

SCARE STAGE FRIGHT AWAY



In the spotlight and at the podium, a moment of jitters can spoil hours of hard work. Learn how to psyche yourself up—not out. BY KAREN HAYWOOD QUEEN ILLUSTRATION BY JEN RENNINGER

No matter how well she prepared, Miriam Elfstrom had jitters so bad that they took over the day of her piano recitals. She couldn't eat. She'd run a fever. Her hands shook and became so cold that she wore mittens until time to play. Under these circumstances, it was hard to deliver a glowing performance. Eventually, it was her piano instructor who taught Miriam exercises to control her anxiety and focus her energy. "I was finally able to relax and enjoy recitals and look at them as a way of sharing music instead of thinking of myself on a stage," says Miriam.

Some people call it stage fright, experts call it performance anxiety, athletes know it as "choking." It can flare up at any age, especially

when someone is trying something new in front of a crowd, or revisiting an activity she hasn't done in years. Taking up piano lessons again, stepping up to the plate on a recreational softball team, joining a community theater group, volunteering to do a reading in church—any one of these and other public activities can sometimes shake the confidence of even the boldest person, bringing on symptoms such as shaking, blushing, nausea, shortness of breath, and a racing heart. Some of these effects can be lessened—or eliminated—using certain exercises. These techniques, developed by Miriam's piano teacher, Victoria Wyatt, a nationally certified music teacher, also helped Miriam when she took up softball. "I used to

strike out like it was my job,” she says. “Then I started using the things we learned. I got on base more. It helped.”

The techniques below are simple to master. But don’t save these tips until the night before the big game or recital—practice them now.

Tap the power of positive thinking

Repeat positive statements when you practice. “One affirmation I like is, ‘I now perform with confidence and joy,’” Wyatt says. Avoid negative words, says Miguel Humara, anxiety specialist and co-editor of *The Online Journal of Sport Psychology*. “When you say, ‘I don’t feel nervous,’ your brain focuses on the ‘nervous’ part and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Practice performing through mistakes

Music teachers recommend that students practice playing at several different spots during a piece so they can continue easily after a memory slip. Apply the same techniques to a speech or lines in a play. “The greatest performers out there can tell you stories of how they just blanked out,” says Gary Ingle, executive director of the Music Teachers National Association. “Just keep going. The world won’t come to an end.” Remind yourself that you’ve worked hard and are ready to show what you know.

Master the stage in stages

Start by performing for friends and family at home. “The last thing you need is to perform for the first time in front of 500 people,” says Ingle. “My mom would have me play for guests. Then I moved up to larger groups.”

Relax, breathe

Tension in your body and stress in your mind are linked. Reduce muscle tension and clear your head by adding breathing exercises to your practice sessions. Before and during practice, tighten then release muscles from head to toe as a relaxation routine. Then take several deep breaths, pushing your belly out. Soon the breathing routine become automatic, Wyatt says. Do this exercise before you take center stage, and you’ll find it easier to relax and stay focused.

Resort to rituals

Pianist Marika Yasuda, of Williamsburg, Virginia, has a lucky handkerchief she takes to each performance. Athletes and other performers wear the same shoes or create a set routine for the big day. “Look at Michael Jordan. He would dribble the ball three times and focus on the rim. The last thing you always saw him do was take a deep breath,” says Humara. Find the ritual that works for you and stick with it.

Forgo perfection

“If you visualize the perfect performance, then make one little mistake, you’ll feel like you failed,” says David Carbonell, Ph.D., director of The Anxiety Treatment Center in Chicago and author of *Panic Attacks Workbook*. He suggests imagining less-than-perfect scenes instead. “An athlete might visualize feeling some butterflies and hear the heckling of the other team, but then he can push those voices away and get back into the zone.” 🏠

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