6. On Mind and Body: Autogenic Training as Self-empowerment for Performers

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Performers are the medium between the Arts and life, and Art, in all its forms, is a meaningful instrument of expression and communication. The composer John Cage writes that “Arts operate to allow self empowerment … and consolidation of social empathy” (p.100). The director Peter Brook underlines that “…The stage is a reflection of life” (p. 111). The dancer and theorist Rudolf von Laban affirms that “Dance is … vibrant life itself … [and] as the awakener of the sense of vitality [it] can be an art of the greatest significance” (pp. 178,179). Performers are gifted with the pleasure and responsibility of representing human thoughts, emotions and universal meaning: they make it possible to draw up fantasy to concrete reality ‘bringing the stage nearer to the street’.

As much as performing is wonderful it also involves great discipline, constantly making choices, hard work and regular exposure to psychophysical stress: performers need to be constantly ‘present’. Published research conducted within the Performing Arts shows that a large number of performers suffer from stress and psychosomatic discomforts such as stage fright, anxiety, lack of focus and concentration, sleep disorders, anorexia nervosa, low self-esteem, depression, hyperventilation, muscle tensions and pains. Hamilton, Kella and Hamilton state that

“Each performing art has its own unique stresses. In ballet the focus is on athletic prowess and physical beauty… Dancers must be thin … extremely strong, and must have a high tolerance for pain. This is in direct contrast to music, where… a premium is placed on flawless technique, in spite of the fact that an instrument can be unpredictable and ill-suited to the musician’s anatomy…Yet work dysfunctions are common in a population where the level of stress is high and coping mechanisms are not always sufficient” (p. 86).

Furthermore, according to Rife et al. “Musical Performance Anxiety (MPA) is a wide-ranging debilitating problem among professional musicians … [It] can adversely impinge on the quality of musical performance and seriously affect careers in music” (p. 161). Likewise, Luke et al. and Mainwaring, Krasnow and Kerr found that stress is also an extrinsic risk factor associated with dance injuries.

Stress can have a negative impact on performance. Indeed, the human body has self-regulatory processes (homeostasis) which control the ‘fight or flight’ stress-response and help to maintain psychophysical balance. The stress-response is characterised by preparing the body to react to external or internal stimuli, and after this reaction, physiological equilibrium is naturally restored. However, when stress is extreme, the stress-response becomes abnormal and homeostasis is not reestablished: this often results in muscular and emotional tension, and weakness of the immune system, affecting our well-being and behaviour.
A performer needs to maintain concentration, high levels of energy, emotional flow and a positive attitude for long hours. Therefore, it is extremely important to be constantly aware of the levels of stress he is exposed to and find ‘strategies’ to maintain that degree of awake relaxation and calmness needed for peak performance. Different authors 16-19 found that relaxation and meditative techniques are useful for this purpose and also effective in treating psychosomatic discomforts in students and professional artists. For example, Autogenic Training (AT) is a relaxation technique and therapeutic approach which has been shown useful to reduce stress and stress-related conditions 20-26.

AT was developed in the 1920s by the German neurologist and psychiatrist Dr Johannes Heinrich Schultz who was influenced by Dr Oscar Vogt, a psychiatrist and neurophysiologist famous for his research into the brain. Dr Vogt and Dr Schultz worked with patients who suffered from psychosomatic discomforts and noticed that the practice of simple mental exercises to induce hypnosis were beneficial to their patients. Indeed, patients reported a sense of calmness, feelings of relaxation, and a state of well-being associated with sensations of heaviness and pleasant warmth in the body. Furthermore, discomforts such as anxiety, headaches and migraines, tiredness or fatigue were reduced or disappeared 26. Following this observation, Dr Schultz explored the possibility to induce a similar state of relaxation without practising hypnosis. He found that using passive concentration in combination with verbal formulas of ‘heaviness’ and ‘warmth’ in the limbs, and directing attention to these sensations, helped to stimulate the body’s relaxation response.

Dr Wolfgang Luthe, a physician who was interested in psychosomatic medicine, contributed to the further development of Autogenic Training which later became known as Autogenic Therapy. He collaborated with Dr Schultz conducting research on Autogenic Therapy and its application in clinical and non-clinical contexts. In particular, Dr Luthe studied the benefits of autogenic practice on asthma patients.

Dr Schultz aimed to offer his patients a tool to regulate their own experience and the body’s relaxation response by self-inducing a state of deep relaxation at will. He called his technique “autogenic” to underline that it develops ‘from within ourselves’: it is a process or ‘journey’ throughout our deepest Self. Indeed, regular autogenic practice enables us to become more aware of our emotions and have insight into how our responses to negative emotions may affect our behaviour and performance at work and in life. Emotional awareness is particularly important for a performer to be ‘present’, confident and ‘in control’ on the stage. In this sense, the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung 27 emphasizes that

“Richness of mind consists in mental receptivity … What comes to us from outside, and, for that matter, everything that rises up from within, can only be made our own if we are capable of an inner amplitude equal to that of the incoming content. Real increase of personality means consciousness of an enlargement that flows from inner sources” (p. 63).

In the last few decades there has been an increased interest in studying the mind-body relationship. For example, research on mind-body interactions 28, placebo effect, immune and related physiological responses 29 has brought evidence that there is an intimate relationship between mind and body, and mind/body/health, and that emotions can have a positive or negative impact on our physical well-being.

Our experience is registered in the brain consciously (Conscious Mind) or unconsciously (Unconscious Mind). The conscious registered experience presupposes an active or critical thinking. In the unconscious mind are registered past experiences, perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings we are not aware of,
but which may be brought to consciousness. The Unconscious is also connected to important bodily functions such as breathing and heartbeat: it plays a fundamental role in our emotional response and behaviour to new situations.

Dr. Schultz observed that regular autogenic practice supports homeostasis, the balance between the sympathetic (‘flight or fight’ response) and parasympathetic nervous system (‘rest and digest’ processes). This resulted in a shift from a state of physical and mental arousal to psychophysiological rest and recuperative processes. The relaxation response achieved through regular autogenic practice was associated to a feeling of heaviness and warmth in the limbs; relief of muscular tension; slowing down of the heartbeat; drop in blood pressure and cortisol (the ‘stress’ hormone); and an improvement of blood circulation and breathing functions. For example, an increase in blood circulation and skin temperature are important to ‘warm up’ muscles and articulations before training or performing. This helps to reduce muscular tension and the risk of injuries. Through stimulating physiological and mental processes, as mentioned above, AT aids to maintain a calm attitude switching off the ‘fight or flight’ response, for example in a situation which may cause emotional stress and pressure, such as a performance. People practising AT can also become aware of emotions that they have suppressed. Indeed, regular autogenic practice brings more emotional awareness and openness to feelings helping to release disturbing or repressed emotions accumulated in the brain thus reducing stress and stress-related discomforts, including performance anxiety. Therefore, the Autogenic Therapist has an important role in monitoring the individual’s autogenic process, helping the person to manage painful feelings which may come to surface. For example, I taught AT to a dancer who had a bad knee injury which had been treated one year earlier. Her main complaint was anxiety: she woke up often during the night worried about getting ‘stiffness’ in her legs and not being able to dance. Regular autogenic practice, together with the autogenic exercise to off-load anxiety, enabled my client to be more aware of her feelings, release disturbing emotions and reduce her fear of being unable to dance. She also became aware that her anxiety and fear was related to the previous knee injury.

Autogenic Training works through the practice of simple mental exercises focusing on different parts of the body, such as the limbs, heartbeat, breathing, solar plexus, neck and shoulders, using ‘passive concentration’ (‘passive observer’ attitude). In an autogenic session, the Autogenic Therapist leads the practice, speaking several times the autogenic formulas in a specific sequence and number of repetitions (for example, “My arms and legs are heavy” when focusing on the limbs) while the client is sitting or lying down with closed eyes in one of the autogenic postures. AT brings about exploration of feelings ‘in the moment’ and the regulation of brain and body processes through self-suggestion. The autogenic exercises are short and simple and can be practiced wherever and whenever needed - taking between 1 to 15 minutes - and also before or after a performance, e.g. to enhance focus, concentration and emotional flow or restore homeostasis and promote sleep, respectively.

Regular autogenic practice has been found to be useful for enhancing physical and mental performance in writers, poets, opera singers, pianists and other artists. For example, Luthe and Schultz found that "Sportsmen, writers, poets, opera singers, pianists, and others whose professional activity requires high standards of specialized mental or physical performance noted after variable periods of regular standard training, that their performance had greatly improved while at the same time becoming less strenuous and exhausting" (p. 154).
Passive concentration combined with autogenic formulas helps to develop Self-observation skills and awareness of our behaviour patterns so that we are more likely to influence or modify them at will. Through self-awareness we can develop an understanding of ourselves, our own strengths and weaknesses, beliefs, feelings and motivations. Indeed, as Grotowski 31 states

“For each individual … it must be clearly established what it is that blocks his intimate associations, thus causing his lack of decision, the chaos of his expression and his lack of discipline; what prevents him from experiencing the feeling of his own freedom, that his organism is completely free and powerful, and that nothing is beyond his capabilities” (p.97).

For performers, self-awareness is the first step to achieve a state of flow which is characterized by intentionally directed focus and absorption in a specific activity, providing an experience of complete mastery in performance or what is described as being ‘In the Zone’.

Most training in performing arts academies focuses mainly or exclusively on fostering students’ technical skills but not on emotional awareness or prevention of performance-related distress. Performers should be aware that “The Mind affects the Body …” 32(p7) and find strategies to cope with emotional stress.

Autogenic Training can be effective for performers to be ‘emotionally and physically prepared’ as it involves mental and bodily functions simultaneously: “Apart from the fact that the autogenic exercises reduce tension and have a calming effect in general, there is substantial evidence of a gain in central nervous system elaboration and coordination” 30(p154).

Regular autogenic practice can also be beneficial to:

- Value personal skills and inner potential
- Acknowledge the source of possibly emerging tensions
- Be ‘present’, relaxed but ‘awake’
- Enhance concentration, self-esteem and creativity
- Have a degree of positive ‘emotional arousal’
- Maintain focus and energy for long hours
- Support psychophysical balance

Either as a ‘tool box’ for preventing and reducing stress, as a way to enhance focus, self-confidence and creativity, or simply as a relaxation technique, Autogenic Training represents a useful resource to self-empowerment.
References


