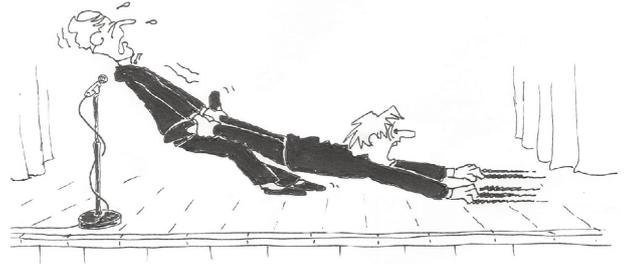


I CAN'T GO ON!

In this Factsheet:

- What is Performance Anxiety?
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- Some Strategies for Managing Performance Anxiety



What is Performance Anxiety?



Performance anxiety or 'stage fright' is a feeling of fear accompanied by increased bodily arousal which can affect a performer when they are practising on their own, rehearsing with others, before and/or during a performance – in fact any time when a performer is in a situation, competitive or not, where they dread being judged, critiqued and 'found out' as not good enough.

Performance anxiety is one of the most common challenges facing any performer and it is no respecter of age, status, experience or reputation. It might be narrow and only emerge around certain situations in specific locations and certain 'important' people, or broader and occur in the build-up and during every performance. Constantly striving for the very highest standards is essential but when, for whatever reason, a performer experiences less than perfection, they can be excessively hard on themselves and a vicious circle of worry and self-doubt can follow.

Other types of anxiety, such as panic attacks, social anxiety and phobias, can also affect performers and lead to fear and stress around performing.

Causes of Performance Anxiety

You are more likely to experience performance anxiety if:



- You are by nature a 'worrier' and tend to get anxious or upset in everyday situations.
- You have an unhappy memory of a previous performance.
- The performance is labelled as 'high profile' or 'important'.
- The performance is technically and artistically challenging, e.g. a major role, lots of exposed solo work, difficult and lengthy physical challenges, etc.
- There hasn't been much time to prepare, practise and rehearse.
- Working with new people, especially 'difficult' people or people whose reputation is awesome!
- You are tired, 'under the weather', jet-lagged, in pain or injured or returning after a break.

- There are major current life stressors affecting you or someone close , e.g. deaths and illnesses, relationship breakdowns or financial pressures.
- You have set rigid and unrealistically high standards for yourself which you (or anyone else) would rarely be able to achieve.

Physical and Mental Symptoms of Performance Anxiety

One or several of these may occur:



- Sweating – especially hands
- Dry mouth
- Heart pounding
- Breathing gets faster and shallower
- Shaking or trembling
- Dizziness
- ‘Butterflies’ in the stomach
- A sick feeling (actual vomiting is less common)
- The urge to keep rushing to the loo
- Feelings of apprehension, fear, dread, or panic
- Feelings of failure, inadequacy, lack of skill

Negative and self-critical thoughts such as:

- *The performance will go badly*
- *I’ll mess up the tricky bit*
- *People will think I’m terrible*
- *There’s no way I’m going to be able to cope*
- *Any minute now the audience is going to see I’m not as good as I should be*
- *I can do it on my own at home but will I be able to do it on the day?*
- *If that happens, the whole thing will be a disaster*

Some Strategies for Managing Performance Anxiety



Managing performance anxiety is a skill and not something that will be magically there for you on a performance day. All skills improve with practice. There is no mystery to mastery! Practise your anxiety management in low stress situations to begin with until you become familiar with all the techniques.

- If your fears relate back to long-standing difficult psychological events, it will help to identify and work through these with a suitable psychotherapist.
- If your fears are based on shaky or inadequate technique, book yourself some time with a trusted teacher or expert in your field.
- If your performance fears include panic attacks, social anxiety or phobias, or you have a wide-ranging tendency to perfectionism, work through these issues with a suitable psychotherapist.

- Medication such as beta-blockers and tranquillizers may help reduce your anxiety. You can see your GP to discuss if they are appropriate for you, how they work, the pros and cons including possible side-effects.
- A philosophy of 'important' performances (see above) not only increases the expectation and pressure, it also has a flipside of 'unimportant' performances. As performers, every performance matters as you never know who might be in the audience. It's better to cultivate a 'next' performance mentality which means your attitude and preparation will be consistent day by day.
- Some 'self-medications' like excessive alcohol or street drugs may be addictive or have bad side-effects and should be avoided. This also goes for excessive exercise, comfort eating, restrictive diets or cutting out meals altogether.

Pre-Performance, the weeks and days beforehand



- Thorough preparation of the music, lines, moves, etc is essential. There are no shortcuts to success. Prioritise your preparation and make time for it in the run up to performances.
- Take time to reflect on the quality of your practice. Is it honestly preparing you in every detail for the pressure of the situation you will be facing?
- Starting with small steps/low stress situations, practise mimicking the performance in as much detail as possible. As you build your confidence and gradually get used to the effects of adrenalin on your body, you can extend this simulation to include: what you will do on the day, what time you will arrive at the venue, what it is like performing at that venue, what you will wear, keeping going and re-focusing when you make an error. Particularly prepare for the all-important few minutes before walking on stage/into the audition room.
- Write down the skills and strengths you already possess which have enabled you to get as far as you have. These will help you to nurture a positive mindset. Keep this list close by whenever you are practising.
- Integrate relaxation and similar techniques into your preparation, e.g. Alexander Technique, Autogenic Training, massage, mindfulness meditation, Pilates, T'ai Chi, yoga.
- You are a performing arts athlete as well as an artist so remember the health basics: nutrition, hydration, sleep, fitness/exercise, warm-up and cool-down routines.
- Practise voluntary management of your arousal, increasing it (e.g. jumping up and down on the spot to mimic an adrenalin rush) or reducing it (see above for relaxation techniques). It can be done.
- If you can choose the material to be performed, then choose something you've already performed successfully and/or repertoire that is well within your technical capabilities and which showcases your strengths. Why make the challenge harder than it needs to be?
- Research tells us that our brain reacts the same in a real situation and an imagined one (see simulation above) so start training your brain into thinking positively and practise seeing yourself performing well.
- Develop and practise pre- and during-performance routines to cultivate feelings of familiarity with the task. This will also increase the chances of you settling and focusing more quickly under pressure.

All our Health Resources for performing arts professionals and students can be found online at:

www.bapam.org.uk

During-Performance

- Interpret the effects of adrenalin as telling you you're ready! Without it, a performance is likely to be less exciting for you and your audience. If you've worked at your simulation, you'll be used to managing adrenalin.
- Perfection in the performing arts is difficult if not impossible to define and just as difficult to execute, so 'park' perfection and aim for sincerity and the best performance you can manage.
- Choose to focus on the task rather than the audience or yourself ("How do I look"?) – in other words: perform the music/role/dance, *not* the situation.
- If you make a mistake, refocus and just keep going. It's very likely no-one else will notice. If you forget your lines/moves, others will help you out and your 'muscle memory' will kick in.

Post-Performance

- Post-mortems and rumination directly after performances will be emotion-laden, especially if using drink or drugs. Postpone your performance review until tomorrow.

Getting further help



Performance anxiety can be a lonely experience but there's no need to suffer alone. Even if you have put up with it for a long time, it may not take as long as you think to find a helpful practitioner, find out about potential financial support and make positive progress. BAPAM provide free clinical advice about managing anxiety and other performance-related health problems, and can also give information about organisations and individuals who provide practical help.

For more information give us a call on 020 7404 8444 or take a look at our website: www.bapam.org.uk

The authors of this factsheet are part of BAPAM's Trainer Network which provides bespoke education events covering key aspects of health in the performing arts. See our website for more information.

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