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### Stage Fright: Coping with performance anxiety for performers

*Ever had pre-show jitters? butterflies? memory failure? fingers like lead and a throat so dry that if you did remember a lyric your voice was barely a croak? You were probably experiencing performance anxiety, or, by its common name: stage fright. Where does stage fright come from and why would our brains make it so hard for us to do our best just when we most want to?*

#### ***Here's a little perspective on anxiety, brain ownership, and performance:***

Not all anxiety is bad. In fact, some, within an “optimum range” can be beneficial. Fear, anxiety and stage fright originate in risking one’s status (embarrassment), unfamiliar, unpredictable, or threatening circumstances, (“I swear that wind could blow the stage down on all of us!” “Could that lightning really hit the mike stands and kill us all?” “I knew I shouldn’t have eaten that burrito.”), irrational beliefs, negative self talk, and the judgment of one’s inner critic (“I’m not as good as the last performer, the audience will know I’m a klutz.”) These can arise from actual past experience like harsh family or sibling criticism, by imagination: “catastrophizing” anticipated events, or be ingrained by cultural or familial taboos about demonstrating skills or talents that bring attention to oneself. They can be exacerbated by biological or metabolic status like hunger or dehydration (ever seen people line up at the porta potty before skydiving or going on stage?) resulting in the fright, flight, fight syndrome.

#### **What we’ve got to work with: Leaky amygdalas, limbic system, breathing, & blood flow**

Thoughts, emotions, and their physiological correlates can reroute blood flow from the cerebrum to the brainstem as a survival response. Muscle tension then increases and blood flow is restricted in limbs, hands, throat, which limits motion range. Dry mouth, blurred vision hyperventilation & chest tightness become problematic as a full fledged “panic attack” triggers fears of death by heart attack, digestive discomfort and distraction from performance. Whew, no wonder stepping on stage for an open mic slot can be so scary!

#### **What we can do: Special demands on performers demand special attention**

Performance is an exquisite act of blending precise physical skills, memory, and emotional communication. Make the unfamiliar comfortable through actions: Have what you need with you (water, food, adequate rest). Actively challenge and dispute irrational ideas and negative self talk by the “inner critic”. Take time to warm up *and* relax your body. Practice a “mindfulness exercise” to change your *relationship* to your thoughts. Breathe to soothe your amygdala. Breathe to focus your thoughts on just this moment, not a laundry list of awful “what-ifs”. Breathe to maintain balanced blood gas levels. Breathe and practice (visualize, hear, feel) a soothing image like a peaceful resting spot, the end of the show, a humorous scene, your inspiring moments or something to increase blood flow like warming hands at a friendly camp fire. And avoid excessive use of coffee or stimulants and alcohol or drugs to “take the edge off”. Most importantly, keep your sense of humor well practiced and keep on playing.

***Tom Tower***

#### ***Some other helpful sources:***

[Meditation in the Zone](#), Shinzen Young

[The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Conquering Fear and Anxiety](#), Sharon Heller PhD

[Emotional Intelligence](#), Daniel Goleman

[Emotional Alchemy - How The Mind Can Heal The Heart](#), Tara Bennett-Goleman

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