

## Stage Fright & Performance Anxiety: Dancing With the Butterflies

By Chantale Lussier-Ley

How often do you hear these reactions to dancing in front of others: “I get Jello legs,” “My hands shake,” “I know someone who sweats a lot!” “My neck and shoulders get tense,” “It feels like I can’t breathe,” “I’m going to be sick,” “Butterflies go crazy in my stomach”?



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During a recent workshop, a group of young dancers ranging from seven to 16 years of age provided such responses when asked what it feels like when they get nervous. We talked about what happens in our bodies when nerves get the better of us, but we also talked about how this “*fight or flight*” reaction is actually a positive, built in response that helps us move faster, see and hear better, jump higher, stretch farther, and generally react with greater agility, speed, and strength. We all agreed that this was a “good” thing; it is a form of “physical intelligence,” a way of protecting us from potential harm. This was a first step towards vocalizing, sharing, normalizing, addressing, and ultimately reframing our experiences of stage fright and performance anxiety. However, the conversation didn’t stop there because it is important to examine what we perceive as “threatening” and to reassess whether or not the threat is valid and worthy of our anxiety. Being nervous, we all agreed, both *expends* and *generates* a lot of energy. The question then becomes: How do we interpret this energy, what do we do with it, how do we use it, and where do we direct it?

I began the workshop by asking the dancers if they’d ever felt nervous, asking

a question, on the first day of school, meeting someone new, speaking in public, taking a test, dancing on stage or in a dance exam, to quote a few examples. Naturally, sooner or later, every person in the room raised their hand. It was obvious: we’ve all experienced moments of fear, even when no specific “threat” was present *per se*. This was an important moment in the room; everyone acknowledged feelings of vulnerability, but also realized that it was normal because everyone admitted such feelings. I asked what goes on in their minds when feeling nervous? Their responses were instructive:

“I’m scared of doing something wrong,” “People will laugh at me,” “I might trip and fall,” “Other people might be better?” “I can’t do it,” “It should be perfect,” “I have to make it,” “People might not accept or love me.”

So there it was: fear of failure, holes in our self-acceptance and self-esteem, social comparisons, myths surrounding perfectionism, and all the “*can’t’s, what if’s, and should’s*” we tell ourselves in moments of paralyzing fear. Poignantly, one of the adults present—a much loved and loving mother and wife, a well-educated and accomplished dancer, singer, choreogra-

pher, dance teacher, and now dance school co-director—also admitted the fear of failure. It became clear to everyone, kids and adults alike, that stage fright and performance anxiety affects us all. What differentiates us is how we respond to these potentially unnerving, out-of-our-comfort-zone, types of experiences. Even highly successful performers, like British actor Hugh Grant and singer-songwriter Colbie Callait, have publicly expressed how terrifying and debilitating these fears can be. So we are not alone and it is important for growing children and

adults alike to become aware of this, to remember how shared these experiences truly are. By discussing these things with kids, engaging in dialogue, and sharing our experiences with each other we will begin to normalize these experiences. In turn, this will diminish their power in our minds.

So what's a failure? Simply put, it's a mistake. "What's a mistake?" I asked. After a few puzzled moments, I proposed that it is a wonderful, albeit unexpected, opportunity to learn. By this reasoning, failure is no bad word, a suggestion that shocked many teachers in the room. I thought it best to remind them of former NBA great Michael Jordan's remark: "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Jordan certainly gave life to the old adage, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again," and we took it to heart. After discussing how stage fright and performance anxiety feels in our bodies and the type of internal dialogue that goes on, we talked about how negative statements can be reworded through the power of positive self-talk. The next step was to apply what we learned. We examined what we *do* when we feel anxious, and addressed whether these actions and behaviors allow us to positively or negatively tap into the energy associated with fright. I asked the young dancers, "What do you do when you get nervous?" One said, "My mom likes to meditate," another one "likes to laugh," and a third responded, "I love to jump!"

So I invited the third young dancer to the front of the group and gave her a jumping rope. I asked her to skip and, as she began, she agreed it would be an easy task.

"Ok, so now, count while you jump," I instructed her. Skipping with the rope, she counted, "1, 2, 3..." This too seemed easy enough for her. So next, I challenged her to skip rope while counting backwards.

"From what number?" she asked.

"27!" shouted someone in the group and we all laughed as I agreed. Again, she began jumping rope, a bit slower now, while trying to count backwards from 27. She performed this task well enough but it was clearly becoming more difficult. I presented her with one more challenge; this time, she was to skip rope, counting backwards from 27, but only vocalizing every third number. She tried but barely got three jumps in. I signaled a time out, giving her a chance to collect herself, encouraging her to think about it and practice in her mind before trying the task again. This time she was barely able to keep the jump rope going as she tried to both jump and engage in a complex series of thoughts. After a timeout, I asked her to simply jump without worrying about any counting, forwards, or backwards. She skipped effortlessly, easily, without missing a beat, until I asked her to stop. Interesting... I asked her which was easiest? She replied, "just jumping."

The lesson? Sometimes thinking *nothing* and trusting our bodies to know how to move is the best strategy, especially in physical education and dance. Your body already knows how to jump, just like it eventually learns how to dance. One doesn't have to tell their feet to push and land, or to twirl their hands around. After a bit of practice, the body knows, and the mind can take a break. My friends and colleagues Doug Newburg and Kelly Doell call this *clearing the canvas*, and it's the ultimate aim of some meditative practices. As I understand it, this is what "being in the moment" is all about. No thoughts about the past, or concerns for the future, just an embodied experience in the *present*. The kids all got it and it was a powerful lesson to witness.

Skipping. It releases those extra endorphins from anxiety, warms up the heart and major muscles of the body, and is just plain fun. This young dancer's strategy is an excellent one, no wonder so many athletes jump up and down right before an important race or event. But why not

get kids to do the same as a way of playing and moving through the butterflies of stage fright?

Another child remarked, "I take really deep breaths." This is when I brought out the bubbles. Inviting this young dancer to come forward, she took the plastic wand and began to slowly blow bubbles. I asked the class to watch and tell me what they noticed, and where her bubbles came from. "They come from her lips," one noticed. Another said, "They come from her chest." "Absolutely! Now keep looking, where else are the bubbles coming from?" I continued to prompt. A little boy said, "They come from her thorax." How sophisticated! "They come from her belly!" Another dancer commented.

We noticed how blowing bubbles was a wonderful way to take our minds away from fearful thoughts and to focus on the joy of blowing bubbles. The somatic bonus of blowing bubbles is that it also encourages us to breathe slowly and deeply. It helps us regulate our heart rate, maximize oxygen intake, and thereby to feel more calm, yet energized and positive. So there we have it, a few simple strategies and tricks to help kids (and adults) learn how to self-regulate their physical, cognitive, and behavioural responses to stage fright and performance anxiety. Though I have yet to try it with a group of dancers, I would imagine that a hula-hoop could have a similar effect. After all, who's ever felt stressed out while blowing bubbles, skipping a rope, or spinning a hula-hoop?

The hour had flown by and it was time to wrap up our workshop. Would we ever feel nervous and anxious again down the road? Of course, but hopefully we will all be more open to "clearing the canvas" in our minds, feeling the butterflies in our tummies, and inviting those butterflies to dance along with us. Besides, such feelings remind us that something exciting is about to happen!

Happy dancing, dear butterflies! ■

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