

The Inner Struggle: Methods to Conquer Performance Anxiety in Ourselves and Our Students

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Introduction

In a thirty-minute lesson, or even in a one-hour lesson, there simply is not enough time to address every important topic.

Performance anxiety is typically on the bottom of the list, since it only rears its head when a performance is looming. However, a lack of skills to manage performance anxiety in lessons or performance is often the reason that students terminate lessons.

There are certain psychological needs that we as humans need met:

- Self-esteem
- Acceptance
- Success
- Status
- Independence

Before assessing the incorporation of performance anxiety management, ensure that these needs are being met in your pedagogical approach to the student.

While there is very limited time in weekly lessons, short, consistent reinforcement of relaxation of mind and body can go a long way to combating performance anxiety.

What is Performance Anxiety?

Two types of anxiety

Trait anxiety: generalized anxiety

State anxiety: anxiety about a particular situation

- Both types can result in a need for performance anxiety management, but the former may necessitate an anxiety management regimen prescribed by a psychologist or therapist. In the most serious cases, medication may be the only option for management.
- *Under no circumstances are we to psychoanalyze our students.*

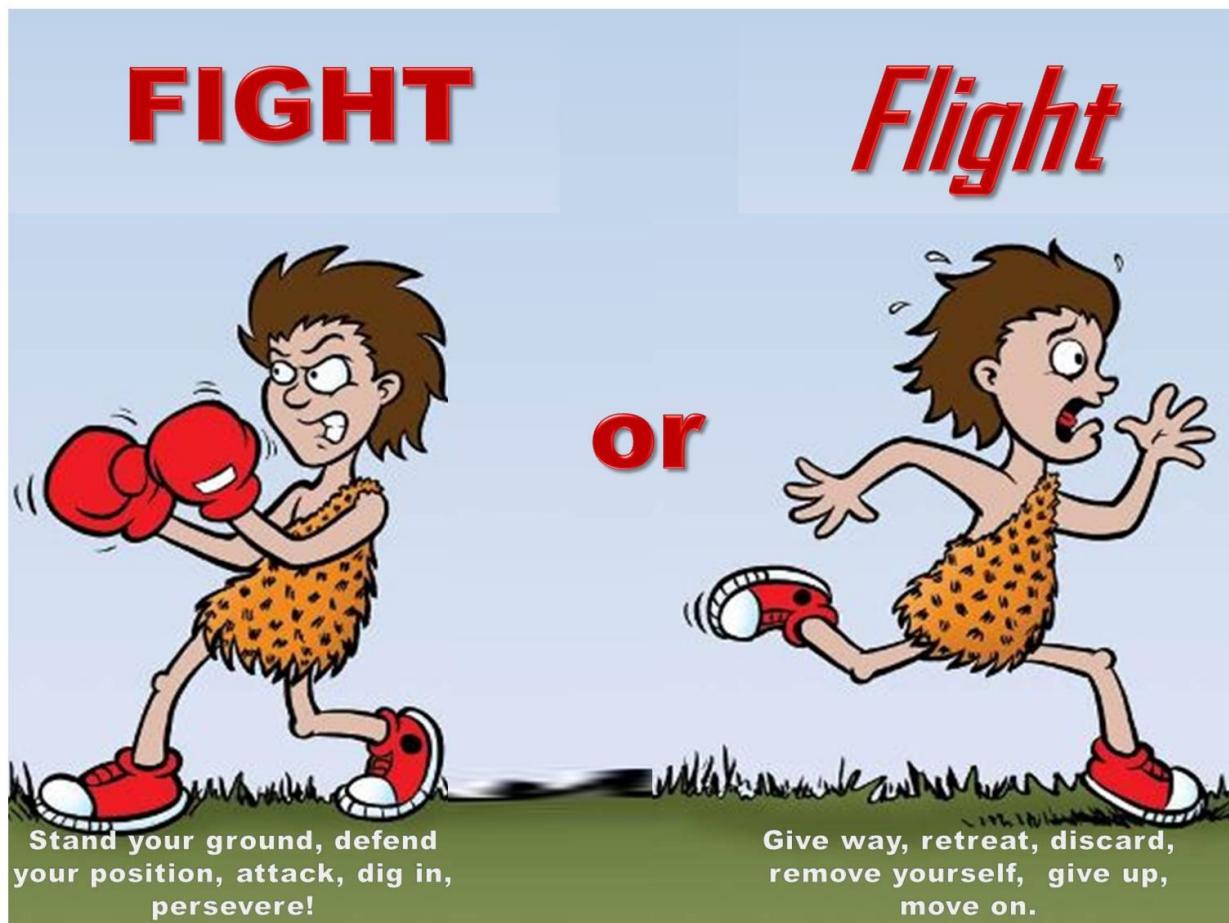
Performance anxiety can be defined as

a negative emotional state with feelings of nervousness, worry, and apprehension associated with activation or arousal of the body.

Performance anxiety results from the body and psyche's **normal response** to a fear stimulus. It is termed one's "Fight or Flight Response." This response entirely bypasses the rational thinking portion of the brain, and is a bodily reaction.

When a fear stimulus occurs,

- the amygdala reacts to send instantaneous signals to other parts of the brain.
- Hypothalamus gland sends message to the adrenal glands.
- Adrenal glands release a stream of chemicals into the blood stream.
 - o Most significant is epinephrine, also known as adrenaline.

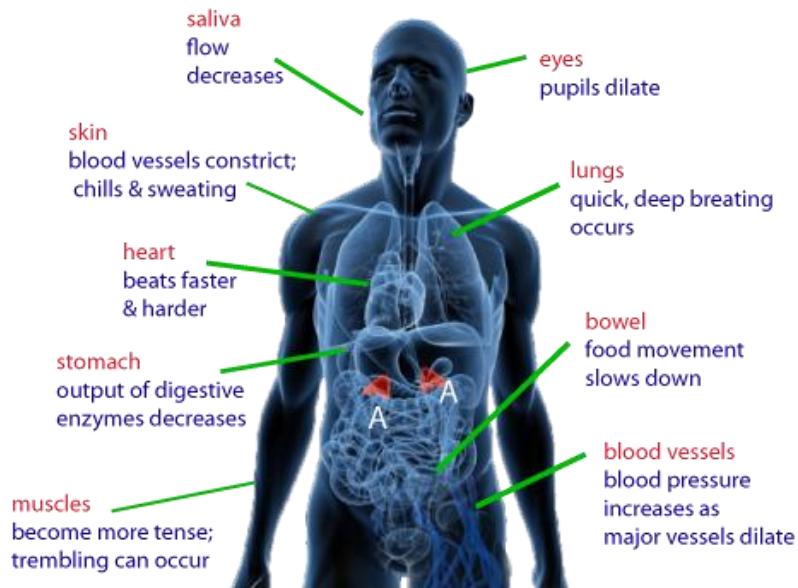


How do we identify performance anxiety in our students?

Physical Symptoms of Performance Anxiety

Physiological response to increased adrenaline	Reasons for this response	Resulting symptoms
Respiratory rate increases	Increased need for oxygen	Shallow breathing Quickened breathing
Pulse quickens; Blood is redirected to large muscles in the arms and legs	Increased strength to fight or run from threat	Pounding or racing heartbeat Rising blood pressure Cold hands or feet
Blood vessels in the digestive system close	Digestion slows or stops	Fluttering stomach Upset stomach; nausea Dry mouth
Pupils dilate	Sharpened sight	Hypersensitive visual awareness Sensitivity to bright lights
Capillaries under the surface of the skin close down	Reduced chance of excess bleeding in battle	Cold hands
Perspiration increases	Reduce chance of skin cuts	Clammy hands Excessive sweating
Increased firing of neurons in the brain	Increased focus	Awareness intensifies Hyperfocusing
Muscles tighten	Physical preparation to fight or run	Excess tension Headache Shaking body
Excess waste eliminated	Decreased body weight offers the ability to run faster	Increased urge to use the bathroom

Fight or Flight Response



Psychological symptoms of performance anxiety

- Fear of the unknown and fear of new things
- Loss of love or approval by others
- Will be revealed as a phony
- Questioning of own competence and abilities
- Fear of humiliation
- General agitation
- Indecisiveness
- Self-disparagement
- Withdrawal
- Procrastination
- Distorted thinking
- Hypersensitivity
- Negative self-talk

Have any of these symptoms been evident in your students or yourself? These reactions to the fight or flight response to a fear stimulus are entirely normal and universal among either beginners or advanced performers.

How do we prepare our students for success in performance?

First of all, we and our students must understand that the fight or flight response is entirely normal. The brain does not distinguish between an eminent attack and the fear of performing for others. Both instances release adrenaline and result in our body's natural fight or flight response.

It is well-meaning, but fruitless, to encourage a student by saying that s/he shouldn't be nervous for any number of reasons. The fact is that once the fight or flight response has begun, the rational portion of the performer's brain is entirely bypassed.

However, there are some methods through which performance anxiety can be managed. There is no universal method, but a **consistent** routine incorporating one of the following methods will result in a management of the symptoms that present during performance anxiety.

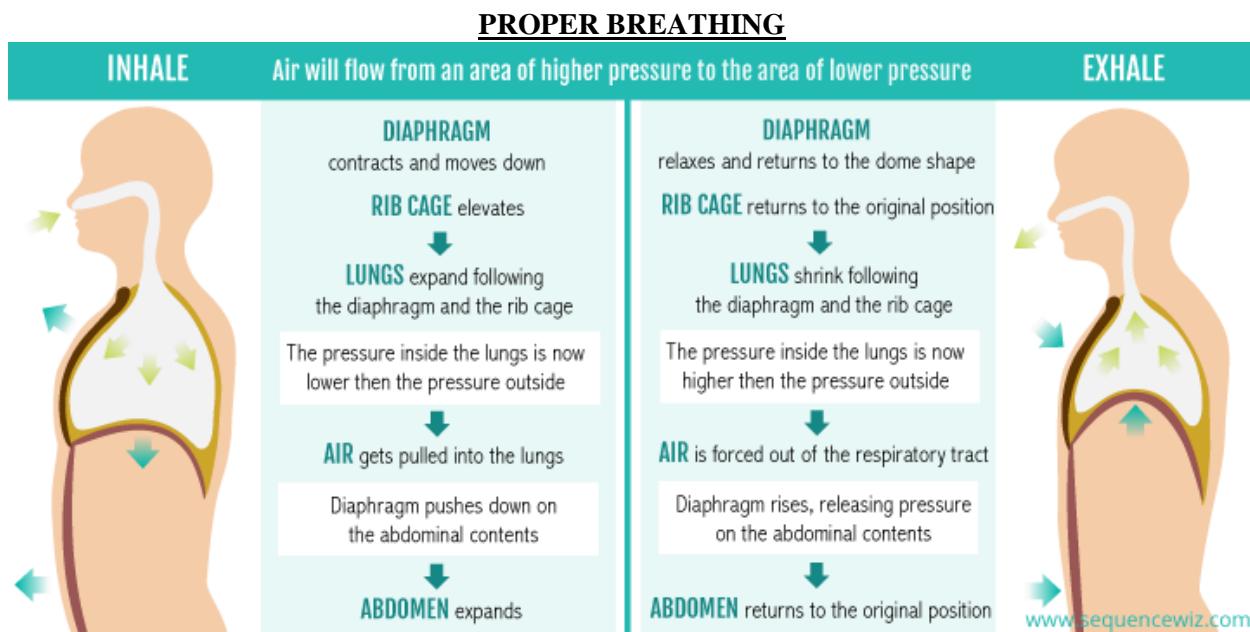
1. Deep breathing

Breathing deeply can slow the heart rate and alleviate the symptoms that occur from an increased heart rate in the fight or flight response.

Breathing is the only function that is both involuntary and voluntary, which means that breathing is the only function with which we can control the involuntary nervous system.

Both before the performance and between pieces, it can be helpful to go through this short routine. Students often hold their breath during performance without realizing it. This starves the system of oxygen and often results in a lack of oxygen flowing in the brain, which can often lead to memory slips.

First, let's look at how one breathes properly. Without a full breath, the method only serves to intensify the short, quickened breath accompanied by performance anxiety.



PROCEDURE FOR UTILIZING DEEP BREATHING

1. Begin with proper body alignment**
2. Place hands on abdomen and lower back
3. Breathe into both hands

Shoulders rest down throughout exercise, front and back of chest cavity is equal in width, skeletal structure is properly balanced with minimal muscular contraction

Helpful notes:

Some students find this low breath more easily by laying on the floor and feeling the expansion of the back into the floor and abdomen up and away from the floor.

Some students may find it more helpful to breathe in this method with a metronome—inhaling for four counts, and exhaling for four counts.

Encourage the student to release half of her or his tension with each exhale.

Perhaps include an affirmation that the student internalizes with each exhalation.

2. Progressive Relaxation

Emotional tension and physical tension go hand-in-hand. Students who learn to relax their muscles systematically can often experience an immediate decrease in the physical and psychological symptoms of anxiety.

This method can be especially helpful for those students who struggle with trembling body. Remember that a trembling body is the result of excess muscular tension, which is a normal fight or flight response.

PROCEDURE 1 FOR UTILIZING RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

1. Sit with proper body alignment** in a chair that has adequate back support.
2. Beginning from the toes and progressing to the crown of the head, contract each muscle group one at a time, and release it.
3. With each release exhale into the muscle group and enjoy feeling the flow of oxygen into the area.

PROCEDURE 2 FOR UTILIZING RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

1. Sit with proper body alignment** in a chair that has adequate back support.
2. Beginning from the toes and progressing to the crown of the head, simply take note of the tension in each muscle group and release it.
3. With each release exhale into the muscle group and enjoy feeling the flow of oxygen into the area.

Shoulders rest down throughout exercise, front and back of chest cavity is equal in width, skeletal structure is properly balanced with minimal muscular contraction

Helpful notes:

Some students will shake their limbs to relax them. Often, this movement results in muscular tension in another area.

Have the student think of an affirmation while relaxing and breathing into each particular muscle group.

It can often be helpful to do this exercise with eyes closed, so the student is forced to channel all energy into each muscle group.

Guide the student through each muscle group, so that s/he doesn't skip any area of tension.

3. Creative Imagery & Visualization

Athletes have been utilizing the power of positive imagery for years. Only recently have musicians begun to understand the power of imagining their success.

The brain and nervous system is unable to distinguish between an event that is imagined and one that actually occurs. Also, when a person is clearly visualizing a specific movement, all the nerves involved in making the muscles move are stimulated as if the movement were physically taking place.

The essence of this method of managing performance anxiety is to intently focus the imagination on an objective with the intention of achieving that objective.

Full Guided Imagery Exercise (reprinted from *Creative Piano Teaching*)

Positive Thinking: Guided Imagery for the Day of a Performance

I look up at the clock—time to get up. Then I remember what day it is—today is my recital! It seems only yesterday that it was a month away. I feel excited and yet, ready, as I start this special day.

I move at a relaxed pace all day. After breakfast I spend some time warming up at the piano.

As I begin to feel my muscles grow more supple, I start each composition and then slowly play through some of the more difficult spots. I will go through this process several times today. I will play just enough to feel comfortable since I want to save my energy for tonight, not wishing to wear myself out in rehearsal.

As the day progresses, I feel more and more exhilarated. The day passes quickly, and soon I begin to dress for the performance.

As I dress I feel a flutter of nervousness. It is OK for me to be a little nervous—it is heightening my self-awareness, and will allow me to present a more sensitive performance. I have learned to relax—I can control my nervousness and turn it into a positive factor.

Warming up at the piano in the recital hall, all dressed up, I am very aware that my recital is merely minutes away. This is my night! Having practiced for those short periods spaced throughout the day, I already feel warmed up. Now I begin to feel even more flexible and comfortable as I try out the piano this last time. The sound of the piano in the empty hall resounds in my ears—a new sound, created by the excitement of this moment.

The microphones have been put in place, the lights adjusted, the piano positioned. The stage manager has just told me that he is ready to open the house. This is it!

I retire backstage and visit for a while with a few close friends until they leave to find their seats. Now, while I'm alone is a good time to take one last look at my music, and to rethink my first piece, focusing on what I want to express in this composition. All the little details and decisions I made in my practice have become an integral part of my conception of this piece. I have special feelings about this music that have grown since selecting it, and I want to share these feelings with my audience.

Five minutes to go, and then—the door is opened for me, and I'm walking onto the stage. I feel a charge of excitement and anticipation. I move with ease and purpose toward the piano. All my practice and hard

work has brought me to this moment where I can communicate my feelings about this music.

As I acknowledge the applause of the audience, I am aware of their energy and support. The warmth of the lights and the sound of the applause make me feel welcomed to the stage.

I feel comfortable as I sit down at the piano. I have spent so many hours at the piano, it now feels very much like "home." I look out at the expanse of the instrument—the bare strings, the open lid, and I feel a sense of power and mastery. The keys feel warm from the lights. The cone of light makes me feel as if I were ensconced in a cocoon—warm, safe and secure.

I position my hands, take a deep breath and begin to play. Sinking deeply into the keys, I feel assured by the solidity of the bottom of the key bed. My arms feel relaxed, my hands steady. I know I am well prepared.

Although I feel a rapport with the audience, my concentration is on my music—listening, allowing the piece to unfold by itself, through me. Memory will remain intact since I will allow one musical idea to naturally follow another. Ideas unfold like the telling of a musical story I know very well.

My hearing is sharper now than it has been in my practice. The presence of an audience creates a heightened awareness and sensitivity toward my playing. As I respond to the sounds I am creating, I feel as if I am hearing the music in a new, fresh light, stimulating a more intense interpretation of the music. My hands feel very supple. I play with an ease and fluidity that makes me feel as if my hands are "dancing" on the keys.

Each piece is over so soon! What took so long to prepare is going by so quickly—one piece, then another. I can hardly believe that it's already intermission, with only half the program remaining. As I wait backstage, I am eager to get back on stage. My hands are tingling—I can feel the blood surging through my hands—I feel hot and flushed. Turn off the houselights! Let's start the second half!

Back on stage, I realize that as I complete each piece, I grow nearer and nearer the end of the recital. I wish it could go on forever. And then, it's over! I hear a burst of applause, and it feels wonderful. The sound rolls toward me like a wave, enveloping me. It is as if the audience is reaching out to me.

Very important to me is knowing that I have played as well as I can at this moment. This was a good performance! I greet my friends and relive the excitement of the performance with them. I know why I play recitals—it's because I love to perform! Another reason is because I love the celebration afterwards!

Helpful notes:

Some students are not especially visual, so this method may not work for all.

Sit in a quiet space with eyes closed when using this method.

4. Mindfulness Practice

Mindfulness is essentially nonjudgmental moment-to-moment awareness. Many practices are based in meditation in which the individual strives for a simple clear awareness of her or his surroundings.

This method has no goal other than to embrace one for oneself. With consistent practice, the mind is much clearer and able to assess her or his surroundings with no judgement or reaction.

The effects include a decrease in blood pressure, diminished respiratory rate, lower pulse rate, diminished oxygen consumption, increase in the calming brain waves associated with relaxation, and an improved sense of well-being.

PROCEDURE FOR UTILIZING MINDFULNESS METHOD

1. Sit in a chair with adequate back support located in a quiet, comfortable space.
2. Free yourself from distractions by silencing any alerts or phones.
3. With your eyes closed, sit quietly observing the sounds around you, but not engaging them.
4. Thoughts may come into your mind, but allow them to be released into the air around you.

Helpful notes:

Some may find it helpful to combine a mindfulness exercise with deep breathing exercise. Combining these can result in a strong connection between our mind and core.

Begin this method by practicing it for only one minute and then gradually increase the amount of time spent in quiet meditation.

This method excels through continued consistent usage and will only serve to agitate if utilized on the day of performance.

5. Affirmations

Affirmations are short, prepared, powerful statements that help a student focus on a positive performance experience.

It is important to remember that to be effective, an affirmation must be truthful and realistic. The subconscious mind will reject any statement that does not align with the truth.

Examples of affirmations:

“I will do my best.”

“I am excited to share this with my family.”

“I have prepared well.”

PROCEDURE FOR UTILIZING AFFIRMATION METHOD

1. Sit in a chair with adequate back support located in a quiet, comfortable space.
2. Free yourself from distractions by silencing any alerts or phones.
3. With your eyes closed, repeat the affirmation to yourself and truly inhabit the message it brings.

Helpful notes:

Our mind will often wander into areas of self-doubt during this exercise. Gently prompt yourself back to feeling the comfort of this simple message.

Affirmations should always be related to enjoying the moment or on the positive aspects of musicmaking. If an affirmation centers on a particularly difficult portion of the music, it will often encourage negative thought processes.

Prayer can be especially helpful for some students as a form of affirmation practice. In the cases where prayer is helpful for a student, the affirmation should originate from their faith and not be prompted by their teacher.

Additional thoughts:

Consistent physical activity can be helpful to combat performance anxiety. The consistent usage of the aerobic system reduces one's pulse rate.

If one wants to have an idea of how s/he may perform with performance anxiety, increase the heart rate through doing jumping jacks or some physical activity immediately before playing.

Personal ways of dealing with performance anxiety:

- Desensitization through progressively more stressful performances
- Sensory deprivation
- Focusing on outward energy to the audience, rather than the potential negative judgement from the audience.

Helpful Sources:

Bulletproof Musician (www.bulletproofmusician.com)

An active blog by Dr. Noa Kageyama, a performance anxiety coach from Juilliard. Topics range from increasing the efficacy of practice techniques to how to cope with a bad performance.

Bruser, Madeline. *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart*. New York, NY: Bell Tower, 1997.

This source centers on mindfulness and approaching the instrument with a healthy body and spirit. It has a lot of exercises and stretches that work to relax the body so that it functions as a unit.

Green, Barry, and W. Timothy Gallwey. *The Inner Game of Music*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1986.

Based on the original *Inner Game of Tennis*, this book deals with the concept of Self 1 and Self 2. Self 1 is the analyzer who interferes with Self 2, who is the doer.

Formula for Performance is Performance = Potential (Self 2) – Interference (Self 1)

Haydon, Geoffrey, James Lyke, and Catherine Rollin. *Creative Piano Teaching*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, LLC., 2011.

A wealth of information on all topics dealing with piano teaching.

Klickstein, Gerald. *The Musician's Way*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

A book on methods of approaching music that maintain musician health, both inside and out. Klickstein also has a website that deals with these issues that publishes a very helpful newsletter and articles (www.musiciansway.com).

Westney, William. *The Perfect Wrong Note*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2003.

A book all about embracing our humanness and positive approaches to playing the piano.

Remarkably uplifting and helpful source.