

Performance Anxiety

A Way to Deal with it that *Works!*



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*This is a **practical** article with simple steps (listed at the end) that you can use on your own without a teacher, right after you read them, to help you better understand your own experience of performance anxiety and how to overcome it. The steps I offer are based on the F. M. Alexander Technique, a simple technique for changing your reactions to stimuli that really works. All you need to do is think about it, trust your own inner wisdom, and be willing to practice!*

Performance anxiety is something most of us experience from time to time, in differing intensities and under varying circumstances. It can hit when you're confronted with a situation as seemingly benign as making a phone call, or one as potentially stressful as speaking or playing an instrument for an audience of thousands of people. No one I know likes it! It feels mildly or extremely uncomfortable, as if there were something very wrong happening, and when panic sets in everything seems to tighten up; now you're ready to flee, fight, or freeze! In this state, it can be pretty difficult or impossible to give your best performance, and you're likely to be disappointed with yourself afterwards. You might wonder, "*Why can't I perform as well as I always do when I'm at home alone?*"

Symptoms of performance anxiety vary, but most are pretty familiar: sweaty palms, dry mouth, faster heart-rate, disturbed breathing, shaking limbs, etc. Negative and repetitive thoughts arise, such as, "*What am I doing here? I can't DO this! I can't wait until this is over. I'm never doing this again! What if I mess up? What if they don't like me? What if...*" Sometimes, it can feel as dramatic as being on a collision-course towards certain death, with your unspoken terror being, "*Will I ever survive this?*" If you suffer from performance anxiety, think for a moment about what *your* typical experience of performance anxiety is like. What do you feel and think? When does it start? Does it creep up on you long before the event, or just before you go on stage? Or right after you actually make a mistake? Or maybe it's a chronic, lowgrade performance anxiety that's there all the time in the background... It's

worth investigating how it manifests, so that you know more about what you're dealing with upfront.

I've been a professional violinist most of my life, and I've experienced a whole range of responses within myself to the idea and the act of performing. As a child, I looked forward eagerly to performing, with lively and energetic sensations of "excitement"; as an adult, I habitually dread the same feelings, which I label "nervousness". What I have learned with the Alexander Technique is that the fear that constitutes performance anxiety is largely the fear of actually feeling those strange sensations that arise in the body. Usually, when performance anxiety hits, our instinctual reaction is to deny those unpleasant bodily sensations by unconsciously creating excess and imbalanced muscle tension, as if we are inwardly trying to run away from them, fight them, or freeze up to pretend they aren't there.

We're very resourceful in trying to change the way we're feeling when we're uncomfortable. Some people feel they need to keep moving around, pace or talk a lot. Some people get very quiet and inward-focused, trying to block out all distractions. Some people have a special object or superstitious ritual that they put their trust in. Stop reading a moment to consider what *you* usually do. Unfortunately, none of these attempts to get rid of the anxiety is likely to work as well as simple, wholehearted acceptance—body, mind and soul—of the reality that we are experiencing in the present moment. What actually works is this: first, to realize that our reactions of anxiety are habitual, and then to admit that there might exist other, more constructive ways of reacting to the situation. Once we open our minds to the idea that there might be another way, we can learn a new response that will take us through, and gradually out of, the anxiety—instead of prolonging it or making it worse.

As an Alexander Teacher practicing the Technique for myself, I can honestly say that I often surprise myself by being able to actually *look forward* to the performance anxiety itself, because I understand now that this experience gives me another valuable opportunity to face myself, learn about myself, and rise to yet another challenge! *What is performance anxiety, after all, but another manifestation of myself?* When I can see the experience as an experiment in which I am a scientific observer gathering data, I can begin to be curious about it, and get in touch with my childlike (not childish!) idea of having those "exciting" sensations be a positive experience. The more I open up my awareness to the unusual sensations of performance anxiety, the less afraid I am to observe and actually feel those sensations. The more I get to know them, the less frightening they become, and the more I can actually begin to enjoy the moment. When that happens, the anxiety magically diminishes—maybe even disappears—and

my performance itself improves as an added bonus. With the Alexander Technique, I learn literally to “rise to the occasion” of performing, I literally “grow up” as I stop shrinking from the experience, and I instead expand my repertoire of responses to this tremendous stimulus. And it truly gets easier every time.

“So how can I do this for myself?”, you might be wondering. What follows is a short guide to what you can do for yourself when faced with a situation that triggers performance anxiety (or any kind of anxiety, for that matter), and it’s a technique that I also recommend that you practice for some time before the event. Although the concepts are simple, putting them into action in the heat of the moment can be a bit like jumping off a high diving board for the first few times: the initial moment when you decide to feel those sensations can be scary. That’s why it’s best to practice the following steps (for maybe 10-20 minutes a day), at a time when you are NOT in a state of anxiety; it can be very hard to trust yourself and the process once you’re already in the throes of panic. When you’re in panic mode, your mind will feel numb, you’ll probably forget what you had planned to do, your confusion will increase your panic, and you’ll go right back to clinging to what you usually do, which has probably never really worked.

The following can be practiced seated, but I recommend lying down on a firm surface in what is known as the “semi-supine” or “constructive rest” position: on your back, with a book or two under your head and your knees bent and aiming up to the ceiling (for more complete instructions on how to lie down in semi-supine, see links below). After a few minutes of resting and allowing yourself to settle into a calmer frame of mind, take your time to slowly think through each of the following steps.

1. Imagine that you are about to give a performance (if that is not the present reality).
2. Where are you right now? Where are you in space? Where is up? Down? Left? Right?
3. If you’re not actually anxious right now, remember what that feels like.
4. Scan your body briefly, noticing what the anxiety feels like in different parts of your body.
5. Realize that the feelings of anxiety are your habitual reactions to your idea of performing, and that the way you usually deal with the discomfort is to try to DO something to get them under control.
6. Make a conscious decision to do something different in response to those feelings this time: you’re going to NOT DO the same thing you always do. In order for those feelings to change, you will simply allow those feelings to BE there, giving yourself the freedom to feel them first.

7. Choose one sensation that is especially present, and get curious about it. (*For instance, think: "Hmm... This is really interesting! I wonder what's going to happen next?"*)
8. Tell yourself what it feels like. (*Example: "I feel my heart pounding really hard."*)
9. Do any thoughts seem to go with this feeling? (*Example: "I can't stand this. I wish it would stop!"*)
10. Gently notice any thoughts and stay with the feeling for just a few moments, without trying to make them go away. Don't try to relax, move around, or do anything else. Just stay with the experience you're having, finding it interesting, and letting it be uncomfortable. (You'll survive!)
11. Is there another feeling that seems to want your attention? Gently shift your attention to this feeling, get curious about it, go back to no. 8, and repeat the process as often as you like.

That's all there is to it! This simple procedure, based on the Alexander Technique, really works. Just decide to devote some time to practicing it. If you practice when you are not anxious, it will be much easier to take the leap to applying these steps in the moment when you are. To recap, this, in a nutshell, is what you're doing:

- You recognize your habitual response to a situation.
- You see that you have a choice—how you respond is up to you.
- You know the old way doesn't work, so you decide to stop doing that and try something new.
- Since the old way was to try to get rid of or change the situation, this time you won't do that.
- You don't do anything other than let your feelings be there, allowing yourself to feel them.
- Once you feel the feelings, you come to know them, and then they're no longer frightening.
- When there's nothing to be afraid of, the feelings of performance anxiety disappear. *Magic!*

Along with the above exercise, I also highly recommend taking lessons from a certified Alexander teacher to guide you through your process of change. A teacher will help you become conscious of habitual reactions that are getting in your way which you may be unaware of, and she/he will help you to discover how to balance and coordinate yourself in such a way that all of your activity becomes freer and more effortless. That sense of ease will instill more confidence in your abilities, increase your sense of self-control, and diminish your performance anxiety in many additional, unexpected ways.

I hope this article has been of interest and helpful for you! I welcome your comments and inquiries at Jennifer@ArtofFreedom.me, or www.ArtofFreedom.me.



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Suggested links to learn more about the “semi-supine” or “constructive rest” position:

pdf article: <http://www.lotussports.co.uk/Publications/Alexander%20Technique.pdf>

YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leht8X3qMc>

