

How to Stay in a More Positive Headspace Before Performances

Description

It's the day before an audition or performance. And as you take a few minutes to review some tricky sections, suddenly you feel a twinge of anxiety and worry about how subpar everything sounds. How unprepared you feel. And your thoughts are filled with stress-inducing worst-case scenarios and what-if's.

You know that the right thing to do in these moments, when your mind starts to spiral to the bad place, is to "think positive."

But these are also the exact moments when it's *hardest* to think good thoughts.

After all, most of us have a natural tendency to dwell on negative thoughts. To worry about the future, bemoan past decisions and choices, and focus on what's bothering us right now in the present.

From a survival perspective, this probably makes good sense.

But from a performance perspective, this negativity bias can make it difficult to stay in a more self-affirming, performance-enhancing headspace before big auditions or performances.

So how can we get better at thinking better thoughts and adopting a more optimal mindset when we need it most?

A positive thinking challenge

A team of researchers ([Westgate et al., 2017](#)) recruited 142 undergraduates, and told them they'd be spending some time "entertaining themselves with their thoughts."

To prepare for this, they were asked to write down 8 topics they'd enjoy thinking about. The topics that participants generated ranged from "my wedding day" or "my family" or "the upcoming summer" to more specific scenarios like "having fun on Valentine's Day with my boyfriend and getting gifts and hugs from him" or "what my life would be like if I were living in Azeroth (World of Warcraft)."

Everyone was then asked to spend 6 minutes engaged in a "thinking period."

Participants were instructed to "spend the time entertaining yourself with your thoughts as best you can." And encouraged to make this thinking time as pleasant as possible, avoiding focusing on mundane everyday activities or negative things in their life.

Two groups

Of course, it's not so easy to stay in a positive headspace for 6 minutes, so to make this challenge easier, one group (the **topic reminder** group) was given *reminders* of the enjoyable topics they listed earlier.

Sitting in front of a computer screen, they were shown each of their 8 topics, one at a time, with the ability to click to the next one whenever they were done thinking about the one on the screen.

The other group (the **control** group) didn't get any such topic prompts. Only the instructions "you don't have to think only about [the 8 topics they wrote down], but they may be a useful starting point."

And while they too sat in front of a computer screen, their screen simply displayed the message "please think about the topics you listed earlier" instead of displaying their topics as prompts.

The two groups' tasks were essentially identical. The only difference was that one group simply had a "cheat sheet" of pleasant topics to think about in front of them.

Would this seemingly trivial tweak make any difference?

Four differences

After completing the 6-minute challenge, participants were asked to rate their experience in several different areas – such as:

1. how much they enjoyed the 6-minute exercise
2. how difficult they found it to concentrate
3. how much mind-wandering occurred
4. to what degree they thought about the 8 topics they identified as opposed to other unrelated thoughts

And was there any difference between the two groups?

Enjoyment

As it turns out, the participants who received reminders rated their "thinking period" as being more enjoyable (**5.90** vs. **5.22**; where 1=not at all enjoyable, 9=extremely enjoyable).

Difficulty concentrating

The reminder group also found it easier to concentrate (**3.58** vs. **5.18**; where 1=not at all difficult to concentrate, 9=extremely difficult to concentrate).

Mind-wandering

They were also less prone to mind-wandering (**4.51** vs. **5.93**; where 1=not at all, 9=very much).

Thought about topics

And ultimately, the reminder group was much more focused on the 8 topics they wrote down (**7.01** vs. **5.95** ; where 1=only about other topics, 9=only about the 8 topics).

All in all, the data suggest that having reminders made it *easier* and more *enjoyable* to engage in thoughts about pleasant topics.

Why?

Previous research on positive thinking indicate that deliberately guiding one's thoughts towards pleasant thoughts requires effort. And because of this effort that's required, it's usually easier to just let our thoughts wander to whatever pops into our head in the moment.

Like watching whatever happens to be on the TV while you run on the treadmill at the gym, because it's too much trouble to look for the remote and find something you actually want to watch.

Unfortunately, under pressure, where does your mind tend to go by default?

Yep...usually the worst possible places. Like worst-case scenarios. Past failures. Pretty much all the things that make us feel less confident.

Take action

So while it might seem a little silly to create such a thing, perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea to create a "positivity cheat sheet" in advance. A short list of moments, memories, thoughts, feedback, quotes, or images that help you stay in a more positive headspace.

It could be as simple as a 3x5 notecard that you keep in your case. Or even a notes document on your phone.

The idea being, your poor brain already has a lot on its mind the day of an audition or performance.

Instead of expending extra effort to will your mind to think positive thoughts, use your cheat sheet to help trigger memories of the last time you had a great performance. Or the supportive comments or compliments you've received from teachers or colleagues whose opinions you trust and respect. Or even post-audition plans to hang out with friends at the new Vietnamese taco place you've been curious to try for months.

All of which will hopefully help you go into your performance feeling something that's a little closer to [excitement than anxiety](#).

References

Westgate, E. C., Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. (2017). With a little help for our thoughts: Making it easier to think for pleasure. *Emotion*, 17(5), 828–839. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000278>

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