

Why a Little Self-Doubt Before Performing Could Be a Good Thing

Description

You know those days when you walk into an audition, or a performance exam, or a music theory final, and for whatever reason, you just know that it's going to be a good day?

These moments can feel pretty terrific indeed – I mean, everything is funner and so much easier when we don't have that knot in the pit of our stomach.

But days like this are more the exception than the rule. Usually, we go into auditions and performances battling doubts and fears for days, even weeks in advance. And we wake up the morning of, feeling a little unsettled and slightly uncomfortable.

After all, eradicating doubt is really difficult! No matter how hard you work to stay in a positive headspace filled with [pink fluffy unicorns dancing on rainbows](#) .

So how important is it really to get to that place where you're fully confident? Or is possible that maybe a little bit of doubt isn't the worst thing in the world?

A jump-rope challenge

A team of British researchers ([Woodman et al., 2010](#)) recruited 28 participants to take part in a simple jump rope challenge.

Everyone was assigned to one of two groups, and then asked to jump rope for one minute, while saying the word “now” out loud every time they heard a beep (the **practice** trial).

And then, a competition

After a 5-minute rest, one of the groups (**control** group) was asked to repeat the task – except this time, there would be something at stake. The person with the most skips and quickest reaction to the beeps, would win a prize of \$45.

The **experimental** group took part in the competition as well, but they were given a different jump rope to use. One that they were told might “interfere slightly with performance due to differences in weight, length, and stiffness.”

In reality, the rope was actually exactly the same as the first one in every way except color. This was just the researchers' sneaky way of injecting a little self-doubt into the competition. ?

Was there a change in confidence?

And it seems the researchers were successful, because the participants took a confidence assessment before each trial, and those who had to use the “challenging” jump rope in competition did experience a dip in confidence, going from **73.79** in practice to **65.14** in competition. Whereas the control group's scores stayed pretty much the same, going from 75.86 in practice to 76.79 for the competition.

So...how did self-doubt affect their jump rope performance?

How did self-doubt affect performance?

Well, you'd think that a decrease in confidence like this would be bad for performance, but that's actually the opposite of what the researchers found!

That slight increase in self-doubt actually seemed to enhance performance, as the experimental group went from **75.93** skips in practice to **85.57** skips in competition.

Meanwhile, the control group's performance stayed pretty much the same – with 71.43 skips in practice and 72.29 skips in competition.

And why might this have happened?

Why did self-doubt help?

The researchers believe that this counterintuitive confidence-performance effect is related to **complacency**.

The idea being, when we're too confident, it might be harder to bring our “A+” game, and we end up being a little too casual about the task at hand.

Which made me think of a few conversations I've had with musicians who have admitted to “underpreparing” a tiny bit on occasion. Not out of laziness or because they're too busy, but it's something they do very intentionally before performances that they are starting to feel a little too lackadaisical about. They explain that this helps to ensure that when the time comes, they'll be really motivated to turn their focus and effort up to 11.

And no, this isn't a valid excuse to underprepare for your next lesson, if that's where your thoughts were going!

Caveats

Of course, jumping rope while responding to beeps is not on the same level of complexity as playing the octaves in the opening of the Beethoven violin concerto when your left hand has frozen into a claw (or, the opening of the Paganini or Mendelssohn concertos – which garnered higher difficulty ratings on Nathan Cole’s [list ‘o the most difficult violin concerto openings](#)).

But researchers have observed this same counterintuitive confidence-performance effect in more complex performance domains too, like with [medium-handicap golfers](#) and [pistol shooting competitors](#).

So there is something to be said for giving yourself permission to experience a little doubt from time to time. Because the relationship between confidence and performance is a little more complex and nuanced than simply saying confidence=good and self-doubt=bad.

Takeaways

Still, there’s a big difference between a little bit of “healthy,” performance-enhancing self-doubt, and the more debilitating question-all-your-life-choices-as-your-stomach-churns-and-panic-starts-to-set-in level of self-doubt.

So it’s still important to build confidence through the [right kinds of practice](#), and through [cultivating clear musical ideas](#), [productive self-talk](#), [imagery](#), and more. But if you know you’ve done your best to prepare as thoroughly as you can, and there’s still a little bit of doubt lingering in your thoughts – maybe that’s ok!

Rather than fighting what is a pretty normal way to feel, and getting worried about the fact that you’re not feeling 100% confident, which only makes you less confident, which makes you worry more and sucks you into the confidence-anxiety death spiral, it may be more productive to embrace a tiny bit of self-doubt as a good thing, and remind yourself of those times when you went into a performance feeling less confident than you would have liked, yet still played better than you expected.

After all, that tiny little nugget of uncertainty may turn out to be the exact motivational boost that keeps you dialed in and focused when you need it most!

References

Woodman, T., Akehurst, S., Hardy, L., & Beattie, S. (2010). Self-confidence and performance: A little self-doubt helps. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 11(6), 467–470.
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