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A Fresh Approach to Resolving Performance-Related Stress

In this article, I will describe a new approach to performance anxiety, one that considers stress and fear to be optional instead of mandatory. If you experience any type of stress, either before, during, or after a performance, and would prefer to be without it, read on. Note that we are not talking about stress management. The very term “management” implies that you just have to learn to live with stress, and cope with it as best you can. Instead, after a brief discussion of basics, I will consider some of the myths associated with conventional approaches to managing performance anxiety and then present new insights about stress and anxiety and new methods for resolving them, which I now practice and teach. These new methods are simple to learn, yet are extremely effective.

First, let’s define our terms (from dictionary.com):

Anxiety: distress or uneasiness of mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune

Stress: a specific response by the body to a stimulus, as fear or pain, that disturbs or interferes with the normal physiological equilibrium of an organism.

For simplicity’s sake, let’s consider these both as variations on the theme of fear.

Fear: a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., **whether the threat is real or imagined**; the feeling or condition of being afraid.

For our purposes, it’s important to acknowledge that our fear can incite a **physiological** stress response from the body, perhaps more widely known as the “fight or flight” response, which in the right situation (if you were, say, being chased by hungry lions) is quite miraculous. The problem is that the body does not seem to be able to determine whether the threat is real or imagined. Nor does it necessarily distinguish between an actual physical threat vs. a potential bruise to the ego. It is unlikely that a mishap during a performance, no matter how severe, would result in your needing to run for your life. (And hungry lions are rarely invited to serve on audition committees.)

So now we come to our first important insight: this is not a mental process. In other words, you did not sit down and think this through, weighing the pros and the cons, analyzing all angles of the situation, and then decide that, all things considered, it was in your best interests to activate your physiological stress response before launching into *Daphnis and Chloé*. So what makes you think that you can think your way out of it? Probably it’s because that is our default response to just about everything, i.e. we do our best to apply our Vulcan mind control to shut down any inconvenient emotions. Only that doesn’t work. In this case, neither the problem, nor the solution, is cognitive.

Next, let’s take a look at the two aspects to knowledge:

- Intellectual understanding (thinking)
- Experiential knowing (knowing)

Consider the experience of eating a strawberry vs. the intellectual understanding of what a strawberry is. If you met someone who had never eaten a strawberry, you could tell them all about the strawberry's physical characteristics, its shape, its color, its texture, you could describe its flavor, its aroma, but no amount of words would provide anything close to the experience of biting into one. While we may be more comfortable focusing on our thought processes, if we are looking to resolve undesirable emotions, it is much more useful to focus on our experiential knowing, which means getting more in touch with what is going on in our bodies. The key to all of this is to be able to stay present to the energy of the emotions in your body.

And now it's time for Insight #2: every unwanted emotion has a corresponding 'feeling,' by which I mean a physical sensation in your body. Being able to efficiently eliminate the anxiety depends on being able to distinguish between the story of the emotion and the energy of the corresponding feeling. For instance, the story of your performance-related fear could be: I am anticipating some disaster that could result in extreme embarrassment. The feeling is the visceral physical sensation of being nervous. Traditional therapy generally focuses on the story of why you are feeling the emotion. But our new improved approach focuses directly on using specific techniques to fully resolve and release the physical sensation. More on that in a moment.

But first let's take a look at some of the old methodology, which I consider to be outdated:

Faulty premise #1: It's normal to feel fear when I play.

While it may be common for musicians to feel some sort of fear, this is not natural. Most fears are learned. In fact there are only two natural fears. Only two. What do you think they are? (Hint: neither of them has anything to do with performing music, even in auditions. We can also rule out death, taxes, & public speaking. See answers below.)*

Faulty premise #2: I'm nervous because of current circumstances.

Fear is not about being present. It's about reliving the past and/or worrying about the future. The only reason you are expecting some sort of mishap to occur is because of some past experience that felt very unpleasant at the time, and you jumped to the conclusion that it could happen again, so you might as well worry, just in case. It's also possible that you decided to worry based on someone else's experience. But again, this was not a rational decision – it was a feeling-level decision. The good news is that we don't need to analyze or determine the cause of the fear. We only need to deal with the energy of it.

Faulty premise #3: Once I get a real job, I won't be nervous anymore.

In many cases, musicians feel more pressure once they are playing on a professional level. In any case, since the fear is not related to the current circumstances, this assumption is erroneous.

Faulty premise #4: I just need to practice more.

See above. While practicing is certainly beneficial, it does not address the roots of the fear.

Faulty premise #5: My fear gives me an edge that I can channel into my performance.

While it's easy to confuse fear and excitement, they are two very different energies. One is useful, the other is not. Fear is the anticipation of pain; excitement is the anticipation of joy.

Faulty premise #6: I just need to control my nerves with medication.

Drugs such as beta-blockers can only manage the physical symptoms of being nervous, and that can be helpful. But wouldn't it be even better to resolve the root cause of the anxiety & be forever free of symptoms?

Faulty premise #7: Something outside me needs to change before I can feel completely comfortable with my performance.

If this were true, we would all be in big trouble. The only thing in the world that we can truly control is what is going on inside of us. Luckily, tackling our inner game is enough to create a big shift in our experience.

The stress-elimination techniques that I teach were originally developed to address and fully resolve symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). After seeing the dramatic results they have provided for many combat veterans, I adapted them to use with musicians (starting with myself), and I have experienced and observed equally impressive results. These techniques provide the means to fully resolve and release the energy of any unwanted emotion. Once the energy is resolved, the emotion goes with it, and the story becomes irrelevant. While I don't have space here to describe the process in detail, here is the gist of it: once you learn to isolate the sensation of the energy of the feeling, the next step is to bring your full attention and awareness to it. By deliberately focusing your full attention on the energy of the feeling, the sensation will evaporate.

This is exactly the opposite of what we are all conditioned to do. From the time we are very young, we develop strategies of avoiding intense feelings because we become very easily overwhelmed. Infants have a limited physiological capacity to process emotions. Our capacity to feel grows exponentially as we grow older, but because we are already so good at resisting feeling fully, we tend to just continue that old pattern, until we learn the value of returning to the full experience available in our bodies. Once you have isolated and resolved the energy of a particular fear, you will not feel that fear again. This provides you with the experiential knowing (as in the actual biting into the strawberry), of being able to play without fear. With this new awareness, your ability to focus on what you are doing will greatly improve. It's incredibly freeing to live without fear. Imagine being able to thoroughly enjoy the music and to be able to freely express yourself without worry!

* falling, sudden or loud noises

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