

Dance Studio Owners and Recital Anxiety: How to Transform Your Stress into Success

Interview with Kathy Blake

Erica Marcus: Today we are talking with Kathy Blake about anxiety around recital time. Hi Kathy.

Kathy Blake: Hi Erica.

Erica: Hi. Will you tell us a little about your studio, please?

Kathy: Yes. I run a full-service dance studio in Southern New Hampshire in a very affluent community. We have over a thousand students ranging from very early preschoolers to adults, and we do all the styles of dance: ballet, tap dance, theatre, ballroom, and hip-hop. We also have a very vibrant arts community here.

Erica: Okay, great! I'll just jump in with the first question. What are some specific things that the owners can do to alleviate the anxiety and stress at recital time?

Kathy: Well, it's always interesting to note in my own experience of having a studio for 35 years how the anxiety never goes away. There is always something to be worried or concerned about. Even with all of the experience that both I and my staff have, we get pre-performance jitters. There are a thousand details to have to manage.

Whether you run a very small studio and it's your first recital with one performance, or like ourselves; we have seven performances over a three-day period in a theatre, and the logistics are just daunting. What I have noticed is that I have recurring nightmares every year no matter how successful the prior year has been.

[Laughter]

Kathy: I have these anxiety moments like, "I can't get to the theatre on time. I have forgotten something. I'm there on the wrong day." It is actually comical to note how much anxiety both myself and my staff have, regardless of how many times we have done it successfully, how many wonderful shows we've put on, or how adept we are at managing details.

I've looked at that myself. I have a master's degree in psychology and I look at myself, and I say, "What is at the source of this anxiety?" I've realized that we are committed to our students having an extraordinary performing opportunity. We're committed to our audience being delighted by the level of artistry, by the excitement, the lights, the

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costuming, and the backdrop. We are so committed to providing a memory that will last a lifetime that it would actually be inappropriate for us to not bring such concern to it.

It isn't really the fear of the unknown as much as it is the desire to do a really good job. Sometimes when you've done such a great job in the past, you almost worry, "Am I going to be able to do that again? How will I meet that expectation?"

In many ways, the more successful you get the more you still have to meet an expectation of your clientele. It is amazing that no matter what, you have pre-performance jitters and butterflies in your stomach. You wake up with lists, and your lists have lists, and your staff worries, and you worry.

What I would like to say to all studio owners out there is that there is nothing wrong. It's just the way it is when you're putting on a show for people, and you want it to be great.

Erica: Right. So there is no way to get rid of it. That's the weird thing. How do you try to deal with or lessen it, if you can?

Kathy: What I do is double and triple check with my staff. I make sure that I have people on task and we keep a 12-month notebook for our recital. We have notebooks that have notebooks. Year-to-year we debrief on whatever didn't work as well as we would have liked it to work in the past.

We have checklists. Checklists are invaluable! We have checklists of props right down to remembering glue, scotch tape, and anything else you need. "What does your theatre provide for the stage?"

Erica: Just to note, we have checklists like that available for studio owners to use.

Kathy: That is wonderful! What you want to do is to have checklists that are appropriate to your individual class props and needs, to tickets, to "Do you have enough change with you to make change? Is there someone at the door? Do you have people on post for refreshments?"

You can't over plan. I'm going to repeat that; you cannot over plan! Plan, create lists and appropriate these lists to the right people, have name tags for backstage helpers, and label everything.

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What every studio owner wants to do is instill the confidence in their students and the students' parents that you are able to manage the inevitable excitement and chaos of the backstage, the way the show runs.

If you can't manage a detail, you need to make sure that you have someone who will do it. This requires many volunteers and being sure that you're always willing to look at what went right and what went wrong last year. Or if you're a new studio owner, "What are your expectations for the day?"

There is no studio owner who hasn't either participated in performances of other studios, or who isn't responsible for it in their own studio, ongoing. Checklists, checklists, checklists, and check your checklist. Make sure that you're holding your people accountable for what is on that checklist, and always update your checklist with new printouts from your computer.

We use clipboards for everything. Everyone has a clipboard in their hands. Everybody knows what's on their checklist to manage so that no detail goes unnoticed. That is the best way that you can instill confidence. If you are trying to keep anything in your head or remember it, you're going to set yourself up for failure.

For the most part, I alleviate anxiety by being sure that everyone knows what they are supposed to do when, and they have it in writing in front of them so that I don't have to worry about people forgetting things.

Erica: Okay, great. That sounds like it will definitely help a lot. How do you work toward the recital throughout the year in such a way that will minimize the stress and anxiety?

Kathy: As I had spoken briefly about before, we have a 12-month calendar, and we have things that we have to do each and every month of the year. The day after or two days after, my stage manager, or my basic key personnel debrief with everyone.

We send a letter to evaluate our backstage workers. Be sure you're willing to be open to both the positive and negative feedback after a performance. Being willing to be responsible for what went wrong and take the credit for what went right and then build upon that is very important.

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Be responsible each and every month for what needs to be done. Have a plan and work your plan all the way through. The other thing that we do, and I feel personally responsible as the owner and director of the studio, is to maintain an attitude of celebration towards the performance.

We are celebrating the hard work of the year. It's like having the party. First, you have to plan the party, go out and market, cook the food, and invite the guests. But on the day of the party, or the day of the wedding, or the day of the show, it's time to celebrate all of the hard work that everyone has done.

At our studio, whether it's at a faculty meeting or with a parent, sometimes parents will share with me their anxiety over, "Oh my daughter's nervous. My son has never danced on stage before." I just talk about the fact that it's a time to celebrate life and to celebrate dancing. We keep the attitude of optimism.

We don't put the pressure on to perform. Of course, advanced students want to go out there and knock 'em dead with their technical expertise, but no matter what level a student, whether it's the first time on stage or the 101st time, it's the director's responsibility to keep an attitude of fun, play, and celebration in the performance.

If you do that month-to-month, day-to-day, then regardless of your own anxiety about wanting everything to go right, you don't have to show up looking nervous or being nervous. You have to maintain your poise and professionalism and not bring your anxiety, or talk about anxiety, in the public place.

Erica: Right. You talked a little bit before about how you stay organized with clipboards. What other ways do you stay organized for your recitals?

Kathy: We have many, many open containers and buckets with labels on them. In our backstage area, we may have a bucket with tape and scotch tape, and another one with makeup, bobby pins, and hair ties. We make sure that people aren't frantically looking for things by organizing those things ahead of time.

We have little stands, almost like what you would stick a menu in. We keep our kids backstage organized by class for each performance with parent helpers. We make sure that every table is labeled so that when people come in, they know exactly where to go. People do not do well with the unknown or that which is not clearly labeled, so we keep everything in containers.

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We make sure that we have all of the sound. Everything is labeled and organized in boxes, crates, or cartons and then people know who is responsible for bringing what. You cannot over plan or over organize. The only thing you can do is under organize. So no matter what, we create notebooks for each recital performance which are all different. We have seven different shows and none of them has the exact same cast in them.

We have our lighting sheets and the order of performance put on the walls in the halls. When the kids are changing, they can look up in a moment and see where they are in the performance order. We make sure that everything is labeled and there are visible signs on the walls. When people are clear that you're managing them, they will be manageable. Does that make any sense?

Erica: Yes, that does make sense.

Kathy: Yes. It really requires extraordinary organization and management. Only experience, year-to-year, performance-to-performance, will bring a polish to that.

One of my objectives in our dance studio owner work is that we help studios to be successful, to avoid the ongoing stress of having parents complain at the end of a performance that it was chaotic or that it was not well managed.

No matter how great your dance training is, if you do not put on a polished performance that is well managed, you will not succeed! It is not possible to succeed in this business without proper management of your performances. That would be my wish and my gift to people.

Erica: Great! It sounds like the top three things that you touched on were being super organized, making sure that everyone knows what they are doing, having it in front of them in writing, and looking back at last year's performance to see how you can make things better. Is there anything else that you would like to add to this?

Kathy: Well, I would say that having jitters backstage and butterflies in your stomach goes with the territory of any performance. Just consider that it really isn't fear or anxiety as much as it is the excitement, joy, and the thrill, the absolute thrill of creating the magic of live performance for your students and your students' families.

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I am moved every year by the absolute unspeakable joy that you see on the faces of all of these young children and their parents, and the tears that are shed over the beauty of seeing young performers live their dream on stage.

It's the lights, action, camera, and the magic of live performance. That's what makes it all worthwhile.

Erica: Great Kathy. Thank you so much!

Kathy: You are very welcome. Have a great show everyone!