

Managing Performance Anxiety

Contributors and Treatments

Contributing Factors

Perfectionism

Introversion

Gender

Comparison and Competition

Low Self-Esteem

Trait Anxiety

Poor Preparation

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Deep Breathing

- **Letting Go of Tension:** Think “breathe in” while inhaling into the abdomen, hold the breath for a moment, and then slowly release the breath while thinking “relax.”
- **Mindful Breath Counting:** Using slow abdominal breathing, count exhalations one through four, and then begin once more with the count of one. For example, “inhale...exhale (‘one’)...inhale...exhale (‘two’)...inhale...exhale (‘three’)...inhale...exhale (‘four’)...” and so forth.
- **Breath Training:** Inhale through the nose and slowly count to three, pause for a moment, and then exhale through the mouth, once again counting to three. The inhalations and exhalations can be lengthened to four or five counts each.

Progressive Relaxation

- Deepen the breathing in order to quiet the mind and allow for better focus.
- Alternate between tensing different muscles and then releasing them.
- Begin with the fists, and move up the hands and arms toward the face, tensing and relaxing the forehead, eyes, jaw, and lips.
- Move to the neck, and then down the shoulders, chest, stomach, and back.
- End with the lower body, focusing on the muscles of the legs and feet.ⁱ

Cognitive Restructuring

- Catastrophic and unproductive thoughts can be centered on things such as worry about memory lapses, concern over tension, fear of disapproval from the audience, lack of confidence in performance ability, and concern about coping with anxiety.ⁱⁱ
- In order to restructure unproductive thoughts, students must first recognize them as unhealthy and irrational.
- Instead of allowing thoughts to center on what could go wrong or the anxiety itself, students should focus on positive self-statements such as “I am well-prepared for this performance,” or “I am excited about sharing this piece with my audience.”

Yoga

- In a study conducted at the Tanglewood Institute, the students who participated in a six-week yoga program showed drastically reduced levels of trait anxiety and music performance anxiety.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Yoga practice can also reduce the potential for performance-related musculoskeletal disorders.^{iv}
- Yoga helps performers find a balance between the seemingly opposed forces of energy and relaxation that are required for peak performance.^v
- Performers can benefit from cultivating a daily yoga practice, as well as utilizing pre-performance yoga sequences.
- Energizing Sequence: *Tadasana* (Mountain pose) and Helicopter Pose
- Relaxing Sequence: *Pranayama* (deep breathing), neck turns and twists, and easy seated and standing twists^{vi}

Systematic Desensitization

- A form of imagery, this involves verbally presenting students with performance situations and helping them learn coping strategies to address feelings about the imaginary performance.
- Teachers should begin by describing easy performance situations, and gradually work towards larger performance venues and audiences.
- Students should allow themselves to experience the emotions and feelings that are elicited, and work through causes behind anxiety.
- Teachers should help students identify and reframe negative responses to the imagined scenario.
- Can also take on the form of a sequence of actual performances, called *in vivo* practice.

ⁱ Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay, *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2008), 44-45.

ⁱⁱ Hee Sun Chung, "Anxiety in Musical Performance: Literature Review and Implications for Piano Pedagogy" (DMA diss., Indiana University, 1992), 64

ⁱⁱⁱ Sat Bir S. Khalsa, Bethany Butzer, Stephanie M. Shorter, Kristen M. Reinhardt, and Stephen Cope, "Yoga Reduces Performance Anxiety in Adolescent Musicians," *Alternative Therapies* 19, no. 2 (March/April 2013): 42-43.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 36.

^v Lesley Sisterhen McAllister, *The Balanced Musician: Integrating Mind and Body for Peak Performance*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013): 263.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 304.