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Stage Fright: The Power Of Our Thoughts

Anyone can experience performance anxiety.

Some performers like Barbara Streisand, Carly Simon, and Sir Laurence Olivier are legendary for their struggles with it. If you have felt queasy before a show, felt your body grow chilled and clammy, your normally facile voice dry up to a two note cough, your eyes blur out any lyrics or score before you, then you have felt the cold, heartless clutch of stage fright. Just when its your time to shine, your mind attends to anxiety rather than the gift of your talents.

What's this about? What can you do about it?

Performance anxiety typically arises from one or more of several sources. There is often an element of fear of what could go wrong - *embarrassment or humiliation by making a mistake*. A sense of threat from an unfamiliar or unpredictable situation - *"the audience came for someone or something else and doesn't like me."* Sometimes these are amplified by the reality or the idea of an unmet need - *"I didn't drink enough water, I'll never hit that 'C' note. I forgot my lucky underwear. I'm so tired I can't remember what comes after 'Oh, say can you see...."*

The "inner critic" is just a thought that we empower.

I'm going to focus on the fourth, probably the most commonly shared and challenging root of stage fright, irrational thoughts: negative self talk - the relentless, harsh, ongoing monologue of our inner critic. For many people, the inner critic speaks loudly in the same voice as shaming parents or jealous siblings: *"Who do you think you are? Why would anyone want to listen to you? You don't have talent. You'll just embarrass yourself and us, too!"* It is no secret where the harsh judgment comes from. For many, it is a lifelong experience.

The sources of this kind of personal judgment may have long since passed but the thoughts and beliefs that they affected still hold power over us. We call these kinds of ideas and beliefs about ourselves *irrational*. They are irrational because they prevent us from experiencing or sharing the remarkable gifts that we have. They are irrational because they limit the effectiveness of our creative gifts. And, they are irrational because they are ultimately based on emotional blackmail or, for some families, ideological beliefs: *"singing is a spectacle of vanity not a gift."* If you have been dissuaded to perform because of stage fright, chances are good that you know exactly what your inner critic has to say.

Regime change: Disowning the inner critic.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is based on the notion that our experience of the world is shaped by the beliefs we have about it. Challenge and change the belief, and voilà!, you have changed your world.

I've adapted some ideas from the founder of CBT, Albert Ellis, to judge if an idea is rational or irrational. They may help to put some of your anxiety inducing beliefs to the test - and then to dispute them out of existence. Check your inner critic's condemnations with these three questions. If they don't pass, don't keep them!

- 1. Will this thought help me feel better about myself and others?***
- 2. Does this thought produce feelings that I want to have?***
- 3. Is this thought helping me reach my creative goal?***

Here's a tip, don't wait until you are stepping on stage to start the disputation with your inner critic! Take it slow and easy as you confront ideas about yourself.

Consider where and how and from whom you internalized them. And, show yourself the compassion of realizing that we take in most of these ideas long before we have the skills - the defensive filter - to judge them. Its also a good reminder to speak to the kids and grown-ups around us with the encouraging voices we wish we would have heard.

You are practicing a new relationship to your own thoughts. It takes persistence and sometimes a little help but the pay off in creative satisfaction and lightening up the load of stage fright can be huge.

Just keep on pickin'!

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