

Performance Anxiety Demystified

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To know others is knowledge. To know oneself is wisdom-Lao Tzu

Definition: Performance anxiety is an exaggerated, often incapacitating fear of performing in public. (Wilson & Roland, 2000)

How does it work?

A perceived threat activates the body's emergency system known as the 'threat response'

Personality factors: Who does it affect?

As a form of social phobia, performance anxiety affects those individuals prone to experience anxiety. Personality traits include: perfectionism, an over concern with small flaws, self-criticism, excessive personal control, introversion.

Situational factors: How the person perceives the threatening event will trigger the severity of performance anxiety.

- Overestimating the severity of a feared event
- Underestimating the coping resources

Exercise 1: Ranking of anxiety hierarchies

In the following chart, rank performance situations that induce the less anxiety to situations that induce extreme anxiety (whether experienced in the pass or imagined).

Anxiety level (0=none; 10=extreme)	Describe the situation (e.g. solo performance, audition, lesson, church service, etc.)
0	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

Task factors:

One critical condition to ensure successful performance is that there needs to be a skill-challenge balance. The task must be within the performer’s ability in order to achieve ‘flow.’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

- Select repertoire that is within your current skill level
- If prone to severe performance anxiety, select repertoire that is slightly easier to handle than your current skill level

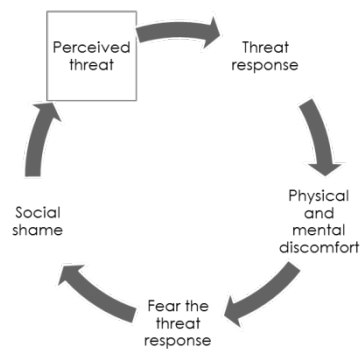
Presence:

Being present means paying undivided attention to the action performed in the present time. This skill is crucial to improve our ability to perform at full potential and needs to be incorporated as part of our daily practicing routine.

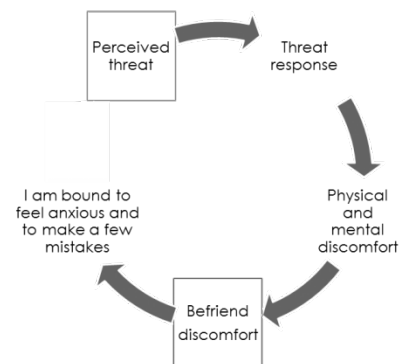
Exercise 2: One-minute Presence

Find a quiet place and set the timer for one minute. Close your eyes and try to focus on **one** of the following: the sound, your breathing, your hands.

The Cycle



Breaking the Cycle



A Plan of Action: Naturalizing Performance Anxiety

Transforming our perception of performance anxiety may have a powerful effect in the body's response.

- Implant realistic expectations
- Anticipate and befriend symptoms of anxiety
- Promote optimistic self-comments

Three steps to naturalize performance anxiety

1. Destigmatize discomfort

- Remind yourself that your threat response is normal and that we all experience it
- Befriend your symptoms: expect to feel anxious, to feel your heart bounce, and to make a few mistakes

2. Neutralized internal negativity

- Remember that your thoughts are just thoughts and thus may be inaccurate
- See your reality from outside
- Use your 'practiced' positive thoughts to bring stability and minimize physical response

3. Re-write Reality

- Writing affects our beliefs in powerful ways. Describe how you performed, what the venue looked like, what the audience looked like, their facial expressions. Describe your positive self-talk while performing. How did feel being focused on the task throughout the performance?

Exercise 4: Positive self-talk repository

- Use present tense to create your positive thoughts: "My fingers move effortlessly and swiftly"
- Make statements short and specific: "I am calm and at peace"
- You can affirm skills you don't necessarily feel true but you wish to develop in your performance: "I am a confident performer"

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Exercise 5: Re-writing Reality

- Write in past tense a description of your performance with all details
- Make this reality as sensory-rich as possible
- Talk about how you felt before, during and after the performance
- Rewrite it as many times as to create the reality you ought to achieve

Additional Exercises

(Adapted from Olivia Fox Cabane's book: 'The Charisma Myth')

Responsibility Transfer

1. Sit comfortably, relax, and close your eyes.
2. Take a few deep breaths. As you inhale, imagine drawing the air toward the top of your head. As you exhale, let that air exit your body through the top of your head washing away all worries and concerns.
3. Pick an entity that you can imagine as benevolent: God, Fate, the Universe, whatever may best suit your beliefs.
4. Imagine lifting all your worries and concerns—an exam, the outcome of a performance, a relationship, etc.—to this entity. This entity is in charge now as you transfer responsibility to whichever entity you've chosen. You have entrusted it with all the worries on your mind.
5. Feel the mental and physical relief as you are no longer responsible for the outcome of each of your worries: everything will be taken care of, everything will work out just fine.

The Big Gorilla

Use this exercise when you want to feel and project confidence in performance.

1. Take a few deep, abdominal breaths and check that your clothing feels comfortable
2. Stand up and shake up your body to loosen tension
3. Take a wide stance and plant your feet firmly on the ground
4. Stretch your arms to the ceiling
5. Stretch your arms to the walls
6. INFLATE. Try to take up as much space as possible
7. Puff up your chest, broaden your shoulders and put your arms at waist level

Midcourse re-direction

Use this line of actions to re-direct your threat response and bring yourself back into a state of confidence

1. Take a deep breath
2. Destigmatize and dedramatize: "this happens to everyone and it will pass"
3. If any negative thoughts appear, remember that they are just thoughts, and not necessarily valid
4. Imagine getting a warm hug from someone you trust for twenty seconds or remember a moment in your life when you felt absolute happiness. (Thanks to your brain's inability to distinguish imagination from reality, your body will produce a chemical confidence response.)
5. Use positive self-talk statements to re-direct your energy effectively