

Madeleine Hallé, PhD — Performance Psychologist

A “BOOST” FOR THE ELITE

Stage fright, or performance anxiety, is a common affliction among athletes, musicians, actors, public speakers — and even performers at the world-renowned Cirque du Soleil.

It might surprise you that these high-profile artists — who embody the upper echelon of physical ability — grapple with fear and self-doubt. And it's up to performance psychologist Madeleine Hallé, PhD, a consultant with Cirque du Soleil, to quell their anxiety and prepare them for the show.

In her research, Hallé finds that lack of training is almost never the cause of performance anxiety; the psychological component is usually the culprit.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE CIRCUS

Injury prevention isn't only about the physical training required for Cirque du Soleil performers — self-confidence plays a huge role in whether they will execute effectively (and safely), as Hallé reported in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.¹

“Low self-efficacy brings doubts and anxiety and decreases the full concentration that's absolutely necessary,” says Hallé. “We have to understand what creates confidence. We have to listen to what creates the situation.”

After conducting a survey among trainees, Hallé and a co-author learned that performers with low self-efficacy — i.e., a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed — were almost twice as likely to be injured as those who exhibited high self-efficacy, in spite of their relatively equal skills and training.

In other words, additional training will not protect performers from injury, but mentally preparing and visualizing their success could be the protection they need to succeed.

BALANCING ACT

For many new Cirque du Soleil performers, the transition from athlete to artist can be humbling. And that includes overcoming the identity crisis that is common among new Cirque performers.

“Here, everyone is at the same level, even if they have Olympic medals,” says Hallé.

On top of meeting grueling physical expectations, adapting to a new creative process can be a challenging mental experience as well. “They don't know how to cope with the fact that we go in one direction one day, and the day after it's the complete opposite,” says Hallé. “We work on the transfer of their skills from their previous life to right now.”

Hallé also attends to issues such as homesickness, workload issues and crisis management.

A UNIQUE POSITION

Among the wide range of careers available to psychologists, Hallé's job is uncommon, and she appreciates what she has.

“It's a fantastic environment to work in,” says Hallé. “I'm really lucky to be able to work here.”

And what would she say is the best thing about working with Cirque du Soleil performers?

“The best thing about my job is certainly to work with fantastic performance artists, but also to obtain their trust,” she says. “I help them adjust to their own identity by making sure they can transfer their skills that they have as athletes to this new role they have as artists.”



Christine Muschi

“I help [performers] adjust to their own identity by making sure they can transfer their skills that they have as athletes to this new role they have as artists.”

SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

Sport and performance psychologists identify psychological principles that can be applied to facilitate peak performance among athletes and in other performance-demanding venues.

¹ Shrier, I., & Hallé, M. (2011). Psychological Predictors of Injury in Circus Artists: An Exploratory Study, *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 45, 433-436.