

BREATHING In Ballroom Dancing

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When you concentrate very hard, you get tense, and your ‘automatic’ system of breathing stops working! Holding your breath is so common! But breathing is so important to good dancing, you should take time to master it. The top dancers breathe quite deliberately, and incorporate it into their dance technique. You can too, and it will pay off with better dancing, better posture, and less stress on your body!

Although the brain accounts for only 2% of the whole body’s mass, it uses 20% of all the oxygen we breathe! No wonder you can’t think straight when you’re nervous on the dance floor!

Competition dancing demands that many important things ‘come together’ all at the same time. This stress produces a ‘Fight or Flight’ response in us, which includes:

- Rapid Heartbeat
- Adrenaline Pumping
- Sweating
- Muscle Tension, and
- Shallow Breathing or Holding Your Breath

From an evolutionary standpoint this would be great if we were either going to slay a Mastodon or run from one. Instead we have to stand tall, hear the music, think on our feet, feel our partner, produce rich and beautiful movement, look relaxed, and smile! HA!

Even though breathing happens involuntarily, you can control it, and even improve it! You want to avoid the situation where your heart is beating fast, but the blood it is pushing around doesn’t have enough oxygen to fuel your brain and muscles.

Let’s learn a couple of useful things:

DEEP NASAL BREATHING (a comparison of mouth vs. nose breathing)

1. Open your mouth wide and take several deep breaths IN AND OUT, as deeply as you can. Note how shallow or deep the air goes.
2. Now CLOSE your mouth and take several deep breaths IN AND OUT only through your nose. Notice the ribcage and abdominals. Does it seem deeper, fuller?

Mouth Breathing is associated with “fight or flight” response. When we’re in danger, we open our mouths and run! This is shallow breathing, and air only reaches the upper lobes of the lungs. This is fine for anaerobic sprints, but not for the beginning or middle of a dance.

Nose Breathing is deeper, slower, and more oxygen reaches the lower lobes of the lungs. This deeper breathing slows your racing heart, helps deliver more oxygen, reduces anxiety and helps your mind focus. Also, notice how your whole torso expands when you breathe deeply through your nose. Learn from that! Try to incorporate breathing into the dance technique you’re doing.

When you are NOT dancing is a good time to practice slow, deep, nose breathing. The more you do it, the easier and more natural it becomes, and the more you can benefit from it. Try to spend more time on the exhale, getting all the air fully out of your lungs. This makes room for fresh, oxygenated air. Often the fault of breathing is in failing to exhale old air out, making room for the new!

WARM-UP BREATHING

It takes a minimum of five minutes to warm up and dilate the blood vessels in your arms and legs when you exercise. You simply cannot rush your warm-up. Emphasize long deep slow breaths through your nose when you are warming up to dance. Do low-intensity movement that mimics your dancing while inhaling and exhaling deeply. The deep breathing helps to dilate blood vessels, and oxygenate your muscles for the harder dancing to come.

A MINUTE AND A HALF OF DANCING

Have the intention of doing nose breathing throughout each dance. Your body knows exactly when you shift into anaerobic-mode, so mouth breathing is then appropriate. Don't fight it, the important thing is just to breathe!

RECOVERY BETWEEN DANCES

You guessed it! Nose breathing again! In between dances you may only have 20 seconds to catch your breath, so don't waste it with shallow mouth-breathing. Close your mouth (you can still smile a toothy smile) and suck in that wonderful air through your nose! It will calm you, slow down your racing heart, replenish oxygen to your brain and muscles, and prepare you for the next dance. Remember: "Long, slow, deep breaths."

THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAR AIRWAYS

For people with obstructed nasal passageways, it's worth it to clear out/open up your sinuses. Blow your nose, clear it out in the shower, and keep tissues handy in the ballroom. Drugstore nose sprays like Afrin cause backlash swelling, so don't get started on that, but DO use saline spray or a netti pot to clean out and open up your nasal passages.

REMEMBERING TO BREATHE

If you know breathing is a problem for you on the dance floor, tell your partner or teacher you wish to improve on it. Ask them to monitor you in practice, and to remind you to breathe if they notice you are holding it. If you use deep nasal breathing while warming up, and in practice, and if you ask a partner to help you, it will become more of a habit. That habit will follow you into competition... **IF YOU PUT YOUR ATTENTION ON IT!** Practice makes perfect, and if you repeat these new techniques every day for a month, they are likely to become permanent.

Optimal breathing can improve your dancing tremendously! Start practicing it today, and enjoy the benefits very soon! This new way of breathing may distract you for awhile, but with practice, it will become a trusted ally in your dancing.

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