

Why Telling Yourself to “Calm Down” Backstage May Be Counterproductive

Description

I can probably count on one hand the number of times I've been on a roller coaster in my lifetime. But these rides always struck me as being one of those things in life that most people have a definitive feeling towards.

As in, you either enjoy roller coasters or you don't.

At least, doesn't it seem that way from those photos that the amusement park has ready for you to buy on your way off the ride?

Roller coaster people are the ones with their hands in the air, smiles on their faces, and are screaming, woo-hoo-ing, and look excited.

Non-roller coaster people (that would be me) are the ones whose hands are firmly attached to the seat belt/bar/anything with a death grip, have tension etched on their faces with their eyes screaming fear, and are trying valiantly to calm themselves down and keep from freaking out the whole time.

Of course, if you've ever tried to calm down in situations like this, you know it's pretty much an exercise in futility...

And what does this have to do with music?

Well, we tend to assume that learning how to calm down is the best way to deal with performance anxiety. But in fact, trying to calm down before a stressful performance may not only be similarly futile – but counterproductive to boot!

Wait – how's that now?

Anxiety isn't necessarily what we think it is

Think back to a time when you felt nervous about a high-pressure situation of some kind.

Maybe it was an upcoming performance, or a time you were going to have to give a speech, or take an important test. Do you remember how it felt?

Often, the anxiety starts with something small. Maybe your heart starts beating a little faster. Or you feel those butterflies in your tummy. You know this is all normal, but that doesn't make you feel any better, and you might start to worry that this is going to derail your performance.

Which makes your heart beat even faster, which leads your thoughts to start spinning off to the bad place, which makes you feel even more nervous, and accelerates this negative spiral of doom.

We usually refer to this experience as “anxiety,” but technically, that's not entirely accurate, because anxiety consists of separate **physical** and **mental** elements. And each affects performance differently.

How so?

Physical activation is not the same as anxiety

By itself, the heightened **physiological** fight-or-flight state we experience in performance settings is known as “arousal” or “activation.”

Our instinct is to try to calm ourselves down and take this high-energy state out of the equation. But the state of being physically activated is actually neither positive or negative.

It's the **mental and emotional** experience – the worries, the fears, the doubts – on top of our arousal state that makes the overall experience either positive or negative, helpful or hurtful.

The subtle difference between anxiety and excitement

For instance, when you combine a heightened state of physical activation with **negative** emotion, you get **anxiety**. Which feels unpleasant and distressing.

But when you combine the same heightened state of physical activation with **positive** emotion, you get **excitement**. Which might include the same increase in heart rate, physical jitteriness, sweats and more, but feels much more positive.

And the reason why it's important to make this distinction between the **physical** and the **mental**, and between **anxiety** and **excitement**, is that this matters a great deal when it comes to performing optimally under pressure.

Three studies, in different areas of performance

In a series of studies ([2014](#)), Harvard researcher Alison Wood Brooks set out to see if we might actually perform better under pressure if we didn't try so hard to calm down.

And how would this work exactly?

Singing performance anxiety

In one study, participants were asked to sing the Journey song *Don't Stop Believin'* on a karaoke program, in front of an observer, where they could win some money, depending on their singing accuracy score (volume, pitch, and note duration).

Participants were split into three groups, and before singing, two groups were asked “How are you feeling?”

One group was told in advance to respond to this question by saying “I am anxious.”

Another group was instructed to respond by saying “I am excited.”

And the third group wasn't asked how they were feeling at all.

And was there any difference in singing performance between the three groups?

Singing performance when “excited”

Indeed there was!

Singing accuracy was highest in the **excited** group (80.52%) and lowest in the **anxious** group (52.98%).

Which was actually significantly worse than the group which wasn't asked about their feelings at all (69.27%).

Public speaking anxiety

Brooks also tried this “I'm excited” strategy with public speaking, but with a slight twist.

In this study, participants were asked to prepare a 2-3 min speech on a specific topic, which was to be delivered on camera, and later judged by a panel of their peers.

As in the singing study, some of the participants were asked to say “I am excited” before giving their speech. But others were asked to say “I am calm” before delivering their speech.

A 3-person panel then viewed the speeches, and scored the participants on a variety of factors.

And was there any difference between the **excited** and **calm** groups?

Public speaking performance when “excited”

Once again, there was!

The **excited** group was rated as being more persuasive, more competent, more confident, and more persistent than the **calm** group. Interestingly, they also gave longer speeches – 35 seconds longer on average.

Math performance anxiety

In a third study, Brooks tested this out with a group of participants who were asked to solve a series of difficult math problems under time pressure.

One group was urged to “try to get excited.” Another group was encouraged to “try to remain calm.” And a third group was told nothing at all.

And was there any difference in performance here?

Math performance when “excited”

Yep, you guessed it.

Once again, the **excited** group scored the highest – with an average score of 45%. The **calm** group and the **no-instructions** group both scored significantly lower, at 36.75%.

Why does this help?

So why is it that saying “I’m excited” seems to lead to better performance than saying “I’m anxious” or trying to calm down?

Well, this seems to be related to the idea that the physical and mental aspects of nerves affect our performance differently (check out [this article](#) for a more detailed explanation of how and why that is).

My take is that interpreting the physical activation as “excitement” might help to reduce the cognitive or mental aspect of anxiety, and free us up to focus more of our attention on the music and the task at hand. Instead of engaging in all of the worries and doubts that would otherwise tend to occupy our thoughts.

Takeaways

So the next time you have a performance, and the fight-or-flight response starts to kick in, try to avoid

saying things like “I’m so nervous!” And not because you’re trying to hide how you’re feeling or that there’s anything wrong with nerves, of course!

But more because there have undoubtedly been times when a performance started out with nerves, but ended with genuine excitement. And because even if you aren’t feeling as calm as you’d like right at that moment, it’s totally possible to embrace the energy and heightened focus that comes with the adrenaline.

Sure, there might be a little bit of anxiety involved, but there’s probably also a part of you that’s feeling some excitement too. So embrace this part, even if you’re not sure if it’s there, and see what happens when you say “I’m excited” to yourself. Think of it as your new pre-performance mantra. ?

A free 3-part mini course, based on your questions about performance anxiety

It’d be nice if this is all you needed to know about beating nerves and anxiety. But there’s more to it than a backstage mantra, of course. There’s the flexibility that you cultivate in the practice room. And the mental work that goes into making sure you can get into a positive headspace right before you play the first note. As well as the mental script you create to ensure you can stay focused during the performance itself.

If you’d like to learn how to work on these skills, I put together a 3-day mini-course based on some of the questions that many of you sent in about nerves and on-stage confidence a couple weeks ago. It goes live on **Monday, Nov. 28th**, it’s free, and it takes place asynchronously. So if you’d like to join in, and you’re not yet a subscriber to the weekly newsletter, [sign up here](#), and I’ll be sure to send Part 1 of the training your way on Monday!

References

Brooks, A. W. (2014). Get excited: Reappraising pre-performance anxiety as excitement. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(3), 1144–1158. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035325>

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