

Music and Dance Scheme

Promoting health and wellbeing in young dancers and musicians

Losing yourself in the work, or lost to nerves?

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Summary

Performance anxiety is a common occurrence for performing artists. It is often interpreted negatively, but can actually help performance when at an optimum level. If performers can interpret their anxiety symptoms as helpful, they will feel more in control and confident that their anxiety will not negatively affect their performance. A number of techniques can help those affected by excessive anxiety, making them more likely to become absorbed in the moment and experience the optimal performance state called *flow*.

Performance anxiety and flow in music and dance

Imagine you are about to step on stage to perform a new work for the first time. How do you feel? Are you focused and in the moment, buzzing with adrenalin and excited about performing...or are you shaky and worried, imagining all the different ways your performance might go wrong? Believe it or not, both of these descriptions represent performance anxiety symptoms. Anxiety doesn't always have to be a bad thing – but understanding more about it is crucial in ensuring that anxiety doesn't negatively affect performance.

Why do we experience performance anxiety?

Anxiety occurs when a performer perceives an imbalance between the demands of a performance situation and their abilities to meet those demands. For example, a dancer might worry about performing the thirty-two *fouettés* (turns) in Swan Lake because in rehearsal they sometimes go wrong. A pianist might feel nervous because he has to perform a Rachmaninoff concerto in front of a live audience for the first time. This perceived imbalance between abilities and demands triggers the 'fight or flight' response – a physiological reaction to a perceived threat which enables the person to fight the threat or run away. Hence, more adrenalin flows through the body, the heart beats faster and the muscles tense, to allow us to 'fight or fly'. Although this is traditionally associated with man hunting animals, it still applies to more controlled situations today. A threat may no longer be a matter of life or death, but can still jeopardise our self-confidence, and might mean that we don't perform optimally.

Performers often find that performance anxiety dissipates once they are on stage. By the end of the performance, anxiety has usually disappeared completely, as the threat has minimised and no longer exists once the performance is finished.

It is important to note that anxiety is caused by a *perceived* threat. This is why different people find different situations nerve-wracking.

Many diverse causes of performance anxiety have been documented in the performing arts. These include:

- >> personal causes e.g.
 - self-criticism or doubts
- >> interpersonal causes e.g.
 - competition between performers or pressure from important others
- >> situational causes e.g.
 - unfamiliarity with the performance space or concerns about audience size

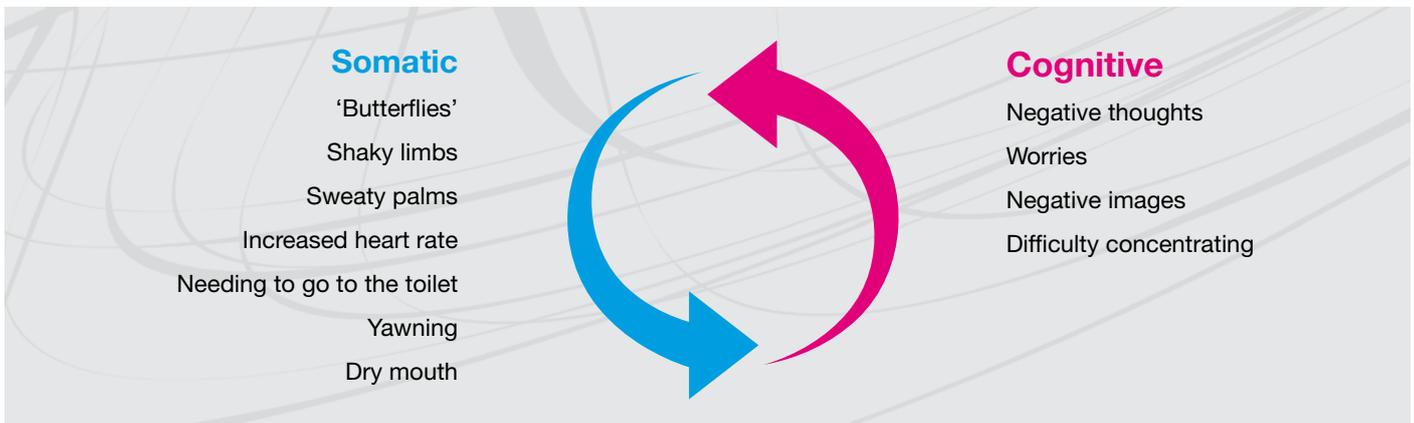
Music and Dance Scheme

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Common to almost all causes of anxiety is a feeling of being out of control. For instance, overly self-critical individuals, such as perfectionists, hardly ever feel that what they do is good enough – in other words, they feel they are not in control of performing perfectly. Competition between performers often causes anxiety because we cannot control how others behave. This feeling of being out of control is especially common in live performances. For example, imagine you had to step in at the last minute as the lead violinist in the orchestra – even if you knew the music very well, you would not have rehearsed in this specific role. In contrast, when performers feel that everything is under control, they tend to feel less anxious.

Performance anxiety symptoms

Performance anxiety has two types of symptoms: physical (**somatic**) and psychological (**cognitive**). For dancers and musicians, it is obvious that having too many somatic symptoms, such as very tense or shaky muscles, can interfere with performance. Cognitive symptoms such as negative thoughts can be equally, or more, damaging, if you are unable to curb them. Some of the most common symptoms are:



The types of symptom are interlinked. For instance, worrying about performing a particular step can give rise to somatic anxiety; on the other hand, experiencing 'butterflies' could alert performers to their anxiety and result in cognitive symptoms.

Flow: being 'in the zone'

Performance anxiety is not always a bad thing. For example, dancers and musicians often experience 'butterflies' before a performance – but this can be an enjoyable sensation, part of feeling excited and ready to perform. In this way, anxiety can help people to perform at their best, by increasing energy (through adrenalin) and focus. Many performers refer to this as feeling 'psyched up' or 'buzzing', which helps to make the performance enjoyable. They understand that without these feelings, performing optimally can be a challenge.

Sometimes performers have what are called flow experiences, which occur when we are totally in the moment, fully focused and immersed in the performance. Experiencing flow reduces self-consciousness and can even result in losing track of time. In order for flow to occur, there needs to be a balance between the level of challenge of a piece and the performer's ability – anxiety can occur when the level of challenge is felt to be too high, and boredom when the opposite is true.

There seems to be an optimal level of anxiety that helps performance. Some somatic anxiety is helpful (e.g. increased energy from adrenalin), but too much can be detrimental (e.g. feeling insecure due to shaky or stiff muscles). Too little somatic anxiety can also result in performance detriments. This often happens when musicians and dancers have performed the same piece many times over, and find it difficult to get sufficiently activated to perform optimally. Performers may refer to this as feeling 'stale', and it can stop the performance from feeling as enjoyable or satisfying as when some anxiety is present.

Music and Dance Scheme

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On the other hand, the more cognitive anxiety a person experiences, the more likely it is to interfere with the performance. Negative thoughts such as, 'I don't think I'm going to be able to do that passage' can be difficult to ignore. Unfortunately, this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy: we can convince ourselves so much that something is going to go wrong that it actually does!

Worry is a misuse of imagination

>> Dan Zadra

It is also likely that there is an optimal level of anxiety which differs according to the individual, just as individuals differ in their anxiety responses (perceptions of threat) to a variety of situations. Therefore, performers could be encouraged to identify their own optimal anxiety levels and try to recreate and maintain these for their performances. It is sometimes also beneficial simply to remember that part of the reason why the performing arts are exciting is because they involve great challenges, stretching us beyond our comfort zones into something new.

All greatness is achieved when performing outside your comfort zone

>> Greg Arnold

If there is an optimal level of anxiety for performance, then we may need to alter the way we think about anxiety.

Anxiety can be interpreted as being either:

>> **facilitative**

- meaning anxiety is interpreted in a positive way, by understanding that it can be helpful towards performance

or

>> **debilitative**

- perceiving anxiety negatively and feeling that it has a detrimental effect upon performance

When performers are able to perceive their anxiety in a facilitative (helpful) way, they feel more in control of their anxiety and are less affected by it in performance. This often happens when performers feel confident in their abilities. Flow experiences are most likely to occur when anxiety is perceived as facilitative. On the other hand, those performers that see their anxiety as debilitative (unhelpful) are more likely to feel that their anxiety is out of their control and therefore likely to affect their performance. Generally speaking, those who feel less confident in their abilities find it more difficult to interpret their anxiety as being facilitative. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research has shown that while performers can interpret their somatic anxiety as being facilitative, cognitive anxiety is more difficult to perceive in such a positive light. Those negative thoughts, images and worries, as well as an increased susceptibility to distractions, rarely benefit performance. However, there are things that can be done to optimise the level of somatic and cognitive anxiety a performer experiences.

Music and Dance Scheme

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Dealing with anxiety: recommendations

A key way to deal with performance anxiety is to recognise it can be a good thing. We don't want to get rid of anxiety altogether because of the positive effects it can have on performance when at its optimal level. It is more important to feel in control, by learning to perceive it positively and understand its benefits. Of course, making such alterations could be a lengthy process for those who have been negatively affected by anxiety for a long time.

Where re-interpreting symptoms is not enough, some of the following may help:

- >> **thought-blocking:** stopping negative thoughts (such as 'I always get the phrasing wrong') as soon as they make an appearance, and replacing them with positive statements
- >> **positive self-talk:** using positive statements to boost confidence and feelings of control (e.g. 'It worked perfectly in rehearsal so there's no reason why it shouldn't do now', or just 'Go for it!'). Try creating statements to help focus you on the artistic aspects of the work
- >> **mental rehearsal:** going over dance steps or instrument finger-work in your head can be a great help; it makes you feel like you've 'been there, and done that' and more in control
- >> a good **warm-up** (yes, even for musicians!) can counteract muscle shakes or stiffness, help to use up some adrenalin and steady the heart rate
- >> **relaxation exercises** can be effective, such as deep breathing. There are many different approaches to relaxation, so find one that works for you
- >> create a **pre-performance routine** to help you to feel more in control. Try to perform all your preparations in the same order for every performance, making them last up until you go on stage. Then you aren't leaving any spare time in which too much anxiety could build up

Finally, anxiety research shows people can be state or trait anxious. State anxiety occurs in a specific situation, such as a performance, and may or may not be present in other, less threatening, situations; it simply depends on what anxiety causes are present. This type of anxiety has been the focus of this infosheet. Trait anxiety, in contrast, is a personality trait (an inherent part of one's character) which causes a person to experience anxiety more often than non-trait anxious people, and to respond to situations with a greater intensity of state anxiety. Trying the techniques above should help, but trait anxious performers may still be negatively affected by their anxiety. In these cases, specialised help may be appropriate.

Overall, anxiety can positively affect our performance and help us to achieve flow experiences. Try to find your optimal anxiety level and see where it takes you!

Further Reading

- Czikszenmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Hamilton, L.H. (1998). *Advice for Dancers: Emotional Counsel and Practical Strategies*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wilson, G.D. (2001). *Psychology for Performing Artists: Second Edition*. John Wiley & Sons.

See also: Music and Dance Scheme INFOSHEET #2 Beyond physical practice

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