

Dancehealth

Debbie Malina looks at Sophrology

Dynamic relaxation

Relatively few people in the UK know very much about Sophrology at present, although its benefits have been used and appreciated across many parts of Europe for more than 50 years. In essence, this structured technique is safe and gentle, combining breathing, relaxation, concentration and visualisation exercises together with some simple movements.

Although Sophrology draws from a range of existing practices – encompassing yoga, hypnotherapy and guided meditation – it is a new discipline that has reshaped these techniques into a purpose-designed and structured approach. The method is holistic and non-invasive, using elements of eastern and western traditions, focusing on enabling body and mind to operate in harmony.

In France it has been used over many years and is widely employed in a range of areas including education, medicine, dance, sports and athletics. Hospitals find it helps patients prepare for surgical procedures or childbirth; school pupils benefit from learning to concentrate better and cope more easily with the anxiety of exams, while multi-national companies regularly

run Sophrology courses enabling staff to reduce their stress levels.

The concept behind Sophrology was devised by Professor Alfonso Caycedo during the middle of the 20th century. Having moved to Spain from his native Colombia to study medicine, Caycedo specialised in psychiatry and neurology. Faced with the limited range of treatments available at that time for patients suffering with psychiatric illness, Caycedo felt there needed to be better options than drugs, chemicals and electroshock therapy. When he found many patients were wary of using hypnosis, Caycedo devised a new approach and called it Sophrology. This word was derived from ancient Greek: *Sos* meaning serenity and harmony, *Phren* equating to spirit and consciousness while *Logos* translates as science and study.

As he was developing ideas for the technique Caycedo became interested in understanding more about different aspects of modifying consciousness. This led him to embark on a three-year trip to the Far East encompassing India, Tibet and Japan, subsequently

he incorporated elements of his findings into the new method.

During the 1960s he spent time studying in Switzerland with Dr Raymond Abrezol. This doctor became so enthusiastic about the technique that he proceeded to use Sophrology while coaching the Swiss ski team that subsequently gained several Olympic gold medals. Dr Abrezol has continued to be instrumental in promoting the system, both in Switzerland and in several other European countries.

While there are many Academies of Sophrology in French-speaking countries, until relatively recently little was known about the approach in the English-speaking world. A few years ago, however, this situation changed when the method was translated into English by Scottish-born Dorna Wilson-Revie, who had trained and qualified with Caycedo. In 2006 she held the first English-spoken Sophrology course in Geneva; since then, interest has been spreading and it is now used in Canada, the US and Australia. The first Sophrology Academy in the UK opened last year.

Sophrology has much to offer dancers. As well as helping to deal with stress and anxiety, it can improve concentration ➤



and help anticipate performance through positive visualisation. The method can be used for personal development, coping with pain management, overcoming addictions and addressing body image issues. When using the technique dancers learn to identify specific physical tensions and are then able to relax quickly, allowing them to focus energy in areas where it is needed. Different breathing techniques can limit stress, calming associated symptoms such as palpitations, trembling and sweating.

Florence Parot is the founder and director of the Sophrology Academy in Kent, which opened in May last year, and is the first school in the UK to train professional Sophrologists. “The technique is a holistic balancing method,” she comments. “Sophrology is based on relaxation and breathing techniques, concentration, visualisation and simple movements; it is at the crossroads between western relaxation techniques and eastern meditation.

“I first experienced Sophrology when I was a student, nearly 20 years ago. At the time I was suffering from burn-out, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

and fatigue. After collapsing and being taken to hospital, my GP recommended I consult a Sophrologist, which I did and this changed everything for me. From being incapacitated and hardly able to get out of bed, within a relatively short space of time I was re-energised and able to live as I wanted. The technique helped me learn how to relax and rebalanced me completely. I was able to pull out of the state I was in and get back to normal.

“Over a period of 12 years I worked as a PA for various European companies at a high level and found I was easily able to deal with all the pressures involved. Colleagues could see I was benefiting from using the technique and started asking me for advice on learning how to relax. One thing led to another, I decided to retrain and graduated from a leading Parisian school of Sophrology five years ago.

“Having opened a practice in Paris, which was situated close to the Opera House and several dance schools, I was regularly visited by dancers, both students and professionals. Dancers in France have known about Sophrology for a long time; they find it can help them to work on concentration and awareness

of the body. Several of the major dance schools and companies there often run group Sophrology sessions. Similarly, professional sports people in France have been using the method since the 1970s.

“The technique is about developing mindfulness of what you are doing. It can provide mental preparation for a specific performance or a particularly difficult enchaînement. A calm mind in a well-prepared body can help you cope with stage fright and anxiety. Dancers find the visualisation aspect of Sophrology to be especially helpful. Part of the brain will believe a visualised image has really happened; this lifts some of the anxiety of actually carrying out a movement as the mind thinks it has already done so.

“There are many other aspects and techniques involved in Sophrology as well as visualisation. For dancers it is beneficial that a lot of the work is carried out standing up, which is unusual for relaxation techniques. This enables them to learn how to concentrate and focus in any position while also working on their breathing, and is good general preparation when dancing.

“Many teachers sent their students to me as they felt they needed ‘grounding’ and were experiencing problems with concentration. The technique does give you greater ‘presence’, and can help you to be more focused in what you are learning. Sophrology can provide support for dealing with stage fright by removing tension through using a combination of breathing and imagery techniques, ➤



allowing you to feel energetic in a good way that will stop your legs shaking.

"Wherever possible, Sophrology trainers adapt the technique to the person they are working with. Many classic relaxation systems do not always offer much flexibility for the individual. Some methods encourage people to feel 'heavy', but not everyone responds to this, especially dancers, whom we prefer to help by concentrating on feeling energetic and light.

"Generally speaking, it is easier to work on an individual basis with somebody if they come to you with a specific problem. Of course, not everyone wishes to do this, and many people prefer to take part in a group session. In this situation a slightly different approach is taken; you work on more general topics, focusing perhaps on stage fright or how to be grounded. There cannot be the same level of flexibility and one has to build in a little leeway.

"While France is now absolutely packed with Sophrologists, when I came over here to open the Academy in Kent it was very much a case of starting with a blank slate – I like challenges! Having already lived in the UK some years ago, I was still pleasantly surprised by how open-minded I found everyone to be in their attitude towards the technique. People have taken to it very quickly; they are far more likely to say 'I'd like to give it a go' than the French would be, it has to be said!

"I realised there was no way I could be everywhere at once trying to 'spread the word', instead I thought that enabling others to learn the technique would be a more effective way of achieving this. So far as the dance world is concerned, currently I have a student who is a dancer and actress – she intends to take the method back to her own students once she has qualified.

"It is too early, as yet, to look at how the UK medical world is likely to react to Sophrology. However, I am starting to receive some enquiries from prospective students with medical backgrounds, for example I have a midwife on my books at present. GPs in France took a long time to accept the method – dentists, in fact, were the first off the mark to use the technique within their practices. Now it is employed across the medical field – in hospitals for pain management, sleep problems and



Florence Parot

anxiety while in private practice it is also used to treat phobias and depression.

"Throughout much of Europe there are now many dancers who will at least be aware of what the technique is about and how it works. I certainly had positive feedback from those students and dancers who came to my sessions in Paris. Dancers said they seemed to have greater confidence and were generally enjoying their dancing more, and this was confirmed by their teachers. We always work to increase the positive side of people and on the sheer joy of feeling your body in dance."

What to expect from Sophrology

During all sessions the instructor provides vocal guidance; you learn how to enter a state of deep relaxation and from this level of consciousness specific techniques are chosen to address particular concerns. One of the overall

aims of Sophrology is to help people live more consciously with their mind and body in harmony. In effect, it helps you become your own therapist, enabling you to learn how to relax, respond to stressful events and become more aware of inner resources, strengths and personal values. The various techniques used within Sophrology are adapted to create a structured method that can be used in everyday life whenever necessary.

While a minimum of four or five sessions will be sufficient to master the basic technique, for maximum benefit it is advised you attend at least 12 sessions. To gain further experience in using Sophrology you will also be asked to practise each day for a few minutes. Courses are available either within a small group of six or seven people on a weekly basis, or one-to-one with sessions being adapted for an individual's specific needs. The first session lasts approximately one hour with follow-up appointments taking 45 to 50 minutes. As part of a group the cost will be around £8 to £12, for one-to-one classes each session will be £45 to £70.

Contacts

The Sophrology Academy. For further information, visit: sophroacademy.co.uk, email: contact@sophroacademy.co.uk, tel: 07861 420059. One-to-one sessions are held at three premises based in Ashford, Faversham and Islington. Contact the Academy for details or to make an appointment.

The International Sophrology Federation is based in Geneva, and is a non-profit organisation dedicated to advancing the Sophrology profession throughout the world, setting high professional standards and building a network of qualified Sophrologists. Visit: sophrologyinternational.org, email: admin@sophrologyinternational.org, tel: +41 (0) 22 347 6357. ■

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