

MANAGING PERFORMANCE ANXIETY-GOING FOR OPTIMAL PERFORMANCES

“COURAGE FACES FEAR, AND THEREBY MASTERS IT.”

~MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

All performing artists have to deal with performance anxiety at one time or another. There are many helpful strategies we can use to deal with this issue that's rarely talked about or addressed.

The "fight or flight" reaction occurs in almost everyone when faced with a stressful situation. When we get up to perform what happens inside our bodies? What happens to you?

GAINING CONTROL OVER OUR PHYSIOLOGY

Adrenalin is a common physiological response to stress. Adrenalin mobilizes our bodies to get away from "danger." Our heart rates can go up, breathing can get more shallow, and sometimes our mouths can feel dry—this is all normal and common.

Most performers learn how to deal with and manage these physiological responses. What do you already do to manage a faster heart rate?

LOWERING THE HEART RATE

Usually paying attention to our breathing is key to slowing down a racing heart. When the body senses danger, the heart starts pumping faster so blood is flowing to all parts of the body. Athletes actually benefit from the adrenalin response, but performing artists need to learn how to lower their heart rate. Deep, measured breathing has been scientifically proven to do this.

Here's an exercise that works for me:

- Breathe in for 3 long counts.
- Pause.
- Breathe out for 4 long counts.
- Repeat this a few times.
- Now increase the pause time.
- Breathe in for 3 counts, pause for 2 counts, and breathe out long for 5 counts.
- Now, increase it further: Breathe in for 3 counts, pause for 5 counts, breathe out for 7 counts. Repeat this a few times.
- This practice can dramatically lower our heart rate, and "trick" our bodies into thinking there is no danger here, because we're breathing so calmly.

REDUCING MUSCULAR TENSION

There are places in our bodies that usually hold tension when we're under stress. These places include the muscles around our eyes, our stomach, and our legs.

Here's an exercise that can ease the tension in our "mobilized" bodies:

Close your eyes:

- Breathe in, and as you breathe out, release the muscular tension in the space between your eyebrows.
- Breathe in, and as you breathe out, release the tension in the muscles around your eyes.
- As you deeply inhale and slowly exhale, release the tension in the following areas:
 - the hinge of the jaw,
 - upper and lower neck,
 - shoulders, arms, hands, fingers,
 - upper back, lower back, upper chest,
 - lower abdomen,
 - buttocks, pelvis,
 - upper legs, calves, ankles, feet, toes,
 - each vertebra of the spine,
 - neck, scalp, and brain.
- Then, in your mind's eye move through all the muscle groups, and as you breathe in and out, release any tension that's remaining.
- When you feel more relaxed, you may want to keep your eyes closed and visualize yourself performing with great poise and ease.
- This systematic tension reduction routine works well with daily practice. After regularly repeating this for many days, weeks, and months, the body gets used to it and starts relaxing automatically as we begin the process.

DEALING WITH A DRY MOUTH

If you find your mouth dries up a little, this is a common adrenalin response. You might want to bring a cup of water on the stage. I know a famous trumpet player who used to pushed a small piece of sugar-less chewing gum into a back molar, and kept his mouth irrigated by touching it with his tongue during rests. If this is an issue for you, you might want to try this method in a rehearsal first.

CULTIVATING A SUPPORTIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHERS AND OURSELVES

How do you listen when others perform?

This is important to explore because *how we listen to others, is how we think they listen to us.*

What are the ways you *want* others to listen to you?

How can we change our attitude to be that way when we hear others perform?

How can we look for the best qualities in what someone else is doing?

- Is their sound beautiful?
- Is there a touching turn of phrase?
- Do you get chills when you hear a certain passage?
- What qualities do you love?
- If the performer makes a noticeable mistake, do you put them down or cheer them on like they might be playing a sport-- "That's okay, that's okay, pick yourself up and run, run, RUN!"

The way we listen to others perform is directly related to how we think they're listening to us. If we develop a positive and kindly attitude toward others, that will spill over into a positive generous attitude towards ourselves. This exercise reduces our perceived sense of danger. Attitude is everything.

HELPFUL SELF-TALK

How do you talk to yourself before and during a performance? What would be the most helpful things to say to yourself? What do you imagine your best friend or favorite relative would say to you?

What would you say to your best friend *before* a performance?

Whom would you most want to perform for, and why? Your best friend? A close relative? A little brother or sister?

How do you think they would listen to you?

If they listened with love, encouragement, kindness, generosity and warmth, how would that feel to you?

How do we recover after making a mistake? What would your best friend or favorite relative say to you to help you get back on track?

What would you say to your best friend after she/he made a mistake?

It might help you to imagine that you're performing for your favorite person or being, and that you're playing for only them. They love you unconditionally. They'll encourage you and support you no matter what. When we imagine them sitting in the audience smiling and enjoying what we're doing, we want to give our best.

DEFINING OUR PURPOSE AS PERFORMERS

What is your purpose as a performer? This is really important to think about.

Is it to impress other people or is it more about sharing your work and talent? We work hard to get up there onstage and perform, but why are we really doing it? These are questions worthy of long-term contemplation.

A musician once said, “The *more* I try to impress people, the *less* I impress them.”

Dealing with PERFECTIONISM

When we perform, many of us think it has to be perfect. Yet, since we're human, we all make errors and mistakes. Most arts disciplines strive for perfection, and teachers and directors keep raising the bar. So how do we get ourselves off the perfection hook and still feel good about our performance and ourselves?

Your ideas:

What can we say to ourselves that will be encouraging, true and beneficial?

Sports psychologists have looked into this and have said it helps to think of a simple phrase or word list that's very positive and can shift our mind set easily into the positive.

For example, in baseball, when a relief pitcher comes in at the bottom of the 9th inning with the bases loaded and has to get the last out to win the game, what can they say to themselves to perform at their best in a high pressure situation?

What do you think?

It might go back to what their purpose is. Why are they working so hard to do what they do?

It might be as simple as, "***I LOVE BASEBALL!***"

Try to come up with a simple phrase or word list that helps you feel more positive and courageous. Here's a word list example: "Self-possessed; Strong; Warrior; Star". Try a few phrases or word lists and see which one works best for you. You can repeat your "mantra" as often as you need to.

Another way to look at it might be to announce to yourself, "I'M IN A PERFECTION-FREE ZONE!"

"Whatever happens, I'm okay because I am beautiful just for who I am."

Sometimes, as performers, we wonder before a performance, if our best stuff will be there when we need it. This phrase works for me: "My high level of ability and artistry will be there, without going to the extreme of perfection."

SUMMARY

- Prepare your part as deeply as you can. (See **POWER PRACTICING.**)
- Plan your arrival so that you can get to the performance space with adequate time to spare.
- Take time to unwind before a performance.
- Sit quietly, feet flat on the floor, breathe in...pause...breathe out.
- Notice if any areas of your body are holding tension.
Jazzy shoulders ;-)
- Repeat the words you've come up with that are true and comforting to you.
- Visualize your favorite person or being that you are performing for.
- Imagine them smiling as they listen to you.
- Give yourself encouragement and support by repeating your positive phrase or word list every few minutes.
- Know that courage is not the absence of fear; courage is going on in spite of the butterflies.
- Remember that everyone gets butterflies. These are strategies to "get our butterflies flying in formation."
- Managing the stress of performance takes practice and experience. Try to create opportunities to perform frequently.
- Performing will get easier for you.