

## How to Become a More Confident Performer

### Description

How confident a performer are you? Do you go into auditions or performances feeling certain that you are going to play your best – and do so from the very first note? Or do you grapple with doubt and anxiety (perhaps even days or weeks before), and have a tendency to begin your performance tentatively?

If you're like most musicians, you probably fall in the second category more often than you'd like. And not only is this an unpleasant feeling, but it is a poor strategy for on-stage success as well.

### Misconceptions About Confidence

The good news is that confidence is something you can change — and that you actually have quite a bit of control over your level of self-confidence. This may come as something of a surprise to you, as there are many who believe that confidence is largely a character trait, that you either have it or you don't. Others think that only success or positive feedback can build confidence, and that you can't make mistakes or experience "failure" if you want to become more confident. Personally speaking, I used to believe that any lack of confidence I experienced was simply a matter of my needing to practice more.

Well, it turns out that these are all just misconceptions. Many musicians suffer from a great deal of self-doubt and insecurities, despite great success. I also know musicians who were not the most talented, but succeeded beyond anyone's expectations because their belief in themselves never wavered. And with regards to just practicing more, most of us already know that this alone doesn't necessarily increase our confidence.

So what do you have to do to become more confident, you ask?

### Keys to Becoming a Confident Performer

One of the keys to becoming a more confident performer is mastering your self-talk.

Self-talk is the term that psychologists use to describe that internal dialogue we all have with ourselves throughout the day. You know, the one that calls us clumsy when we stub our toe on the bedpost, or an absent-minded idiot when we get back from the grocery store and realize we've forgotten the one thing we went there for. Some of us talk out loud or mumble to ourselves, others keep it all inside, but we all have that voice inside our head that is often very difficult to turn off.

For better or for worse, we tend to listen to ourselves and believe the things that we say to ourselves. If you tell yourself that you are a failure and untalented hack, and do so consistently and repeatedly, you will start to believe that you are indeed a failure. You will soon begin to feel like a failure, and ultimately act in

ways that will confirm this perception of yourself, “proving” that you are indeed a failure.

## Shh...Your Subconscious is Listening...

Keep in mind that your subconscious mind is listening to everything that you say to yourself, and that it doesn't have a filter. It will take in everything that you say, and over time, unconditionally accept the most consistent messages as reality — whether this is actually true or not. It doesn't matter if you are only kidding, or don't truly believe the things you say to yourself. Your subconscious doesn't have a sense of humor, and is completely literal. And for better or for worse, your self-confidence (or lack thereof) resides in your subconscious beliefs.

We've all experienced frustration at times with computers, because they are so literal. They don't care what we *meant* for it to do, only what we *told* it to do.

Your inner computer doesn't know or care what you really mean by “I'm never going to be able to play this piece well.” It doesn't know if you truly do lack the ability to play this piece, or if you just need to work harder, or perhaps just give it some time to simmer on the back burner. Your subconscious just takes it in, and over time, you will start to believe that you really don't have the ability to ever play this piece. You will have a tendency to act on this belief, perhaps working on it half-heartedly, thinking less creatively, and giving up sooner when feeling stuck. Eventually, you will discover that exactly as you predicted, you do struggle with this piece. This is called a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we sabotage ourselves (even in our lives outside of music) by creating new self-limiting prophecies *all* the time.

If you want to *feel*, *act*, and *be* more confident, you must first take control of your mind and begin *thinking* like a confident person.

How do you learn to think like a confident person? Most of us aren't truly aware of what we say to ourselves, especially when practicing or performing. The first step is to identify and write down these thoughts.

## Identifying Self-Talk

The vast majority of the thoughts that your mind generates when you are under pressure are unhelpful. They are often irrelevant (“Hmm...I wonder what I should eat for dinner”), overly analytical (“Keep your thumb unclenched, fingers light, elbow around, shoulder down...”), or self-destructive (“Uh-oh, here comes that passage that I screwed up in rehearsals”).

Keep in mind that your brain has a fixed attentional capacity, meaning that you can only pay attention to so much stuff at once. For instance, try convincing your significant other that you truly are listening to what he/she is saying even though you are sitting in front of the TV staring at the screen. Think they will buy it? Fat chance, right?

So if your brain can only process a certain amount of data at once, you can choose to fill it with either helpful stuff or harmful stuff. It's like budgeting a finite amount of money — why would you waste money

on things you don't need or want if you only have a limited amount of it?

Similarly, you can utilize your limited attentional currency on thoughts that are conducive to building confidence and success, or on thoughts that destroy confidence and lead towards failure. There is no neutral thought, just as there is no neutral purchase with your money. You are either buying something you really want, or something that zaps your bank account and moves you further away from buying the thing you really want.

So how do you keep your mind from self-destructing? The first step in re-programming your mind is to identify what is currently being programmed.

## Self-Talk Log

One of the most effective ways of identifying your thoughts is to create a self-talk log.

**Step 1:** *Pick a piece you are working on that is fairly challenging.*

**Step 2:** *Set up a recording device and begin recording.*

**Step 3:** *Play for about 5 minutes, but any time you have a thought, pause and repeat it out loud (verbatim) so you can capture it on the audio recording.*

**Step 4:** *When you're finished, get out a notebook, draw a line down the middle of the page, and transcribe all of the thoughts you recorded on the left side of the line.*

Now, take a look at all of the thoughts you wrote down. Count them. How many thoughts did your mind generate in those 5 minutes? A few? A ton?

How many of them were critical, unsupportive, irrelevant, distracting, and the type of remark that you would never say to a friend? Did you insult yourself or make personal attacks ("You suck!")? Were you able to keep your mind rooted in the present, or did your thoughts linger on mistakes or even review past incidents when you've made that same mistake ("Why do I *always* play that note out of tune?")? Did your thoughts project into the future (e.g. "Jeez, there I go again; I'm *never* going to be able to get this part down.")?

On the flip side, how many of your thoughts were relevant, supportive, and helpful to your performance? Reinforcing thoughts, or cues that remind you what correct technique and the desired outcomes feel and sound like – such as "fluid bow changes", "keep the air flowing", "ooh, nice slide, that was awesome!", or "sustain", "whisper", etc.? Were these few and far between?

## Changing Your Self-Talk

Now it's time to begin changing your inner thought patterns and making them more conducive to building confidence and future performance success.

Take a look at all of the self-defeating thoughts you wrote down in your notebook. You'll find that these thoughts tend to be based in the past or future — neither of which you have control over at the moment. Failure-type thoughts are also unproductive in that they don't help you in any way. All they do is make you feel worse about yourself.

One by one, begin rewriting the negative thoughts as more supportive, constructive, or self-enhancing thoughts in the right-hand column. Here are some examples.

Failure-Type Thinking	Success-Type Thinking
There's no use in practicing. So-and-so is just more talented than I am.	There are a lot of successful people who had to work hard to get where they are. I can be one of them if I practice the right way. After all, they wouldn't say that success is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration if there weren't some truth to it.
&%#\$@!!! Why do I always rush that passage and mess it up? I'm such a screw-up!	Hey, take it easy. Even the best make mistakes too. Get refocused and move on. Plenty of time to figure out why this happened later.

Does the dialogue on the right side column seem corny or fake to you? Maybe it is, but the idea is to come up with thoughts that help you feel more positively inside, and ultimately keep you moving towards success. Next time you hear yourself engaging in a loser-type thought, jump on it instantly and "overwrite" it with the more encouraging thoughts you have come up with.

Why is this so important?

This is how people who are interested in becoming the best they can be think. This is how *winners* think.

Social psychologist [Barbara Frederickson](#) has written a book about her research which suggests that people who experience positive emotions in a 3-to-1 ratio to negative ones eventually arrive at a tipping point "beyond which they naturally become more resilient to adversity and effortlessly achieve what they once could only imagine."

Start making yourself more aware of your self-talk, learn to think more like your own best friend, and you will absolutely find yourself feeling — and performing — more confidently.

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