

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY:

How to make nervousness work for you.

Presented by Charlie Bertini

All performers experience nervousness. Here are 7 keys to making the most of your nerves through understanding. When we can identify the source of our nervousness, we can use positive energy to overcome it.

From middle school through college, or as a music director, we've all had to deal with nerves. Sadly, our nerves can totally destroy a performance that was well prepared and rehearsed. This strategy will address these issues with awareness, common sense and discipline.

What is performance anxiety? It is neurotic expectations of the *unknown* based upon *imaginary results* from something that has not yet happened.

Performance anxiety, or stage fright, is what happens when you focus on yourself and your fears, rather than your performance. It's the result of thinking of the performance situation as a *threat*, rather than a *challenge*.

You get so involved in your internal struggle that you don't get involved with the actual performance.

One of the keys to mastering stage fright is to become truly involved in, and focused on, your *material*. Not on yourself!

Expect, and accept, that you will feel anxious, especially at first. That's OK. If you allow yourself to work *with* the anxiety, not against it, you'll be able to calm down and proceed. If you resist the anxiety, you'll make more trouble for yourself.

Our brains don't differentiate between clear and present danger and the perception of it. In response to stress, your adrenal glands pump the hormone epinephrine (adrenaline) into your bloodstream, causing your body to shift into a state of high arousal. Your muscles tense, you sweat and shake, your heart pounds, your mouth goes dry, you have trouble breathing, you may become nauseated or dizzy, and your throat constricts, making your voice rise in pitch. This is the so-called "fight or flight" response, which our species is thought to have developed because it helped prepare the body for forceful action in response to a threat. But what Cro-Magnon man needed upon finding a bear in his cave is not what a modern person needs in order to play a recital. *Without the release of abrupt action*, the hyper activation basically becomes a panic attack.

Many persons are actually capable of presenting or performing with minimal stage fright, but have so accepted anxiety as their norm that they've come to expect it. And, of course, the "expected" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We plan for what we expect, then actually accomplish it. It's amazing that the human brain is capable of this kind of self-destruction and performance sabotage, but it is.

The body accommodates the mind, and the mind assists the body in carrying out actions, even those that are not healthy and productive – or even that we think are satisfying. Ironically, when the mind succeeds in failing this way, it does succeed. But it has succeeded in failing!

SEVEN POSITIVE KEYS TO DEALING WITH PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

1 determination

Be prepared: practice, practice, practice!

Make your performance your message to the audience.

We become what we think. If you think you can't do something, you are usually correct.

Your mind and body will see to it that you're right, so think positively.

If you expect to fail, you may very well do so.

Be determined to give your best performance.

2 energy

Take the emotions and passion you *feel* for your solo and channel it into your performance.

Express it!

Strive to become the best you can be at whatever level you have achieved at that time.

Stay in the moment.

Give thanks for your talents and abilities.

3 perspective

Accept yourself for who you are, and don't feel like you have to prove yourself to others.

Give yourself permission to be you.

4 courage

Once we see anxiety for what it is, it ceases to have power.

Don't focus on what *could* go wrong. Instead focus on the positive. Visualize your success.

What you have to express is something unique.

Enjoy what you've accomplished, and others will enjoy it, too.

5 focus

Don't focus on your anxiety. Instead, shift the focus from yourself and your fears to the enjoyment you are providing to your audience.

Your focus should not be on worrying about outcomes or consequences or on how you're being perceived, but simply on the task at hand.

6 poise

Act natural and be yourself.

Connect with your audience – smile, make eye contact, think of them as friends.

Act calmly, even if you feel nervous.

See your listeners as allies who are supportive and want you to do well.

Laugh when you can. It can help you relax.

Make yourself look good. When you look good, you feel good.

Stand up straight. Breathe. Listen to your breathing.

Enjoy what you are doing and convey that to your listeners.

7 resilience

Try to overlook minor errors when you perform. Overall impressions are more important to the audience than note-perfect performances.

Audiences do not want you to fail.

Faith is powerful and overcomes anxiety every time.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

Listen to what you know, instead of what you fear.

Richard Bach

The task ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you.

Ugandan proverb

It's wonderful to strive for peak performance.

It's absurd to be paralyzed by fear of not being perfect.

Jonathan Berent, L.C.S.W.

Playing the piano, it's not brain surgery. If I don't do well, nobody's going to die. What you're trying to do is share music with people who want to hear music. So why all the fuss? It's a terrible waste of time.

Emmanuel Ax

TOOLS

Some performers welcome stage fright, and don't actually wish it gone. For them, it is almost a badge of honor, or at least proof that they're serious about their work. But for those who must deal with it, here are some strategies that might help.

Look for opportunities for exposure to mild or moderate levels of stress that challenge but do not overwhelm your coping skills. For example, *visualization of the performance*.

Be thoroughly prepared. Nothing replaces adequate time spent in rehearsal and practice. Practice performances. Attend dress rehearsals. Record yourself and critique the playback.

Limit caffeine and sugar intake the day of the performance. Eat a sensible meal a few hours before you are to perform so that you have energy and don't get hungry.

Got sudden "cotton-mouth?" Raise your tongue to the roof of your mouth and hold it there. This opens up your salivary glands and provides some moisture.

Your heart pounding doesn't have to trigger anxious thoughts. You can ask yourself what you want instead: clear thinking, easy breathing, and less tension.

Don't let anxiety prevent you from experiencing joy and satisfaction in your performance. Feelings of anxiety are natural, and can be used to your advantage. Use it as positive energy.

Special breathing techniques are often recommended as coping strategies. The Alexander Technique's approach is the whispered "ah." All musicians, as well as conductors, can reap the rewards from its calming effect.

Practice controlled breathing. Relax and redirect your thoughts when they turn negative. It is best to practice some type of relaxation technique every day, regardless of whether you have a performance, so that the skill is there for you when you need it.

Practice rhythmic breathing, holding the THOUGHT or INTENT of your music firmly in your mind. Your *intent* serves as a magnifying glass, focusing the energy of *awareness* of what you are doing.

Musicians can relate to this by remembering that period in their growth where all of their thought focused on such basics as learning fingerings, producing sound, reading notes and, for wind players, coordinating their breath. Once all those functions become unconscious, that's when the music making really begins!

It is said that emotions proceed from the solar plexus (the pit of the stomach). If you have butterflies in your stomach, try this:

As you exhale, give the firm command, "Get out!" to your solar plexus and visualize the undesirable emotion leaving with the exhaled breath. Repeat seven times and finish with a deep breath.

Now how do you feel? "Free" and "Light" come to mind. Much better than being under the sway of negativity.

Remember that if the message comes deeply from within, the listener knows it. Many times, music adjudicators have given high ratings to someone who made a mistake but sent a message that was clear and sincere, as opposed to someone who played perfectly but with no soul or inspiration. An inspiring performance comes from a sense of purpose, confidence, knowledge of the material, experience, values and having an honest reason for doing what you are doing.

Be a vehicle for the music. Try not to get in the way.

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