p.37). Environmental resources include various forms of support from other people or institutions. For a dancer, this would be comprised of the support of teachers, choreographers, and directors. If a dancer is required to perform almost every night of the week, he or she needs physiological and psychological support from those in his or her environment. There must be access to proper technique and fitness training so that the dancer can cope with the physical demands of the performance. There must also be a strong social support so that a dancer can cope psychologically with the stress of performing. According to researchers, "the erosion of

social support serves to remove important buffers against the stressful demand of the situation and to decrease an important environmental resource” (Smith, 1986, p.38). Having adequate environmental resources is important to reduce stress and reduce the likelihood of burnout among dancers.

Personal resources are also important so that a dancer can cope with his or her demands. The physical ability and physiological coping skills are among the personal resources that are crucial for an athlete. In looking at the parallels between sport and dance, one can discern the personal resources that are relevant to dancers. If the dancer does not have the physical ability, or specifically the technical skill, to execute the choreography being demanded of him or her, stress can occur. Also, stress can arise in a dancer if he or she does not have the psychological skills, such as relaxation, to cope with the demands of his or her career. It is important for every dancer to gain adequate personal resources in order to minimize the stress from their demands.

Not having appropriate resources to meet career demands can cause stress, and as a result chronic stress can cause burnout. If burnout is to be prevented among dancers, adequate resources must be available to dance students and professionals. It is the responsibility of the dancer and those who are influential in his or her dance career to develop and provide the resources necessary to manage his or her internal and external demands. With proper resources, a dancer can diminish stress and minimize the risk of burnout in their career.

Burnout hinders physical performance, depletes the dancer of any positive motivation, causes emotional distress, and leads to drop out. In any safe dance practice, burnout should be avoided and taken care of immediately if detected. As a dancer or teacher of dance, it is critical to implement rest, relaxation, and provide adequate resources to reduce and positively respond to stress. With a safe dance practice, both the body and mind can stay healthy and respond well to

the demands of a dance career. With proper rest, relaxation, and reduced stress, a dancer can avoid burnout and have a long and healthy dance career.

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