

How to Keep Your Cool in Stressful Lessons, Rehearsals, and More

Description

Whether it's the 2nd grade spelling bee, a Little League game, or youth orchestra rehearsal, most of us have had one of those traumatizing moments where a teacher, coach, or conductor called us out in front of our peers.

For me, it was an orchestra rehearsal in high school, where the conductor made each stand play the same difficult passage one at a time, to make it crystal clear which players were the problem, as the rest of the orchestra watched and listened. It was pretty humiliating, and for some time afterwards, I got way more nervous for orchestra rehearsals than performances.

Whether a culture of fear is created intentionally or not, moments like this can stick with us for years, affect how we feel about performing, and even lead us to quit something we might care deeply about. A 1992 Little League [study](#) for instance, found that young athletes who played for coaches who didn't receive training on how to create effective coach-athlete relationships were 5 times more likely to quit the team at the end of a season.

It'd be nice if we were always surrounded by supportive conductors, teachers, and colleagues...but that's not something we can control.

So whether it's a prickly stand partner or curmudgeonly conductor, is there anything we can do to shield ourselves, or ease our poor, frazzled nerves in such stressful situations? (And no, [that's not the answer](#), if you're thinking what I think you're thinking.)

A juggling study

A [team of researchers](#) at the University of Kansas recruited 38 students to participate in a 30-minute training session on juggling.

Before the training session however, they were randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group (the **control** group) received a 12-minute lesson on the history of sport psychology, while the others (the **experimental** group), received a 12-minute overview of the research on optimizing motivation in sports.

Specifically, they learned about three different types of motivational climates that coaches, teachers, and parents can create.

Three motivational climates

One was the **ego-involving** climate, which puts a premium on winning and performing better than others. Where mistakes are a huge no-no.

The second was the **task-involving** climate, where effort, growth, and mastery are the key priorities. And mistakes are seen as being an inevitable part of the learning process.

The third climate is known as the **caring** climate, where individuals are valued, respected, and made to feel safe – not just with teachers or coaches, but amongst peers as well.

Research on the effect of these climates

Those who receive a combination of the latter two climates – task/caring – tend to report greater enjoyment of the activity. But perhaps more importantly, seem to put in more effort and experience less anxiety as well.

The ego climate, on the other hand, tends to lower an individual's self-esteem, reduce motivation, and lead to a state of chronic stress. Meaning, the stress doesn't just kick in during a particularly harrowing orchestra rehearsal, but continues to linger long afterwards. On the drive home, while making dinner, watering the cacti, and even with a pint of Ben & Jerry's chocolate chip cookie dough in hand.

Given how crappy it feels to be in a constant state of stress (not to mention the potential health consequences), the researchers were curious to see if an awareness of these climates might help individuals be more resilient in the face of an ego-involving training session.

Juggling time

So that's exactly what the students experienced in their juggling session.

It all began with an ice-breaker activity, where each participant was asked to share their greatest sports achievement. Because there's nothing like a little humble-bragging to foster a competitive ego climate, right? And to really drive this message home, instructors responded more favorably to those with more impressive accomplishments, making it clear that they valued athletic ability above all else.

After a little bit of instruction, participants were given some time to practice, and were then ranked from 1 (best) to 10 (worst), based on their juggling ability.

Next, everyone was asked to perform their new skill for 30 seconds, one by one, in front of the whole group, and re-ranked according to this performance.

All the while, instructors encouraged participants to compete and compare themselves with each other,

and praised only the better-performing individuals in the group. The worst-performing students were mostly ignored and left alone. =(

A protective buffer?

The participants took an anxiety assessment before and after the session, and provided saliva samples before and at various points after the session to measure any changes in their cortisol levels (a hormone that's one of the key markers of stress).

The training session increased anxiety for participants in both groups, but there was a significant difference in their cortisol response.

The control group's cortisol levels shot up during the training session, and *stayed elevated* for some time following the session. Meanwhile, the cortisol level of the group which learned about motivational climate stayed pretty much *unchanged* throughout.

In other words, the short primer on ego vs. task-oriented motivation seemed to buffer their stress response, protecting them from the after-effects of an anxiety-provoking training session.

Takeaways

On one hand, the study reinforces the value of cultivating a task-oriented culture in one's teaching studio, chamber music group, or orchestra.

And the importance of constantly reminding ourselves to focus more on growth and learning vs. winning and losing in our own practice and performing.

But most importantly, I think the study highlights the benefit of teaching young students about these different types of goal orientations and climates, so they can be better prepared to deal with an ego-based climate when they inevitably encounter one.

After all, if they can recognize it as such, and see it for what it is, perhaps they'll be able to get through it more confidently, without misinterpreting the situation to mean that they're somehow inferior or weak or not cut out for music (or performing, or leadership, etc.).

Yeah, but...

But is this "kinder, gentler" approach compatible with winning and maximizing performance? Or does it mean settling for less?

Not at all! The task/caring approach is NOT about lowering standards or expectations. Or doling out praise when performance falls short.

It's about combining expectations for effort, focus, and the pursuit of excellence while demonstrating a genuine appreciation for the person in front of you – ~~even~~ especially on those days when performance falls short – as Boston Celtics coach Brad Stevens describes here:

[Brad Stevens: Why Positive Coaching Is Powerful](#)

And this need not apply just to teachers, conductors, or the people we typically think of as leaders. We can *all* contribute to creating a task/caring culture in our classrooms, studios, and ensembles:

[Brad Stevens: How Teammates Help Each Other Improve](#)

A few more cool things to watch/listen to...

And for the conductor, teacher, or parent who has had a rough week, here's a talk by former UCLA softball coach Sue Enquist that will elicit a few chuckles and help you remember why you love what you do (especially the quote ~10:30):

[Sue Enquist: Fear and Failure](#) @What Drives Winning

And another interview with Brad Stevens, on maintaining a healthy perspective through the ups and downs (“focusing on growth, not on trophies”). If you watch nothing else, at least watch the first 90 seconds of the video:

[Brad Stevens](#) @What Drives Winning

And if you've ever found yourself wondering “how hard could conducting be, really?”, you might enjoy this podcast episode by LA Phil violinists and “Stand Partners for Life” Akiko Tarumoto and Nathan Cole:

[What We Love \(and Loathe\) About Young Conductors](#)

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