

How to Keep Anxiety From Spiraling, on Stage and Off

Description

It's been decades now, but I still remember vividly the day I stood in front of a panel of faculty at Curtis for my very first college audition.

I had never met any of the musicians who looked up at me from behind the table. I knew them only by name and reputation – and even then, wasn't sure who was who (this was before the days of Google images/Facebook).

I'm sure they were all perfectly nice folks, and it's very possible that one or two may even have smiled at me. But in the heat of the moment, all I saw was an intimidating row of stern, somber, serious-looking faces.

Needless to say, my nerves shot through the roof, and I can still recall how anxious I felt, and how completely scrambled my thoughts were.

Whether it's a college audition, seating auditions at school, or the unscreened round of an orchestral audition, what are we to do when we come face to face with the people who could meaningfully shape the future course of our lives with just a few marks of their pens?

How can we keep our nerves from spiraling out to the bad place?

An attentional bias

Research suggests that those of us who experience social anxiety have a tendency to experience our surroundings differently. Specifically, the attention of socially anxious individuals is biased towards negative stimuli. Which contributes to a tendency to focus on things around them that *confirm* their fears and maintain, rather than reduce, their anxiety.

If you've ever gone to work wearing a mismatched pair of black dress shoes (my excuse is that I was jet-lagged ?), or discovered that you've committed some other fashion faux pas too late to do anything about it, you may be able to relate a little to the feeling of being overly sensitive to your surroundings.

Even though the logical part of you knows that the quiet laugh behind you, and the smile of a stranger passing by have nothing to do with your fashion mishap, it's difficult not to be a little more sensitive. And to feel your face turning slightly red as you wonder if they are in fact a response to your appearance.

A public speaking study

Curious to see how this phenomenon plays out in performance-like situations, an international team of researchers ([Lin et al., 2015](#)) put together a study to explore this further.

Forty-four students were recruited to participate, and asked to take a social anxiety assessment.

Twenty-two of them scored high on this measure, and made up the **high social anxiety group**.

The other twenty-two scored low on the same test and were designated as the **low social anxiety group**.

A stressful speech

Each participant was then hooked up to a heart rate monitor and an eye-tracking device, and asked to prepare a 3-min speech on the education system in China (which at the time, was a popular topic of debate on campus).

Of course, the task wasn't just to prepare a speech, but *deliver* the speech as well – to 12 audience members, who would be connecting live via Skype to listen to and evaluate their speech.

In actuality, the audience was pre-recorded, and consisted of university students who were trained to provide positive, neutral, or negative facial expressions and behaviors.

Three types of audience members

Positive stimuli, for instance, involved nodding, smiling, and leaning forward slightly. Neutral stimuli included looking ahead without smiling or frowning, and making slight adjustments of one's head and body. And negative stimuli consisted of frowning, rolling one's eyes, shaking one's head, yawning, and looking away.

So how would the participants react? Would there be any difference between how the low-anxious and high-anxious participants reacted to the exact same audience?

3 key findings

As expected, there were a few interesting differences between the two groups.

1. Perceptions of speech performance

The **low-anxious participants** seemed to feel more positive about their speeches, rating them higher (**5.75** out of 10) than the high-anxious participants did with their speeches (**3.94** out of 10).

This seems to speak to the “self-evaluation bias” or the tendency for our anxiety levels to color our perceptions of how well we are performing (you can read more about that [here](#)).

2. Negative/positive bias

Using the eye tracking data, the researchers were also able to measure not just what participants were looking at, but for how long.

When they tallied up the total amount of time participants spent fixating on positive, neutral, or negative audience reactions, the researchers found an interesting difference.

The low-anxious participants spent significantly more time attending to **positive** audience members than the high-anxious participants did – about twice as much time, in fact (29.89 seconds for the low-anxious group; 14.67 seconds for the high-anxious group).

The low-anxious group also spent significantly *less* time fixating on **negative** audience members than their high-anxious counterparts. About 12.87 seconds for the low-anxious folks vs. 26.05 seconds for the high-anxious folks.

Fundamentally, they found that the low-anxious participants had a “normative” negativity bias. That is, a tendency to direct their attention towards positive audience members and away from threatening stimuli.

Conversely, the high-anxious participants did not seem to have such a protective bias. If anything, they did the opposite, focusing more on negative reactions than any other type of reaction.

3. Anxiety response

The high-anxious group’s preoccupation with negative audience members appeared to have physiological consequences as well.

While the stressful task made both groups’ heart rates increase above baseline levels, the high-anxious group’s average increase (112.22 bpm during the speech vs. 85.27 bpm baseline, or a **27 bpm increase**) was significantly greater than the low-anxious group’s increase (93.57 bpm during the speech vs. 79.482 baseline, or a **14 bpm increase**).

What does this all mean?

It's not clear from this study what might have happened if the high-anxious participants had been trained to spend more time looking at neutral or positive feedback audience members, so you'll have to take it all with a grain of salt.

However, the data seems to suggest that the more worried you are about what a listener or an audition panel thinks, the more likely you could be to seek feedback about your performance in the moment. And in that moment, if you focus disproportionately on hints of negative feedback, that may very well increase your anxiety, make you tighten up, lead to more discomfort and more worries, and hasten that familiar downward spiral of doom that we've all experienced.

So what are we to do with this?

Take action

Well, on one hand, I suppose this is sort of an obvious finding. I mean, of course looking at a sour-looking committee member is going to make you feel more nervous than looking at someone who is nodding along with a friendly smile.

But it's an example of one of those things where knowing is only half the battle. Because actually keeping your focus relentlessly directed towards positive stimuli under pressure is easier said than done! It's a little like trying not to look at roadkill. We know we're totally going to regret looking, but dang, it's just so hard not to.

In an ideal world, while you're in the middle of an audition (or performing in general, for that matter), it's probably best to avoid looking for *any* sort of feedback, positive *or* negative. After all, in that moment, it's more important to focus on what you want to say, rather than on what others might think.

But if you *do* have to look at the panel at some point, make it a point to play to and mentally connect with the positive, confidence-enhancing people on the committee who make you feel more comfortable and supported.

This is something you could even practice, and might be fun to try as a personal experiment. Whether picking out friendly faces in a restaurant or social gathering, or selecting one or two especially engaged audience members to play to in a performance setting, we have opportunities around us all the time.

And who knows – maybe cultivating this habit will make the world feel like a slightly friendlier place even outside of the concert hall as well. ?

An example of practicing vs. practicing performing

The underlying concept in today's study is that there's a difference between the regular practicing that we do on a daily basis, and practice that's geared towards performing better under pressure. As in, gaze

control isn't something we would generally think about when we're in the practice room, but it's a tiny thing that suddenly becomes relevant when performing.

It turns out there are a lot of little things like this – from how we structure our repetitions to what we focus on when doing run-throughs – that could really help us in performance. Where if we add these small details to our daily practice, it not only enhances our learning experience, but helps us feel much more at ease on stage as well.

So whether you're an adult learner looking to play more like yourself in lessons, a young musician preparing for college or grad school auditions, a professional musician wanting to play more consistently in auditions, or a teacher seeking to help their students experience more joy in the practice room and on stage, I'll be teaching a [live, online, 5-week class](#) on the most essential mental skills that can make a difference in one's practicing and performing. The first class is on Sunday, January 22nd, and registration is **open today through Jan. 16th**.

What you'll learn

We'll meet once a week via Zoom and go through the relevant research in four essential psychological skill areas, test out a range of exercises and techniques together as a group, and to make sure the ideas don't just stay in your head, but actually become consistent habits, I'll show you how to gently integrate these new skills into your (or your students') daily practice through manageable, bite-sized practice challenges.

There will also be separate learner and educator tracks, depending on whether you'd like to learn the skills for yourself, or learn them for yourself and teach them to your own students, plus private group areas and a forum to make it easier to compare notes and connect with a supportive group of accountability buddies from around the world.

Registration is open **today** through **Monday, Jan. 16th** at 11:59pm.

Over 1000 musicians, educators, and students and learners ranging from age 12-70+ have benefited from the course to date. You can find out what alumni are saying, and sign up to join the new cohort below:

[Join Performance Psych Essentials](#)

References

Lin, M., Hofmann, S. G., Qian, M., Kind, S., & Yu, H. (2015). Attention allocation in social anxiety during a speech. *Cognition and Emotion*, 30(6), 1122–1136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2015.1050359>

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