

How to Make Performance Anxiety an Asset Instead of a Liability

Description

We are typically led to believe that being “nervous” is a bad thing. Indeed, most of the advice I’ve ever heard has been aimed at reducing anxiety. Over the years, I tried everything I could to get rid of the unpleasant feelings associated with performance anxiety. I tried eating bananas, drinking chamomile tea, imagining the audience in their underwear, sleep deprivation, practicing more, taking various supplements, and even trying to convince myself that it didn’t matter how I played. None of this, of course, took the anxiety away or did much to help me perform any better.

From studying with performance coach Don Greene when I was a graduate student at Juilliard and my own subsequent studies in performance psychology, I’ve come to understand that anxiety isn’t the problem we tend to assume it is. Things are more nuanced than this, and one of the problems is that most of us have never tried to use adrenaline to our *advantage*. By telling ourselves to “just relax,” we are actually doing us a disservice by implicitly confirming that the anxiety we feel is bad and to be feared.

[Research on threat vs. challenge states](#) have illustrated this in various ways, but the big question, of course, is how do you transform anxiety from a liability to an advantage?

Practice mode vs. performance mode

In the practice room, we have a tendency to practice somewhat mindlessly, merely repeating passages over and over until they sound better, making corrections, but doing so almost unconsciously. However, as soon as we walk on stage, we tend to get flooded by over-analytical thinking, criticism, excessive planning, and so on, which only serves to lead to a pre-occupation with technical details and an inability to play as freely and automatically as we are capable.

Are you familiar with the phrase “paralysis by analysis?” This is exactly what happens when we know that our every move and sound is under close scrutiny by others. The opposite of this paralyzed state is often referred to as “flow” or “the zone,” where everything just seems to “click” into place and our playing is easy, free, and effortless.

How do we make the shift from this over-analytical state to the quieter flow-like state? A tool that many athletes have used over the years is what performance psychologists refer to as a “pre-performance routine.”

Centering

“Centering” is a particular pre-performance routine that was designed in the 1970’s by sport psychologist

Robert Nideffer, and adapted for performing artists by Don Greene. Centering is a way to (a) channel your nerves productively and (b) direct your focus even in extreme situations. Once you get the hang of it, it's pretty quick and helps to ensure that you start each performance off on the right foot.

There are seven steps, each specifically designed to move you progressively closer to inner quiet, focus, and poise, and take you further away from fears, doubts, and self-criticism.

Step 1: Pick Your Focal Point

Select a fixed point in the distance, somewhere that feels comfortable. This point could be on your stand, the ground in front of you, or on the back row of the hall, or even could simply mean closing your eyes. A focal point helps to minimize distractions and avoid the temptation to engage in distracting, irrelevant thoughts.

Step 2: Form Your Clear Intention

A clear intention is in essence, a specific goal statement. What do you intend to do when you step out on stage? How exactly do you intend to sound? What, precisely, do you intend to communicate to the audience?

Use assertive, declarative language, such as "I am going to perform brilliantly, with passion and clear dynamic contrast," as opposed to "I hope to play well."

Do not use the word "don't". Doing so will only put the negative picture in your head and generate fears and doubt. For instance, when you say to yourself "*Don't miss* the high note", what's the first image that pops into your mind? Missing the high note, right? What image pops into your mind when you tell yourself "*Nail* the high note?" Learn to focus on what you want, not on what you don't want.

Step 3: Breathe Mindfully

One of the most powerful techniques for countering the stress response involves learning how to breathe diaphragmatically. When stressed, our bodies have a tendency to revert to shallow, rapid, chest breathing. Doing so keeps us in fight or flight mode. Diaphragmatic breathing is the most biomechanically efficient way to breathe, and furthermore, is conducive to activating what's called the parasympathetic nervous system response which is our body's antidote for the fight-or-flight state.

Step 4: Scan and Release Excess Tension

One of the most detrimental consequences of performance stress is muscle tension. As our thinking becomes more negative, our muscles tend to get tighter and less facile. And not just any muscles, but often the ones that we most need control over!

Scan your muscles from head to toe as you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, one muscle group at a time, releasing tension on the exhale.

If you develop a more acute awareness of muscle tension even in the practice room, and are able to control the degree of tension you experience in your playing, you will be able to retain much of this ability during a performance and will feel much more in control.

Step 5: Find Your Center

Are you familiar with the martial arts concept of ki or chi? In Eastern philosophy, chi is described as being one's "life force" or energy. I know that sounds kooky, but if you have ever observed the movements of a great martial arts master or even some athletes or dancers, you will notice a presence, grace, and balance about them regardless of their size or physical dimensions. Not only is the feeling of being centered a very calming and reassuring one, but the mere act of searching for you center will quiet your thoughts.

Step 6: Repeat Your Process Cue

There is a tendency when stressed to hyperfocus on minute details. This may be highly desirable in the practice room, but can be paralyzing on-stage. The solution is to focus on a "process cue" or reminder of what it sounds, feels, or looks like to produce the exact sounds you want.

There are two possible ways to do this. One, you could brainstorm and experiment with words that cue up the sound/feeling/images of producing the beautiful sound, clean articulation, or solid intonation that you wish to produce. Examples of such words are smooth bowing, light fingers, even shifts, fluid, powerful, calm, or easy. It's not the word that is important, but the resultant mental sound/feeling/image of performing exactly the way you want to that is key.

Thus, a second way to do Step 6 is to avoid using words altogether and merely hear, feel, or see yourself performing exactly as you wish.

Step 7: Direct Your Energy

By the time you have gotten to this step, you will have made the shift into a more quiet and focused mental state conducive to performing your best. You will have taken the edge off of your nerves, and in this last step you will channel the remaining energy that remains through some creative visualization into a dynamic and inspired performance. This is how you use the energy instead of trying to get rid of it.

Do a quick internal search for all of the energy that you feel in your body, and feel it gathering at your center. I often imagined my center and energy being somewhat like those plasma lamps that are sold at stores like The Sharper Image (Google "plasma lamp" if you don't know what I'm referring to). Now, direct that energy upwards, through your torso and neck, into your head, and blast it out through your eyes or forehead like a laser beam at the focal point you identified in Step 1. Think of this beam as a conduit for your music and the energy that will convey your clear intention to the audience.

This may sound a little hokey, but have you ever met someone incredibly intense, who perhaps invades your personal space a bit, and looks at you so intensely that you feel uncomfortable and almost feel that they can see into your head and read your thoughts? That's the same sort of energy I am talking about. Instead of trying to get rid of the energy adrenaline provides by relaxing, you can learn to channel it into your performance, and take your playing to a whole new level. Kind of like how public speakers are encouraged to use their adrenaline to project to the back of the hall or use larger physical gestures instead of trying to calm down.

Practicing Centering

When you first try to go through this routine, it may take several minutes to go through all of the steps. If you practice this for 10-15 minutes per day, however, and stick with it, you will begin to notice a difference within a week or two and find that you can center in 5-10 seconds. Some notice a difference within days. The key, like anything else, is consistency and persistence.

Many, if not all, of these elements can be shared with even the very youngest students, whether they get nervous before performances or not. Not as a means to reduce anxiety, but as a way to improve focus and clarity of musical intentions. You don't even have to do the full routine – starting with even just one or two ingredients as the base of your new routine can be a helpful way to get started.

p.s. If you'd like more concrete techniques and strategies for learning how to “surf,” you might like [Beyond Practicing](#) – an online performance enhancement course that will provide more in-depth training on developing your own pre-performance routine and five other key mental skills that will help you become the kind of player who thrives when the pressure is on.

Date Created

July 2009