

Performance Anxiety

Relief methods for presenters and performers

By Erin McGaughan, performance and presentation coach.

November 10, 2015

I hate rhyming mnemonics, and if this one weren't so sticky and helpful, I'd drop it.



Bless it.



Assess it.



Address it.

Bless it.

We only call it anxiety when it's not fun. Until then, it's excitement, energy, focus, present-moment awareness, passion, commitment. But if the adrenaline and cortisol levels go higher than our personal level of tolerance – boom, now it's Performance Anxiety.

Whatever you call it, this is your ancient sympathetic nervous system, your inner caveman, preparing for fight, flight, or freeze.



'Bless it' means don't fear the fear; manage it, like the fuel in a rocket.

You need it, and it's valuable.

Assess it.

Trust your inner caveman. For more than a million years, it's been identifying dangers like death by tiger, and death by exclusion from the cave. If it says there are dangers here, then there are, and you – modern pre-frontal cortex user - you need to assess them clearly.

Is it your job on the line, or even your whole department? Is your family's mortgage payment at stake? Is the product you're pitching going to save someone's life? Is this audition or open mic going to lead to being discovered by a hot producer?

Or are these illusions?

Even more importantly: **who exactly IS this audience**, what do they know about you already, and what is it they need from you now? 'Assess it' means identifying any illusions that stop a performer or presenter from being present and truly connecting to THIS audience, right now.



'Assess it' means being here IRL – in real life.

Address it.



This is where it all happens. You've got plenty of tools in your toolbox to choose from, and you needn't be shy about trying them.

However, my Best Recommendations are 1, 2, and 3.

1) Live performance repetition.

Stand-up comics know that it's all about Stage Time. Our fight/flight systems overreact to the unfamiliar, BUT after we've done it 5 times, for 5 different audiences, the repetition blunts the teeth of our anxiety beast. If need be, create ad hoc performances for your friends, family, or other co-workers, join Toastmasters, attend open mics, whatever you need to do to get into performance situations that make you anxious.

2) Practice and preparation.

Audiences are expert at assessing expertise. If you truly know your song or your subject, the audience sees it in your eye tracking, vocal flow, body symmetry and coordination, as well as of course your actual content or performance. But, while preparation is important, it's not quite as important as #1 for overall impact on anxiety levels. See also #8 and #9 below for discussion of memorization.

3) Physical Aerobic Warm-up.

The inner caveman is preparing to do major exertion, so give it some exertion, and help yourself get back into a synchronized mind-body union. Several push-ups, jumping jacks, a little jogging, anything that gets you mildly out of breath will do. Then leave enough time before your entrance to drink a bit of water and normalize your breathing. Coordination, alignment, balance and flexibility all increase, as well as your audience's perception of your social status and well-being. An aerobic warm up also eases circulatory symptoms like cold hands, trembling, sweating, chills/goosebumps, lightheadedness and heart-racing.



Those first three tools get the most complete and reliable results. But for the curious, see below for more strategies to address Performance Anxiety and Stage Fright.

4) Yoga-style Breathing Exercises and stretching.

Try 10 slow, deep breaths while stretching the back, torso, groin, chest and neck. This and [other breath exercises](#) can slow your heart rate, which is a good trick. However, don't do the slow breathing thing unless you've already done #3, or you risk looking sleepy, lazy or depressed. Remember, yoga methodology is not primarily about social connection and communication, whereas performance is.

5) Vocal warm-up.

Use the warm-ups you find most enjoyable from your relevant discipline. Here's a [Royal Shakespeare Company](#) warm up. Here's a warm up from a [lovely opera singer](#). BONUS: there is one exercise that appears in almost every genre of vocal discipline – [the motorboat sound](#), which coordinates breath output without adding tension in the neck.

6) Movement disciplines.

Training methods like Alexander Technique, Skinner, Laban, Klein, NIA, Tai Chi, ballet, Zumba, all the various yoga forms – can all be wonderful. However, if your favorite movement discipline isn't thoroughly addressing your gut-curdling fear, ask yourself whether it's aerobic or not. See #3 above.

7) Spa-type treatments.

Massage, sauna, hot tub, steam room, shower, heating pad, facial, etc - who doesn't love this stuff? However, as with #4, be careful you don't come out looking lackadaisical, like you just got out of bed.

8) Memorization, part A.

The fight/flight alert system can sometimes cause us to freeze our thinking, so that we can only fall back on what has become "automatic". For some performers, this falling back is a welcome moment of comfort, as they get into the flow of a song, memorized prayer or familiar mission/vision soundbite.

9) Memorization, part B.

Many performers who *thought* they had thoroughly memorized their material find that they lose lyrics or "go up on lines" (aka forget what to say) when they actually see the audience. *Eye contact* initiates a different kind of brain activity than solo study does. Bad coaches will say "then don't look at the people."

Eye avoidance is NOT a sustainable strategy, and will ruin your audience connectivity.

Go back to #1, and get used to it.

If your discipline doesn't require exact memorization, don't do it. Instead, reduce your full speech to bullet points, memorize those and fill in the details spontaneously, for the audience you really see in front of you. This prevents speakers from getting addicted to exact inflections, an addiction that can make a presentation sound perfunctory, like a boring pre-flight speech.



10) Power poses.

There's some [evidence that shows](#) holding a series of powerful Wonder Woman-type poses for two minutes or more can increase testosterone levels and feelings of confidence. There's also some [evidence that it doesn't](#), though. Like other tactics, if it works for you, great. It's quick and cheap.

11) Placebos, lucky charms, and ritual.

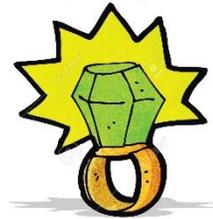
These are cognitive tools that work well on some people, but not on all. Examples:

"This soup is an ancient Hawaiian recipe that cures anything."

"I have to wear my lucky ring or I can't perform."

"I eat roast chicken and sweet potatoes at 5:30, without fail."

Downside: serious problems occur if the lucky charm is unavailable or the ritual is altered. It's best to avoid "must haves".



12) Special diets for delicate digestive symptoms.

The fight/flight response shuts down digestion in order to prioritize blood flow of stress hormones. This shutdown causes unpleasant symptoms like butterflies, gut spasms, stomach aches, nausea, diarrhea, frequent urination, flatulence, dry mouth and more. Some people use a BRAT diet or other exclusion diet to minimize the unpleasant effects. Others focus on timing their intake (and outflow).

13) Special diets: comfort foods and folk medicines.

This mixes the power of #11 and #12. Some people use special teas, lozenges, sprays, supplements, candies, or other foods that may or may not have some actual calming effects, though these are seriously strengthened by placebo and ritual-comfort effects.

14) Beta Blockers.

These chemicals are well proven to interfere with the natural hormonal systems and reduce adrenaline production. Expense, addictive properties, and side effects make these relatively unpopular.

15) Alcohol, narcotics and other inebriates.

Not recommended. Results are unpredictable, methods are unsustainable, and use of these substances delays the performer's *actual* development of skills and confidence.

16) Hypnosis, NLP, self-talk, pep talks, prayer

These revolve around convincing the brain of something – e.g. that it is not in danger, or is not afraid, or is worthy of success. I've seen these tactics work well for some people, but not so reliably that I'd put it any higher on the list. For me, my inner caveman doesn't put much stock in talk.

Erin McGaughan is a performer, director, and coach in Seattle Washington. She's currently on staff as Music Director at Unity of Seattle. She coaches and consults for private students as well as local and national groups including TEDxRainier, WeWork Seattle, Unity NW Region, DIOS Arts Network, National Conference of Centers for Spiritual Living, Women of Wisdom, and more. Full info at www.erinmcgaughan.com