

“Quiet Eye”: A Technique to Enhance Performance When You’re Nervous

Description

Whether it’s sight-reading a tricky piece in rehearsal, playing our least comfortable excerpt in a big audition, or doing a run-through for a colleague whose opinion we respect, most of us are more likely to rush than to drag when the going gets tough. And sometimes, we rush before we even play a note. We walk hurriedly onto the stage, tune quickly, and start to play before we’ve taken a moment to get our thoughts in order.

None of which makes logical sense. I mean, why would we make things harder for ourselves at the worst possible time by depriving ourselves of the time we need?

Of course, it’s not just musicians who tend to rush when anxiety kicks in. Athletes and surgeons (for instance) are prone to this as well. Yet somehow, the very best performers never seem rushed, and always seem to find ways to slow things down and perform at a high level.

How exactly do they do this?

Our eyes give us away

Previous studies have found that expert performers’ eyes tend to be “quieter,” or less active in the last few moments before executing a skill. A basketball player, for instance, might stare at the hoop for a bit before shooting a free throw. Or a golfer might gaze at the ball before making a putt.

Contrast that with what the more typical response – where our eyes dart around and take in lots of extraneous visual information in those last few critical seconds before throwing a dart or starting Don Juan.

Eye movements might not seem like a big deal, but the research suggests that our eyes are indicative of something more important – our focus. It’s not a perfect measure, but we can use information about where we look, and how long we do so, to get a sense of how effectively we are using our attentional resources in a pressure situation. Which in turn is quite important, because how well we play is a reflection of how fully engaged we are with the task at hand.

Sure, we all have those days when we drive from home to the grocery store while in a zombie-like haze, and times when we can get through an ok *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* while practicing on autopilot, but if we really want to play our absolute best, it takes all of our cognitive resources to make this happen. Just like it takes every ounce of focus and physical energy we can muster if we want to set a personal best in the mile or the deadlift.

So what exactly should we be doing with our eyes?

“Quiet Eye”

A technique called “Quiet Eye” (QE) has been studied in sports, as well as in law enforcement, military, and medical settings, and refers to the amount of time one spends fixating on a specific location before initiating movement. Expert performances seem to go hand in hand with longer QE periods, and it also appears that performing optimally requires that our brain get itself organized before initiating movement, because QE periods get longer as skills become more complex.

In other words, the best performers don't just wing it. They actually take a moment to slow everything down mentally, and prepare themselves to execute a movement before doing so.

Which certainly makes sense. It's like taking a moment to think about how best to answer a delicate question in a big interview, versus simply blurting out the first thing that happens to pop into your thoughts.

But there haven't been a ton of studies looking at the impact of QE in high-stress situations. So is this strategy still effective when the anxiety kicks in?

A test of surgery residents

A team of British and Canadian researchers ([Causer et al., 2014](#)) recruited 20 first-year surgery residents, and divided them into two groups. One group received Quiet Eye training (QET group), while the other received traditional technical training (TT group).

Everyone started with a baseline test of their surgical knot-tying abilities¹.

Then, they received some additional training.

First up was a training video on how to tie the knot, with a particular emphasis on the correct hand movements.

Then, the TT group received additional technical instruction on how to tie the knot. Meanwhile, the QET group received Quiet Eye training, which taught them to focus their gaze on the precise location of the knot before making each throw (i.e. loop).

Next, the QET group watched video of an expert surgeon utilizing a long quiet eye gaze on the placement location of the knot, just as they were instructed to do. The video just showed the surgeon's hands and movements, but a black circle indicated where the surgeon was looking. The TT group watched the same video, but in theirs the cursor was removed, so they saw only the surgeon's hands and suture movements.

Both groups then watched video of their baseline test. The TT group received feedback on their hand movements (technique), while the QE group watched video that showed where they looked, and their

feedback were centered around making sure they employed longer quiet eye gazes on the important knot placement locations.

Last, they took more practice repetitions, and cycled through these steps a couple more times.

Low anxiety vs. high anxiety

Finally, the participants went through the knot-tying test again – but in two different conditions. In the “low anxiety condition,” they were told that the test would be used for “calibration purposes,” and they wouldn’t be compared with any of the other surgical residents. No biggie.

In the “high anxiety” condition, they were told that their performance would be videotaped, their teachers would be evaluating their performance, and they would be ranked among their peers. And to add even more pressure, everyone was told that their performance so far was in the bottom 25%.

The benefits of “Quiet Eye” training

From Causer, J., Vickers, J. N., Snelgrove, R., Arsenault, G., & Harvey, A. (2014). Performing under pressure: Quiet eye training improves surgical knot-tying performance. *Surgery*, 156(5), 1089-1096.

Both groups improved, but the benefits of the Quiet Eye training really became clear when the residents were anxious. Under pressure, the QET group continued to performed pretty well, whereas the TT group’s performance declined. When anxious, their performance regressed back near baseline levels – as if they hadn’t received any training at all.

The Quiet Eye group also completed their task quicker and more efficiently than the TT group.

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When the pressure increased, the Quiet Eye group was more disciplined in both a) how long they kept their eyes fixated on a visual target, and b) how many things they gazed at. The TT group fixated on more things, glancing at them relatively quickly. In other words, their eyes were more active, suggesting that they were more distractable, and less focused when the adrenaline kicked in.

Takeaways

At first glance, it’s easy to get the impression that Quiet Eye is mostly about picking a spot and staring at it. But it’s no help to stare at your stand, while you think about all the things that could go wrong, or make dinner plans in your head.

The idea is to slow down and quiet your thoughts, and focus on the most important and task-relevant details at the right time. What is this piece about? How do you want it to sound? What is the most

important thing you must do right at the outset?

“Quieting” your eyes is just a technique to help you plan your next move, eliminate any distracting thoughts, and [get into the right headspace before you play the first note](#).

It’s possible that you’re already doing something like this on those good days when things go well, and just didn’t realize what you were doing, and how valuable it could be. Maybe these are the days when you have the presence of mind to unfocus your eyes and take a deep meditative breath or two before you play? Or when you give yourself a moment to slow down your racing thoughts by gazing at the floor as you hear the opening note and quality of sound you are aiming for in your head before lifting your instrument up to begin playing?

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References

Causer, J., Vickers, J. N., Snelgrove, R., Arsenault, G., & Harvey, A. (2014). Performing under pressure: Quiet eye training improves surgical knot-tying performance. *Surgery, 156* (5), 1089–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.surg.2014.05.004>

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