

Stage fright: treat it RIGHT!
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Having an audience often triggers a wide range of uncomfortable feelings and physical sensations. Performance anxiety is a reaction to the perceived threat that we will be negatively evaluated by others (or sometimes by ourselves, such as in fear of being in front of a camera). The greater the perceived threat (i.e. if it's a final examination, if we are performing in front of someone we consider important) the more anxious we will feel.

Some start to feel "stomach butterflies" hours or days before the performance, others shake and sweat, others experience nausea and diarrhea and others even get panic attacks! The result is often to develop an aversion to performing which hinders your growth as a performer and your chances of succeeding in what you do. What makes this particular type of anxiety so important to overcome is that it is integrally tied into an experience that would otherwise be meaningful, exciting and fulfilling! The goal is to find out how to handle our brain and body's reaction to the perceived threat. We will examine 4 simple ways to decrease the frequency and intensity of performance anxiety.

1) The 3 Ps: Prepare-Practice-Perform: Before hitting the stage, it is very important that you feel confident about what you are about to do. This is because during moments of intense anxiety we may be consumed by worries about how we're doing, what people are thinking, how we look etc. When a speaker has practiced the speech many times, he/she will be on "autopilot" and will be able to think about relaxing rather than what he/she is saying during the speech. The focus moves from getting it right onto "nailing it"! Prior to practicing however, there is another extremely important stage: the stage of preparing and caring about the content of your work/art. If you hate blues and you are about to perform a blues song in front of blues fans your anxiety level may increase as your level of personal satisfaction is reduced. Of course, there are times when a performer has no choice over what they will be performing but the more comfortable you feel with the content of the work you are about to showcase, the better it will feel while you are doing it.

2) What are you telling yourself? The second part of managing performance anxiety is learning to identify "negative self-talk" during stressful times. Self-talk is our inner dialogue, our thought process. Many of these internal dialogues are so quick and automatic that we do not pay attention to them. Some have been shaped through early experiences and messages we receive from our environment. For example, if we grew up being told that showing emotions is bad we might experience some discomfort when performing a piece that requires emotional expression. The 1st step is to learn to identify such thought patterns and the 2nd step is to learn to challenge and dispute them.

3) Who are you trying to impress? The next topic has to do with our own unique relationship with the process and experience of showcasing our work. We tend to focus on others' judgement and we develop a skewed perception of the performing experience. One that asks the question "what will they think?" instead of "what do I think?" When you're about to get on stage and begin performing you want to ask yourself the following questions: Why am I doing this? What do I hope to get out of this performance? What do I find fun and rewarding about this? When we perform we often have the underlying assumption that the only goal is to impress and satisfy others. Naturally, this kind of thinking creates a lot of unrealistic expectations as it is impossible to always count on a positive reaction from our audience. Once the emphasis is placed on what we are getting out of it, then we feel more confident.

4) Breath-Relax-Visualize: Let us assume that a writer is about to present her book in front of hundreds of people. She is impatiently waiting to be notified to get on stage. If the writer knows her body and signs of anxiety, she will immediately become aware of her dry mouth and will begin to monitor any negative thinking. Then, as she reminds herself that anxiety will quickly reach its peak and begin to diminish, she is calming herself down and reassuring herself that "she will be ok". She will start taking deep breaths to ease physical tension and shortness of breath. She will imagine that her stomach is a balloon that inflates and deflates with every inhalation and exhalation. She will visualize a safe space

around her; one that is filled with positive thoughts, images of comfort and self-affirmations. Repeating this 4-5 times reduces the threatening interpretation of the moment and increases comfort and positivity.

Hopefully the above tips will help you enjoy the process of performing to the fullest!