

How the 'Gift' Reframe Could Enhance Performance

Description

Ever notice how your brain can sometimes be your greatest asset, but at other times, a total liability?

Like how it tends to approach performances as if they are life-or-death tests of our worthiness as human beings, even though this is pretty much a guaranteed recipe for misery before, during, and after?

That's obviously way more pressure than anyone needs, so searching for a more performance-enhancing way to view performances (i.e. "reframing") is something that many musicians have experimented with at some point.

Popular reframes include:

"Remember that the audience is rooting for you to do well; they're on your side."

Or *"Think of your performance as a gift that you are sharing with the audience."*

The latter in particular is a reframe that I've heard many times. And to the degree that it can shift our attention away from ourselves, and more to the music and what we want the audience's experience of the music to be, perhaps this could help to defuse our nerves, anxiety, and tension in that moment.

But does it really work?

Hmm...where to begin?

Answering this question would be a lot simpler if there was a study that looked at this exact question – but if there is one, I'm not aware of it.

However, there *are* a few studies which have looked at something similar in the context of social anxiety (which is not exactly the same as performance anxiety, but does share some similar elements).

Acts of kindness vs. exposure

In a Canadian study ([Trew & Alden, 2015](#)), researchers recruited 122 socially anxious participants to test out different strategies for reducing their anxiety and avoidance of social situations.

One group – the **acts of kindness group** – was asked to engage in 3 acts of kindness per day, twice per week, over a 4-week period. Acts of kindness were defined as "acts that benefit others or make others happy, typically at some cost to oneself," and involved things like doing their roommate's dishes, mowing

a neighbor's lawn, or making a donation to charity.

A second group – the **exposure group** – were instructed to put themselves in social situations they'd usually try to avoid, and to stay there until their anxiety eased up a bit. They too were asked to engage in 3 social engagements, twice per week, over a 4-week period. To help them better cope with their anxiety in social situations, they were taught a deep breathing strategy which had been shown to be helpful for reducing anxiety. Their social activities included things like asking a stranger for the time, talking with a neighbor, or asking someone out to lunch.

A third group served as the **control group**. They were simply asked to record 3 daily events, twice per week, over a 4-week period – things like attending class, cooking, or shopping.

Anxiety and avoidance

The researchers were curious to see how these strategies would affect two aspects of the participants' social anxiety – 1) the anxiety itself, and 2) how strongly they would be motivated to avoid social situations that stressed them out (“social avoidance goals”).

Regarding social anxiety, *both* the **acts of kindness group** and the **exposure group** experienced reductions in social anxiety, when compared to the control group.

They also experienced a drop in social avoidance goals, compared with the control group.

However, the **acts of kindness** strategy led to *greater* and *faster* reductions in social avoidance goals as compared with the exposure folks.

So all in all, it seems that folks who engaged in acts of kindness not only experienced a drop in their anxiety, but in how resistant they were to participating in social situations.

Hmm...why might that be?

Why do acts of kindness help?

It's a bit paradoxical, but socially anxious individuals are more likely to experience negative social interactions, because they have a tendency to engage in “safety behaviors” that actually make their interactions worse. Like inexplicably talking fast (or softly, or both) in a meeting¹. Or avoiding eye contact. Or coming up with excuses to get out of a social situation. All of which is intended to make things better – but clearly don't.

Acts of kindness *shift our focus away from trying to protect ourselves, and onto an effort to make someone else's life better*. Which can put our mind in a more productive place, where we're less fearful and more prone to approaching it as a challenge, rather than a threat.

So by thinking of our performance as a gift, we are engaging in an act of kindness?

Well, maybe, sort of. But put this way, I worry that we run the risk of cultivating a slightly narcissistic perspective on performances. Perhaps it's just semantics, but I think there's a similar, but more prosocial way of describing this reframe that feels a little more to the point.

Sharing moments of beauty

In an interview some years ago ([read it here](#)), pianist Menahem Pressler was asked what advice he often shared with his students.

He said (emphasis mine):

*“My most important advice is to love the music, because if you honestly do love the music, you are rewarded to begin with, immediately. **If you can share that love, you will reward others and you are rewarded.** But if you feel that music should do something for you, then you're defeated before you begin.”*

In the same interview, he also explained that he enjoyed performing because concerts gave musicians *“the ability to have people share that which you find beautiful, that which you find life-giving.”*

So the gift is not *us*, nor our *performance* per se, but the work we have done to identify, cultivate, and highlight that which we find beautiful and meaningful in the music. To curate and share what we find most compelling, as one might assemble a [collection of books](#), or [ideas worth spreading](#), or a [team of superheroes formed to protect the Earth from extraordinary threats](#) .

The end-goal being less about impressing those in attendance with our technical prowess, but to make them feel hope, awe, joy, or an emotion of some kind. To change their mood, as comedian Jim Gaffigan says in [this brief moment \(starting at 4:39\)](#) where he talks about the thrill of having an impact on one's audience in this way.

Changing moods

Indeed, while we're probably more likely to think of psychologists when it comes to working on feelings and emotions, where do we turn to first if we want to be inspired? Relaxed? Excited? Or to laugh so hard we snort?

[Cat videos!](#) Music. Art. Literature. Dance. Film. Or some combination or mashup thereof (case in point, what would that cat video be without the soundtrack?).

So does this work?

At the end of the day, yes, I think for some musicians, the “gift reframe” can be a helpful way to approach performances. With one caveat!

We have to make sure we don't get too attached to whether the audience likes our gift or not (which Pressler alludes to in [this interview](#)).

The value of the gift reframe lies in its ability to focus our attention and energy on the *doing* and *sharing* and *excitement* behind our work, not the response to that gift by the intended recipients.

Do we wish our gifts would always be embraced with open arms, bright shiny eyes, and boundless joy and enthusiasm? Of course. But as any parent who has tried to find the perfect gift, cook the best meal, or buy the right clothes knows, the degree to which others will appreciate our efforts is not something we control... Good thing much of the fun is in the forethought and giving that comes before we see their reaction anyhow!

References

Trew, J. L., & Alden, L. E. (2015). Kindness reduces avoidance goals in socially anxious individuals. *Motivation and Emotion*, 39(6), 892–907. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-015-9499-5>

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