



Stress-free Learning

The LAST thing we need more of in our lives is STRESS. It's thought that, for short periods, stress can be energizing and harmless. Over time, however, stress can be downright debilitating.

Name 3 situations where YOU feel stressed:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

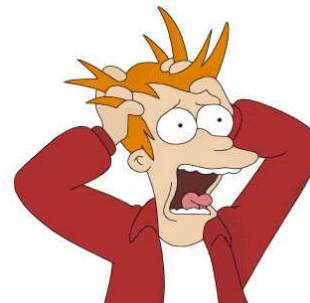
This stress reaction is both physical and emotional. Some common signs of unhealthy stress are: Feeling nervous, sad or angry • Fast pounding heartbeat • Hard time breathing • Sweating • Pain or tense muscles in the neck, shoulders, back, jaw or face • Headaches • Feeling tired or having trouble sleeping • Constipation or diarrhea • Upset stomach, lack of appetite or weight loss.

Name 3 ways stress affects you physically/emotionally:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

When we invite someone to join us in this wonderful activity by attending classes and they accept ... guess what? They have just volunteered for a potentially very stressful situation. It is OUR responsibility as instructors to remove as much stress as possible from this learning experience. But HOW?

First, we need to understand how stress interferes with the learning process. When the human body is under stress, it releases a hormone called **cortisol**. In low levels, cortisol can actually increase learning and enhance memory. That's good! *However, in higher levels, cortisol can lead to cognitive deficits and memory impairment.* That's NOT good. This means, the instructor is walking a razor's edge ... a little stress is good, but how do you know when you may have crossed that line and the stress level is "in the red?"



Acknowledging this very human reaction to the situation is crucial. I tell the following story on the second night of class; I tell it because it's true and because it levels the field for what we all experience.

When my father was learning to square dance, I would call him every Monday to see how his Sunday lesson had progressed. One Monday I called him and he said the

lesson had been awful. “What happened?” I asked him. “I couldn’t remember anything!!! Everything the caller said made no sense!! I was never where I was supposed to be! It was AWFUL!!!” I couldn’t help but laugh but my father was not amused. “Why are you laughing?” he growled at me. “Because,” I explained, “Daddy, that’s just normal! It happens to everyone at one time or another.” He then said something profound. “If it’s so ‘normal,’ WHY don’t they tell us???” I had no answer for that at the time, but I made sure from that day forward, I TELL my people!! EVERYONE is going to have one of “those” nights at some time during the lessons. Even your callers have “those” nights! Heaven help us if we all have one on the same night!

That usually gets a lot of heads nodding and laughter. Recognizing and admitting our humanity is healing and bonding.

Do you know the time during class when your new dancers are “peak learning?” The first 20 minutes and the last 10. Make good use of that time! A very short review, followed by teaching new material during those first 20 minutes is taking advantage of a physiological fact. Use those first 20 minutes very carefully. During the last 10 minutes of class, TEACH something!!! BUT ... tell them they don’t have to remember it, because you’re going to re-teach it first thing next class. You have just removed the stress!! And, you’ll be amazed at how well they actually do recall it, come the next class.

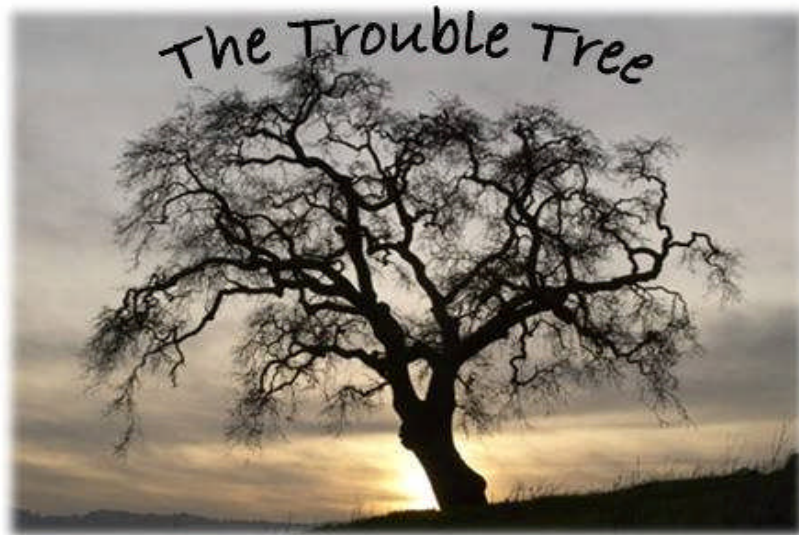
Watch your dancers for signs of stress during the rest of the teaching time. Ask your partner to also watch. If either of you see hunched shoulders, scowling faces, deer-in-the-headlight looks, anger, hands being thrown up in the air or a white flag being waved, it’s time for a stress reliever!!!! STOP and regroup. LAUGHTER is the greatest stress reliever; therefore, HUMOR can be your very best friend.

Here are some **suggestions** for (humorous) interjections:



- 1) Have an Etch-A-Sketch moment. Stop the instructing and tell everyone it’s time for an Etch- A-Sketch moment. The first time you use this, there will be confused faces. Demonstrate it by leaning forward slightly from the waist, dropping your head and giving it several rapid shakes. Have everyone do it. There will be laughter. Just that small break will result in stress relief.
- 2) Stop and tell a short, humorous story.
- 3) Stop and point out something someone just did that was awesome - I give verbal “gold stars.”
- 4) Touch someone!! A hand on the shoulder can be comforting!
- 5) Get them quickly in a squared set; then have them turn to their corner and say “Well, THAT went well!” The camaraderie will cause laughter and the stress will diminish.
- 6) Acknowledge that a limit has been reached. I’ve said, “Folks, I think we’ve all hit our wall!” The sighs, nodding heads and laughter from the floor told me I was absolutely right.
- 7) Scatter promenade (mix up) your squares and do a party dance routine. Keep it very simple and short so they can succeed.

- 8) Do a quick mixer, like Patty Cake Polka.
- 9) A deep breathing break of 3-4 breaths will help. Stop the action and tell folks, "Breathe with me!!"
- 10) When squares are struggling, stop and make this suggestion: "Hey, Folks? When squares break down, just look at everyone else like it was their fault!" That usually gets a grin.
- 11) Use the "Trouble Tree." I made it into poster size and it's at the table for every class, as well as at our club dances.



You can't bring troubles into a Square Dance ... your mind and the music won't let you! So you're invited to hang yours on the Trouble Tree, where you can pick them up on your way out ~ but only if you really want to!

Created by Deborah Carroll-Jones Square Dance Caller

The important thing is to stop and let them relax a bit. Never forget that these folks are here for RECREATION. If the situation becomes too intense or negative, they won't come back; they don't have to!

Our own mood as instructors sets the ambience for the class. If you have had a stressful day/a stressful drive to class, you will bring that into the learning experience. Take a few minutes before going in to do some deep breathing, stretching or listen to a song that makes you smile. Leave YOUR stress in the car ... it'll be there after class if you'd like to reclaim it.



Keep a smile on your face and there will be a smile in your voice. That's your primary contact with the dancers ... until you send them out the door with a hug!