

Dealing With Anxiety

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Performance anxiety can be a frustrating condition. After putting in hours of work, performers want to deliver their best performance when the time arrives. Anxiety, however, can interfere at the last minute. Almost everyone experiences anxiety of some sort as they work through the performance process. What differs is how individuals deal with that anxiety when it appears.

In order to deal with anxiety in a healthy manner, it helps to understand it. Anxiety is basically the body's way of reacting to stress. With both physical and mental symptoms, it affects some people more severely than others. In its mildest form, most experience anxiety as a feeling of apprehension and characterize it as "a case of the nerves," "butterflies," or "stage fright." These feelings are often accompanied by an elevated heart rate, sweating, and shaky hands or knees. Others experience moderate cases of anxiety and might describe "freezing up" or "blanking out." Severe cases can exhibit serious physiological symptoms such as vomiting or migraine headaches. While severe cases may need professional care or medication, most anxiety reactions are not that extreme, and their effects can easily be minimized or eliminated by applying some very simple concepts. In addition, it is important for the performer to realize that not all stress is bad. Sometimes a slight increase in environmental stress can actually improve our performance. Responding positively to stressful situations can help speed reaction times and heighten your senses. This "good stress" is called eustress, and is associated with feelings of fulfillment, accomplishment, and satisfaction. Often, successful performers will exhibit this effect when they play well under pressure, or "rise to the occasion." When anxiety interferes with successful performing, though, it helps to have some methods for dealing with it.

In dealing with anxiety, I recommend addressing the physical symptoms first for two reasons. One: They are often easier to identify and control. Two: Awareness of a physical symptom can often be the psychological trigger that sets off a mental symptom. Eliminating that trigger can return a sense of control and stability to the mind. At the very least, addressing physical symptoms gives performers something to focus on and prevents the mind from wandering towards unproductive thought patterns. When you anticipate anxiety, I recommend combating physical symptoms with the following methods:

1. Controlled Breathing – Controlled breathing is a voluntary process that can affect one of the most important involuntary processes: heart rate. As a person slows their breathing, they will also be slowing their pulse and calming the entire body. Breathe deeply in a relaxed manner. Inhale to capacity and exhale fully. In addition, use measured breathing techniques such as breathing in for four counts and out for four counts.

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2. Muscle Flexing – When physical tension interferes with performance, flexing muscle groups can often have the effect of relaxing the body. Start at the top of the body and work down. Flex the face muscles and jaw, hold it for three to five seconds, and then release. Do the same with muscles in your neck, shoulders, arms, hands, abdomen, legs, and feet.
3. Exercise Regularly – Frequent physical activity can have tremendous overall benefits when dealing with stress. Physical exertion is a great way to release accumulated reactions from all areas of life. Releasing that stress in small amounts through regular exercise can prevent isolated incidents from becoming more than a person can handle.
4. Eat Healthy – Without a good diet, the body will quickly run out of energy. Both the muscles and the mind depend on nutrition to power them through the day. Start with a sensible breakfast, choose healthy foods, and match daily calorie intake to the amount of energy used in a day.
5. Get Enough Sleep – People require different amount of sleep to perform their best. However, most people don't get enough sleep. Over time this can drain their energy and cause fatigue. In addition, physical fatigue can decrease their capacity to maintain a clear and focused mind. Go to bed early enough to ensure seven to nine hours of sleep before waking.
6. Establish a Pre-Performance Routine – Begin by practicing under the same conditions that will be experienced in performance. Perform for small, familiar, and less intimidating audiences before stepping on stage in front of strangers. Before a performance, plan a pre-set routine to follow. For instance: 1. Check your equipment. 2. Do a breathing exercise. 3. Take a drink of water. 4. Take the stage. Having a routine provides something familiar to do and can smooth any unexpected reactions in a new setting.

Mental symptoms of anxiety can also be dealt with using some very simple methods. The key to success with many of these methods is simply to maintain focus at all times. Don't let the unconscious mind run wild. If it does, often a performer's perceptions can completely obscure the reality of a performance situation. When facing anxiety, I recommend combating the mental symptoms with the following methods:

1. Set Attainable Goals – Achieving reachable goals help build confidence throughout the performance process. Early experiences often define which feelings become associated with performance in the future. It is important to set the mind on the right track from the beginning.
2. Repetition – Practice the performance as much as possible. The more familiar it becomes, the

less reason there is for worry. Put the mind at ease by proving over and over that it can perform when called upon.

3. Visualization – Mentally picture the performance, imagining every part of it from beginning to end. Visualize how you will walk, breathe, move, and successfully execute each moment of the performance. Creating this sort of mental pathway can make a live performance easier because there is a sense of familiarity with the events. The mind knows what is coming because it has seen, heard, and felt it before.
4. Understand the Audience – Remember that when it comes to performance, performers are often their own worst critic. In reality, the audience is not out to get anyone. They are there because they want to experience something wonderful. They want performers to succeed. Mentally accepting their support can go a long way towards alleviating any apprehension. Consider this: The larger the audience, the more supporters there are!
5. Get the Ball Rolling – Simply starting can often be the biggest mental obstacle. Focus on beginning the first minute of the performance. Once it has begun, each segment leads quite naturally into the next. Being comfortable and confident through the first minute will cause the rest to follow much easier.
6. Stay in the Moment – Don't judge yourself as you perform. Concentrate on what's happening "right now." Performers that analyze themselves during performance only take focus away from the tasks immediately at hand. There will be time later for feedback and analysis. While performing, keep the mind attuned to events as they happen in real time. Distractions do not help, and will probably detract from the desired result.

In summary, there are many methods that can lessen the symptoms of performance anxiety. Exercise, eat healthy, and get plenty of rest. Use breathing and muscle flexing exercises to alleviate physical tension. Play for small audiences before the big performance, and visualize a successful performance in detail. And when the time comes, live in the moment and save judgment for later. The human tendency to experience anxiety will always accompany performance. It is the performer's ability to deal with that anxiety that will enable them to achieve success.