

Community theatre thrives on collaboration, creativity, and mutual support. However, the pressures of rehearsals, performances, and social dynamics can sometimes contribute to or exacerbate feelings of anxiety and stress among members. Creating an understanding and supportive environment is crucial not only for individual well-being but also for the health and success of the group.

Here are some practical tips for NODA groups to support members experiencing anxiety and stress and some signposts to relevant UK resources.

### Creating a Supportive and Inclusive Environment

Prevention and early support start with the group's culture:

1. **Foster Open Communication:** Encourage an atmosphere where members feel comfortable talking about challenges without fear of judgment. Check in with members regularly, not just about show-related tasks.
2. **Clear Expectations & Scheduling:** Provide clear schedules, role expectations, and communication channels well in advance. Uncertainty can be a major trigger for anxiety.
3. **Promote Flexibility:** Where possible, be understanding if a member needs to take a break, arrive slightly late, or adjust their commitment temporarily. Reassure them that their well-being comes first.
4. **Buddy System/Mentoring:** Consider pairing new members or those who seem less confident with more experienced, supportive members.
5. **Designated Point of Contact:** Having a specific committee member or a dedicated welfare officer (if feasible) that members know they can approach confidentially can be very helpful.
6. **Mindful Rehearsals:** Incorporate short breaks or simple grounding/mindfulness exercises at the start or end of intense rehearsals.
7. **Celebrate Effort, Not Just Perfection:** Emphasise the joy of participation and teamwork, reducing pressure solely focused on a flawless performance.

## Recognising Potential Signs

While group members are not expected to be mental health experts, being aware of potential signs can help you offer support sensitively. These might include:

- Noticeable changes in behaviour (e.g., withdrawal, irritability, tearfulness).
- Appearing constantly worried or on edge.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering lines/blocking.
- Avoiding social interaction within the group.
- Frequent unexplained absences.
- Physical symptoms like restlessness, fatigue, or panic attacks (shortness of breath, racing heart).

## Responding with Support

If you notice someone struggling or if a member confides in you:

1. **Listen Actively & Non-Judgmentally:** Offer a private space to talk. Let them share as much or as little as they want. Avoid interrupting or offering unsolicited advice. Simply validating their feelings ("That sounds really tough") can help.
2. **Offer Practical Adjustments:** Ask if there's anything the group can do to help. This might be adjusting rehearsal schedules, breaking down tasks, providing extra support with lines, or ensuring they have someone to sit with during breaks. Consider if these could be 'reasonable adjustments' (see Legal Considerations).
3. **Respect Confidentiality:** Maintain confidentiality unless you have serious concerns about their immediate safety or the safety of others (follow safeguarding procedures if applicable).
4. **Gently Encourage Professional Help:** You can suggest they speak to their GP or explore mental health resources, but don't push. Frame it as a positive step towards feeling better.
5. **Signpost to Resources:** Provide information about the organisations listed below.
6. **Avoid Pressure:** Don't force participation or make them feel guilty for struggling. Reassure them their place in the group is valued.

## UK Signposting Resources

Here are some key UK organisations that provide information, support, and services for anxiety, stress, and mental health:

- **NHS (National Health Service):**
  - **GP (General Practitioner):** Often the first point of contact for mental health concerns. They can assess, provide advice, prescribe medication if appropriate, and refer to specialist services.
  - **NHS Talking Therapies (formerly IAPT):** Self-referral or GP referral psychological

therapy services for common issues like anxiety and depression. Search "NHS Talking Therapies" online for local services.

- **NHS 111:** For urgent mental health advice if you can't contact your GP or need immediate support.
- **Mental Health Charities:**
  - **Mind:** Provides extensive information and support for all mental health problems. Has local branches. InfoLine: 0300 123 3393, Website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
  - **Anxiety UK:** Charity specifically for anxiety, stress, and anxiety-based depression. Offers support services including therapy. Helpline: 03444 775 774, Website: [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)
  - **Samaritans:** Confidential emotional support 24/7 for anyone in distress. Helpline: 116 123 (free), Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)
  - **Rethink Mental Illness:** Provides support and information for people affected by severe mental illness. Advice Line: 0808 801 0525, Website: [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)
- **Arts Specific:**
  - **ArtsMinds:** A resource hub for mental health support within the performing arts. Website: [www.artsminds.co.uk](http://www.artsminds.co.uk)
- **NODA:**
  - Check the NODA website ([www.noda.org.uk](http://www.noda.org.uk)) or contact NODA directly for any specific member welfare resources or guidance they offer.

## Legal Considerations

- **Equality Act 2010:** This Act protects people from discrimination. Mental health conditions, such as significant anxiety or stress-related disorders, can be considered a disability under the Act if they have a substantial and long-term adverse effect on someone's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.
- **Reasonable Adjustments:** If a member's condition meets the definition of a disability, the group has a legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to avoid disadvantaging them. This could include things like providing information in different formats, allowing flexibility in schedules, or modifying certain tasks, where reasonable for the group to do so.
- **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (HASAWA):** This Act requires organisations (including potentially volunteer groups controlling premises or activities) to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their members and others affected by their activities. This includes managing risks related to work-related stress and mental health. Risk assessments should consider psychological hazards as well as physical ones.
- **Duty of Care:** Groups generally have a common law duty of care towards their members, which includes taking reasonable steps to ensure their health, safety and wellbeing during group activities.

**Important Disclaimer:** This information provides general guidance and signposting. Committee members and fellow group participants may not be mental health or legal professionals. The focus should always be on creating a supportive peer environment and signposting individuals towards professional help when needed. Ensure your group has appropriate safeguarding policies in place and consider seeking specific advice if complex situations arise regarding legal duties.

By fostering a culture of understanding and knowing where to turn for help, your group can be a positive and enriching experience for all members, even during challenging times.