

**PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS IN DANCESPORT****Latica Čačković, Renata Barić and Jadranka Vlašić***Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Zagreb, Croatia**Review paper***Abstract**

Many factors of different stress levels influence the performance of dancesport couples in various ways. Some of them are invariable and the dancers cannot affect them (judges, other competitors, music, dance floor, dance partner, etc.). Others are variable, i.e., a dancer can affect them promptly (body condition, outfit, choreography, dance skills, etc.). In addition to the foregoing, the psychological stress of dancers depends on his personality traits and the immediate preparation for the competition.

**Key words:** *psychological demands, dancesport, psychological preparation, factors of stress*

**Introduction**

While doing their sport, in addition to physical, technical and tactical demands, athletes are also faced with psychological demands. In today's elite sport, the differences in the physical fitness and skills of athletes are small, therefore winning the competition can greatly depend on the psychological state of athletes, i.e., the mental adjustment to the current situation (Bosnar, Balent, 2009). Considering its structural complexity, dancesport belongs to the group of conventionally-aesthetic activities, which means that it has aesthetically formed and choreographically appointed acyclic movement structures that are commonly performed in standard, but also in variable conditions (Milanović, 2009), and the performance evaluation is based on the subjective grade of the judges. Considering the large number of dancesport couples on the dance floor competing at the same time (finals – 6, qualifying rounds – 8-12 per heat), it is possible to determine that the grading system is very subjective, which is one of the reasons why dancesport is not included in the list of Olympic disciplines. The desire of every dancer on the dance floor is to give the impression of the ease of movement backed by good physical and psychological preparation. Psychological preparation is very important because the performance of dancesport couples on the competition is influenced by many factors of different stress levels. Some of them are: judges, other competitors, music, dance floor, audience, dance partner, etc. A dancer must learn to cope with some of them, while keeping others under control. Dancesport was on the border between art and sport for a long time. It was recognized as a sport in 1997 by the International Olympic Committee. The international governing body in dancesport is the World Dance Sport Federation (WDSF), which incorporates a well-defined competition system. There are many dance styles covered by the term dancesport, but the term usually implies two groups of dances - standard (English waltz, Tango, Viennese waltz, Slowfox, Quickstep) and Latin American (Samba, Cha-cha-cha, Rumba, Paso Doble, Jive).

The characteristics of standard dances include closed posture (requiring physical contact with a partner), as well as elegant and progressive motion on the dance floor in a counterclockwise direction. Latin dances are characterized by closed, semi-open and open figures which require a visual connection between partners, in addition to their physical connection, so that they can communicate in a way more convincing and interesting to the audience. Dancesport is a competitive discipline and competing dancers are faced with various problems associated with competitive performances in the same way as athletes in other sports. The goal of this paper is to explain the background of the stress caused by competitions and the sources of psychological pressure, as well as the most frequent errors in preparing for the competition which can enhance the dancer's perception of stress.

**Competition as a source of stress**

Any kind of competition is a source of stress for the contestants. "Stress is a nonspecific reaction of the body to any demand that is placed on it." (Cox, 2005; Selye, 1983). Stress as a condition of the organism is accompanied by intense physical and emotional experience, managed by the autonomic nervous system, the part of the nervous system that is located in all parts of the body and mainly supervises the functions of most internal organs - organs which independently controls the actions necessary to sustain life (Matković & Ružić 2009).

Symptoms of stress are increased heart rate, sweating, and blushing, which can occur as a result of the increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system (part of the autonomic nervous system primarily responsible for changes in physical functioning associated with arousal). These symptoms are equal to, although of slightly higher intensity than, the symptoms that occur when an athlete is excited. In addition to physical threats, the autonomic nervous system responds to mental and emotional threats (Winkelhuis, 2001) as well.

The cognitive system, responsible for cognitive assessment, constantly checks whether we can cope with the situation we are currently facing. It compares the situation with past experiences and, if no such recent example exists, then the autonomic nervous system reacts to the new situation stressogenically. The stress manifests itself in different areas. On the *physical level*, dancers face many potential threats such as lack of strength, lack of food or fluids, lack of warm-up or lack of experience with a choreography. If the habit of dancing five dances in succession to the fullest is not recently created, such a situation will be stressful at the competition. *Mental threats* come from a dancer's thoughts, desires and demands that cannot be controlled, i.e., they are the product of a dancer's cognitive assessment. A thought such as "Now I must dance well to make the final" is decoded by the cognitive system as a threat. Considering that the result depends on many factors that a dancer cannot control (partner, other competitors, judges, audience, etc.), the autonomic nervous system interferes by sending stress signals that a dancer should, with time and experience, learn to recognize and control. A dancer can affect *emotional pressure* by doing things that help the production of pleasant emotions such as happiness and pleasure. An athlete can achieve this, for example, by isolating himself in between rounds to relax the mind and body, or socializing with others.

Unfortunately, there are also emotional demands the dancer cannot control. These are music, the venue in which the competition is held, how the partner feels and acts on that day, whether the audience likes the dancer or not, whether he gets positive feedback from his coach in between rounds or not. For any thoughts, feelings and desires concerning the above, over which the dancer has no control, the ANS reacts by sending stress signals. Mental, physical and / or emotional pressure not only causes physical tension often perceived as unclear and panic thinking or not thinking at all, but it also limits the dancer's freedom of movement. Stress leads to short and shallow breathing high in the chest, a faster heartbeat, excessive consumption of energy and too tense muscles, because the ANS begins to produce various hormones and chemical substances. These hormones, such as cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline (Matković, Ružić, 2009), are very useful if the body needs to be protected physically or mentally. In competitive dancing this is not the case, so the dancers should prevent the activation of this defense mechanism.

A good psychological preparation that results in better psychological skills and more adaptive coping strategies can help reduce feelings of vulnerability, and thus the consequent easing of the ANS in the production of stress signals. There are many factors that cause stress on the physical, mental and emotional level that a dancer may not even think about, but he feels their influence very strongly.

**Classification of stress factors in dancesport**

In order to relieve stress, a dancer must investigate the source of feelings of vulnerability. For the competitors, the list of stress factors is almost endless. A dancer must learn to cope with some of them, while preventing most others. Stress factors, therefore, can be divided into those that cannot be influenced (invariable) and the ones that can (variable). Most of the variable factors cannot be changed on the day of the competition, but during the preparatory period a dancer should pay maximum attention to them. The dancer should do fitness training and competition simulations to prepare his body for competitive efforts. Costumes should be prepared on time, and if the costume is new, it should be tried out during practice. To improve dancing skills, a dancer should work every day, and train a choreography in time or adapt it to the coming competition. If he has control over these aspects of competition preparation, a dancer can consequently form realistic expectations about the competition to avoid disappointment. The factors of stress can be divided into *internal* (endogenous), which are dependent on the dancer, and *external* (exogenous), which are related to other factors of a competition. The perception of stress greatly depends on cognitive assessment, which is influenced by certain personality traits.

Table 1 Classification of stress factors

	<b>INVARIABLE FACTORS</b>	<b>VARIABLE FACTORS</b>
1.	JUDGES	PHYSICAL BODY CONDITION
2.	OTHER COMPETITORS	STAMINA
3.	MUSIC	WARDROBE
4.	BUILDING	FOOD AND DRINK
5.	DANCE FLOOR	CHOREOGRAPHY
6.	AUDIENCE	DANCE SKILLS
7.	PARTNER	DANCER'S EXPECTATIONS
8.	COACH	
9.	COMPETITION SCHEDULE	
10.	FRIENDS, PARENTS	
11.	THE BREAKS IN BETWEEN ROUNDS	
12.	THE AIR IN THE BUILDING	
13.	PERSONALITY	
14.	THE TRAVELLING	
15.	BUSINESS WORRIES	
16.	PRIVATE WORRIES	

Table 2 Internal and external stress factors

<b>INTERNAL</b>	<b>EXTERNAL</b>
PHYSICAL BODY CONDITION	WARDROBE
STAMINA	CHOREOGRAPHY
DANCE SKILLS	FOOD AND DRINK
DANCER'S EXPECTATIONS	THE JUDGES
PERSONALITY	THE OTHER COMPETITORS
BUSINESS WORRIES	COACH
PRIVATE WORRIES	PARTNER
	THE AUDIENCE
	THE BUILDING
	THE FLOOR
	THE MUSIC
	COMPETITION SCHEDULE
	THE BREAKS IN BETWEEN ROUNDS
	THE AIR IN THE BUILDING

### **Personality traits as facilitators of stress**

According to the definitions of psychologists Rathus and Eysenck, personality is a set of traits which are important for life adjustment, in which individuals differ (Rathus, 2000). In a broader sense, a personality includes character, temperament, intelligence, morphological characteristics, motor skills and functional skills, while in the narrow sense it includes character and temperament, and sometimes intelligence in other authors' definition. Personality is a complex structure of lasting features which determine the psychological adaptivity of the individual. These features shape the personality traits that represent the dimensions along which individuals can consistently be distinguished (e.g. emotional stability, extroversion, aggressiveness, creativity) and which come to the fore in different situations (Petz, 1992). Knowing one's traits can be useful in understanding his perception, style of response and the associated problems which may occur. The way a dancer approaches life in general gives insight into possible stress-causing factors appearing during dance competition. Results of the "Four C's" (Cross Cultural Consumer Characterizations) research in the field of communications marketing, which has identified seven different personality types with a specific state of mind, behavior and expectations, inspired Winkelhuis (2001) to apply this division to dancers. The research identified three main groups of people types: *limited* group (Resigned and Strugglers), *middle majority* (Mainstreamers, Aspirers and Succeeders) and *innovators* (Explorers and Reformers). Each individual in a particular group mainly reacts in the similar way to external stimuli. Winkelhuis used this division with dancers when talking about their reasons for practicing dance and the objectives they want to achieve. Knowing what they want, dancers can more easily look for the ways to reach their goals, which has positive repercussions on their motivation. Most people find themselves in two to three groups, the characteristics of different groups can be found in combinations within the structure of their personality, some of these traits dominate, some are average and some below average (Winkelhuis, 2001). People whose personality is characterized by indifference (Resigned) and whose values are based only on subsistence are not often found in the competitive dancing world. On the other hand, those who work hard in life for improvement, but regularly suppress feelings that regardless of all efforts, they will fail to succeed (Strugglers), are quite common. This fear is not always related to their skills, but mostly to their state of mind. And, even when they achieve success, they are unhappy and already fear future failure. At some point in the Struggler's dance career the compensation by coaches and partner can no longer help him, so he must change his attitude towards life in order to progress. The largest group in society is formed by people who are looking for security, like to conform to the rules of society and feel a strong family responsibility (Mainstreamers).

Dancing provides Mainstreamers with an opportunity to make friends and have a social life. They might not focus on their performing qualities, and have no urgent need to win, therefore they are not affected by competition stress so much. On the other hand, there are dancers who have an urgent need for victory and success is essential for their happiness. They should learn to focus on dancing instead of results. Such people have a need to be perceived as successful and their success in the dance world provides them with prestige in society (Aspirers). Similar to them are Succeeders, but the difference is that they feel they are already successful and they want to keep that success. They long for more material success and look for recognition in society. They find success in dancing as crucial for this recognitions. They should also learn to focus more on dancing itself to relieve themselves from unnecessary stress considering that judging and results cannot be affected. Competitive pressure caused by the result imperative is present among both types, which can lead to problems with concentration and more frequent errors during competitions. The Explorers and Reformers are innovators of society. They like to adjust the existing norms to suit their own needs and opinions of what is good and what is bad. Both personality groups are affected by competition stress when they get lost in normal competition routines and expectations. More than others, these types have the power to perform for themselves and thus they can focus on their own goals and values. Becoming aware and recognizing his own features helps the dancer understand who he is and what he wants. Two people in a couple are not the same, so recognizing and respecting their differences helps them to better function as a dancing couple.

### **Unprofessional preparations for the competition as a source of stress**

One of the main stress causing factors is poor preparation for the competition (Zagorc & Jarc-Sifrar, 2003). Unnecessary problems that can occur before the competition can easily be avoided by preparing timely. The most common stress causing factors, which largely reduce the value of dancer's performance are (Winkelhuis, 2001): -too high practice intensity during the week before the competition that results in a lack of power on the day of the competition; - not enough hours of sleep during the week before the competition; - late arrival to the dance hall which results in insufficient physical and mental preparation; - unbalanced diet before and during competition; - insufficient warm-up which causes the autonomic nervous system to produce signals of physical threat - excessive muscular tension, fatigue, poor balance, etc.; - a choreography or some new figures are not yet trained; - the outfit is not good enough, does not adhere to the rules of the dance federation or was not ready on time; - competition simulation in training was not performed to the fullest, so the body is not prepared for the effort required by the appearance in the finals.

If a dancer is insufficiently prepared for the competition, he will be significantly exposed to stress. Mental strength developed and improved by psychological preparation enables dancers to better face the competition stress.

### Conclusion

In any competitive sport, athletes are susceptible to stress, and competitive dancing is no different. Dancers have to cope with many stress causing factors.

Some of these can be influenced by dancers, while others cannot. Some causes are dependent on the dancer himself (endogenous), while others are related to other factors of the competition (exogenous). The extent to which a dancer will be subject to stress also depends on his personality traits, which then come to the fore, and of the dancer's cognitive assessment of the specific situation. Regardless of its source, stress should be identified and good psychological preparation should be used to help each dancer to achieve his maximum potential on the competition.

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## PSIHOLOŠKI STRESS U SPORTSKOM PLESU

### Sažetak

Na izvedbu sportskih plesnih parova na natjecanju utječe mnogo čimbenika koji su različito stresni. Neki od njih su nepromjenjivi i na njih plesači nemaju utjecaja (suci, ostali natjecatelji, glazba, podij, partner, itd.), dok su neki promjenjivi, odnosno na njih plesač može pravovremeno utjecati (stanje tijela, odjeća, koreografija, plesne vještine itd.). Osim prethodno navedenog, psihološki pritisak plesača ovisi i o njegovim osobinama ličnosti te neposrednoj pripremi za natjecanje.

**Ključne riječi:** psihološki zahtjevi, sportski ples, psihološka priprema, faktori stresa

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Correspondence to:

Jadranka Vlašić, Ph.D.

University of Zagreb

Faculty of Kinesiology

10000 Zagreb, Horvaćanski zavoaj 15, Croatia

Phone: +385 (0)1 3658 666

E-mail: [jadranka.vlasic@kif.hr](mailto:jadranka.vlasic@kif.hr)