

Seeing Improvement

Imagery expert Eric Franklin explains the benefits of this mental technique.

By Virginia Johnson

If you want to improve everything from performance to the time it takes to recover from an injury, look no further than your own head. The secret is a simple thing called imagery, or imaging, and it is something that you already use all the time.

"Everyone uses imagery, just not systematically," says Eric Franklin, director of the Franklin Method Institute in Uster, Switzerland, and a member of the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science. "You cannot think or do anything without it."

Imaging is the process of mentally going through a movement, an emotional state or a future scenario. On a basic level, you do this when you recall a friend's face or think ahead to how nervous you are going to be on opening night. Research of sports and dance psychologists has shown such mental activity creates changes in the brain that are similar to those happening when a movement is actually performed, which means that effective visualization, or imaging, can help you do something you have never been able to do before.

Franklin, who is a former dancer, works with students and professional dancers around the world to help them harness this natural ability to improve their dancing. In June, he will teach an intensive course on imagery for dancers and teachers at the Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen.

"Dancers need to start realizing that they are not going to get better just by executing a step over and over again, but also because of what they are thinking, what they are feeling and what they are picturing while doing it," he says. "If those three things are not supporting the action, the result is not good."

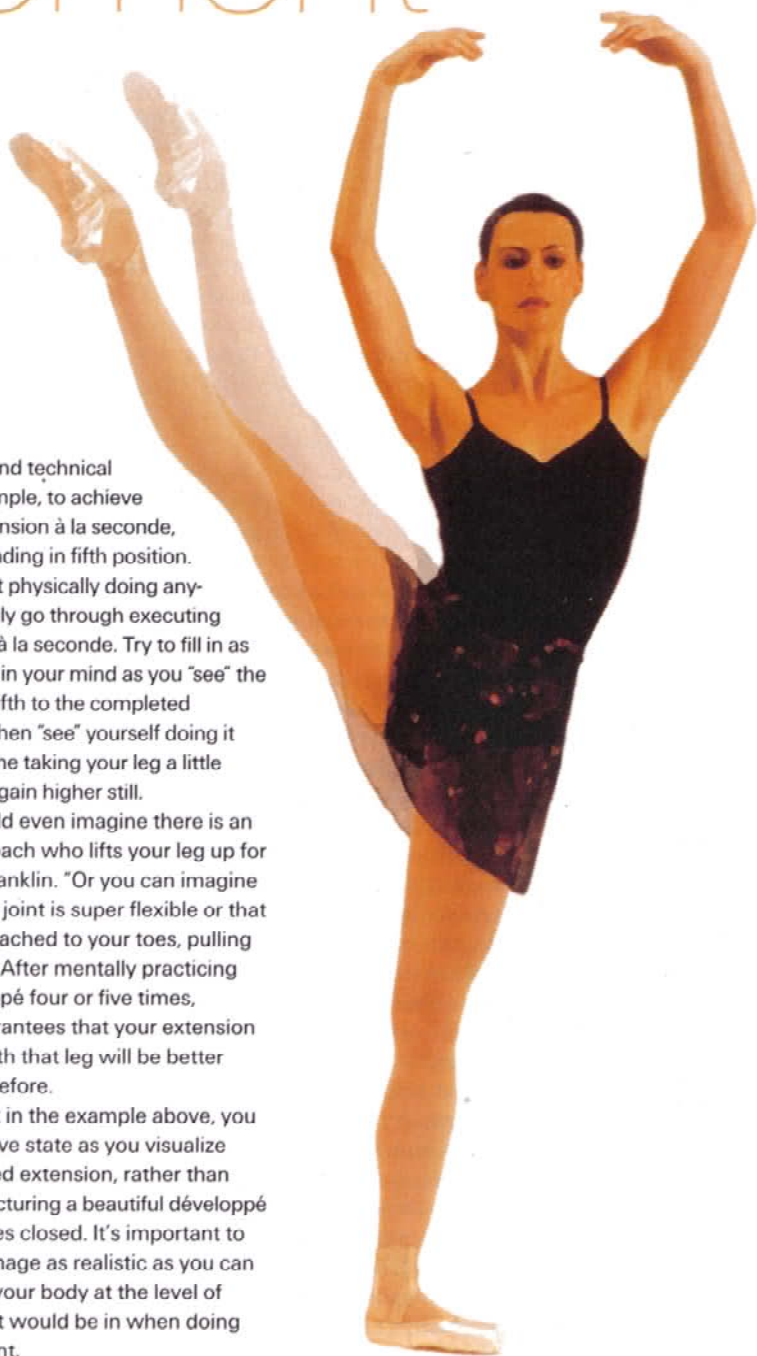
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confidence and technical skill. For example, to achieve a higher extension à la seconde, begin by standing in fifth position. Next, without physically doing anything, mentally go through executing a développé à la seconde. Try to fill in as many details in your mind as you "see" the action from fifth to the completed développé. Then "see" yourself doing it again, this time taking your leg a little higher, and again higher still.

"You could even imagine there is an imaginary coach who lifts your leg up for you," says Franklin. "Or you can imagine that your hip joint is super flexible or that a string is attached to your toes, pulling your leg up." After mentally practicing your développé four or five times, Franklin guarantees that your extension in second with that leg will be better than it was before.

Note that in the example above, you are in an active state as you visualize your improved extension, rather than sitting and picturing a beautiful développé with your eyes closed. It's important to make your image as realistic as you can and to have your body at the level of activity that it would be in when doing the movement.

"To work on your technique, I wouldn't practice imaging lying down, and I would do it with the eyes open," says Franklin.



"You dance with your eyes open, so if you practice with closed eyes, then it won't be realistic."

Successful imaging requires that your image be based on an understanding of biomechanics, literally how your bones and muscles work together to accomplish a movement. Once you've developed an image that works, put it into action using an approach that sparks your imagination. In the example above, you could have imagined someone helping you lift your leg, a string pulling your toe up or a flexible hip joint. Each of these is a different kind of image; experiment to discover what approach connects the image to a physical response.

"Basically, you want a change in the way your nerve cells are organized to

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create movement," says Franklin. "To do that, you really do need a new feeling. Until you've done that, you haven't made a fundamental change."

The easiest and most basic kind of imaging is outer, or external, perspective, in which you see yourself from the outside, as if you are watching a movie. Dancers who are just beginning to image can use an external perspective to help themselves conquer stage fright. But remember, "You must create a reality," says Franklin, "otherwise, it is a mental fantasy, not mental preparation."

When preparing for performance, "It's a great idea to imagine seeing yourself onstage, that things are going really well and the audience is clapping," Franklin says. "But it is not ideal to think of yourself feeling perfect and everything going wonderfully, because come performance day, your heart is going to be speeding, the lights are confusing and there are strange sounds from the audience—not at all like what you imaged in preparation. Instead, imagine yourself in the real environment: The lights are a little bothersome; there are lots of distracting sounds; your heart is beating, but nevertheless, you are doing great; everything is working out even though all of these stresses are all around."

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