

The One Thing We Often Overlook When Trying to Beat Performance Anxiety

Description

Trying to beat performance anxiety can sometimes feel like playing a game of whack-a-mole.

Like, you think you've finally figured out a solution that's going to be the one – and it does help in one or two performances. But then it doesn't work so well in the next performance, and it feels like you're back to the drawing board.

Why is this, anyway?

What's the problem?

One of my clinical supervisors in grad school once said “If you misdiagnose the problem, you're probably going to misdiagnose the solution.”

And that really stuck with me, because as I went through the program and learned more about the nature of anxiety and performance, one day I learned that the reason why all of my solutions were so hit or miss, is that my understanding of performance was incomplete. I had essentially misdiagnosed the problem, and was looking for solutions in the wrong place.

How so?

Well, it helps to have some visuals when explaining why, so I've inserted a short 4-minute video excerpt below from [Beyond Practicing](#) to walk you through the insights about nerves that helped me better understand how to solve the performance anxiety whack-a-mole problem.

I hope it helps to fill in some gaps for you as well!

The anxiety-performance relationship

<https://vimeo.com/772888633>

Enjoyed the video? It's an excerpt from [Beyond Practicing v3.0!](#)

Dealing with cognitive anxiety

So you've watched the video, and are probably thinking...ok, what now? How are we supposed to deal with cognitive anxiety?

There are a number of things that can be helpful, depending on the person of course. But one strategy that is pretty universally helpful, no matter what else might be going on, is to have a **plan for your attention** during performances, rather than leaving your thoughts up to chance.

Otherwise, your mind is going to obsess about how jittery you feel. Or how you missed the big shift in your last run-through. Or what the audience might be thinking.

Attention control

Athletes call this attention control training. Some musicians do it too – but I think we could probably all be a little better about doing it more intentionally.

For instance, Houston principal horn player Bill VerMeulen has been known to encourage his students to play from the score – looking at any part other than their own. Which gives you a much clearer idea of what else is happening in the orchestra, allowing you to create a clearer and richer background track for your own performance.

In [cellist Natasha Brofsky and violist Roger Tapping's podcast interview](#), Roger spoke of one particular tricky section in a quartet, where he found that things tended to go better if he focused all of his attention on the cello part at that moment, instead of worrying about his part.

And in horn player [Julie Landsman's podcast interview](#), she spoke of subdividing and helping students come up with vivid images and emotions to focus on during performance as well.

Focus on what, rather than how

The common thread in all of these examples is that they facilitate a focus on sound and expressive goals, rather than the technical means of sound production. This is something that athletes have known about for some time, but is becoming increasingly appreciated in music circles as well. As in [this study of singers](#), for instance.

So what do you do with all of this information?

What has been most helpful for you?

Take a moment and think back to some of your most engaged performances. Disregarding your anxiety and how you felt, and see if you can remember what you were you thinking about or focusing on in that moment – even if it was very brief – when things were going well.

And don't say you were focusing on "nothing" or on "the music!" What *exactly* were you focusing on? Was it the piano part? Was it the shaping of the phrase? The voice that you hoped to bring out in the baseline? The kind of vibrato or articulation you wanted to hear? A particular kind of image or emotion or concept of sound?

It can be difficult to recall these kinds of memories sometimes (and much easier to remember all of the negative thoughts you had instead). But take a moment and see what comes to mind, and even if it's kind of hazy, please do **share what you remember below in the comments**.

Your experience may jog others' memories, and help give others new ideas on what might be helpful for them to try as well!

References

Hanin, Y. L. (1995). Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) Model: An Idiographic Approach to Performance Anxiety. *Sport Psychology: An Analysis of Athlete Behavior*, 3, 103-119.

Martens, R., Burton, D., Vealey, R. S., Bump, L. A., & Smith, D. E. (1990). Development and validation of the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory – 2. In R. Martens R. S. Vealey, & D. Burton (Eds.), *Competitive anxiety in sport* (pp. 117-190). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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