

Athletes and the Arts® Performance Anxiety

Issue

Performance anxiety, commonly referred to as “stage fright” in performing arts contexts, is a distressing and disabling condition that affects performers of all ages. At least half of all performing artists, regardless of age, gender, and talent or experience level, report problems associated with performance anxiety.

“I’ve never told anyone this, but I suffer from terrible stage fright. True. You can’t tell though, can you? Unbelievable, the panic. I nearly die of fear before I go on stage. But I’m kinda glad about the stage fright. I reckon it’s what gets the adrenaline going.”
—John Lydon (a.k.a. “Johnny Rotten” of the Sex Pistols)

The symptoms of performance anxiety can be categorized in terms of physical and cognitive reactions to a perceived or real threat. The “threat” is often the fear of potential performance errors or negative audience reactions that would result in feelings of embarrassment or humiliation. The irony is that performance anxiety can indeed impact the quality of one’s performance, resulting in the very experiences one is attempting to avoid, and creating greater anxiety about future performances.

Practical Suggestions

Performing in front of people, whether it be an anonymous audience or one’s instructors and/or peers, can be both exciting and stressful. Experiencing some level of anxiety, or anticipatory energy, is necessary in order to perform well. Thus, eliminating performance anxiety altogether is not advised.

“A little bit of stage fright, then I’m ready.”
—Faith Hill

Rather, the focus should be on working to control the anticipatory energy in order to optimize one’s performances. Most people perform better when they feel relaxed. Relaxation is an active process, not a passive one. It is something that needs to be practiced in order to be effective.

One common mistake performers make is to only attempt relaxation exercises when stressed. Like other performance skills, relaxation needs to be rehearsed. A performer must be very familiar with what being relaxed “feels” like and how to engage a relaxation response:

- **Remember to Breathe.** Take a few slow, deep breaths regularly throughout the day to release tension. Inhale slowly through the nose down to the diaphragm and exhale slowly out the mouth. Work to create respiration cycles that last 10 seconds (5 second inhale... 5 second exhale). It is important to practice this exercise regularly, both during and outside rehearsals, to create a habit of relaxation. Before every performance, it may help to take 4 or 5 slow, deep, relaxing breaths to re-create the feelings experienced during rehearsals.

- **Positive Self-Talk.** As you breathe, mentally remind yourself that you are ready to perform. Say to yourself: “I am prepared and ready to perform” or “I can do it.” Positive self-talk is most effective when the message relates to the process of performing (i.e., “I am prepared”), rather than an outcome (i.e., “I will win the audition.”)
- **Evaluate After You Perform.** You will have plenty of time after a performance to critique, criticize, and try to improve. Optimal performances happen when you allow yourself to trust in your ability and just perform. Everyone makes performance mistakes. The difference between elite performers and everybody else is how quickly they recover from mistakes (not necessarily the absence of mistakes).

Beta-blockers and other medications have been found to be effective for performing artists who report primarily physical reactions (e.g. rapid heartbeat) to their anxiety.

Instructors, directors, and other performing arts educators play a key role in minimizing the negative effects of performance anxiety. Fostering an educational and performance environment that helps instill and reinforce performer confidence is crucial. Confidence often results from meeting challenging, but reasonable, demands. For performers more prone to performance anxiety, it is important for instruction to balance constructive feedback and criticism with genuine positive support and reinforcement.

Guidelines

- Inform/educate all performing artists, teachers and institutions about the prevalence and symptoms of performance anxiety.
- Assess performance anxiety in all performers. There are several brief, well validated measures of adolescent and adult performance anxiety.
- Expose performers reporting greater magnitudes of performance anxiety symptoms to a more in-depth evaluation by mental health and medical professionals to rule out additional psychological conditions including anxiety, mood, and/or substance use disorders; and to evaluate for possible pharmacotherapy (i.e., medication).
- Encourage changes in practice habits to incorporate relaxation training.



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