



Amelia, Dancer
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Performance Anxiety

Victoria Wong Shi Yin, December 2021

Performance anxiety is a common experience for many dancers⁶. The American Psychological Association defines this as the apprehension and fear of the consequences of being unable to perform a task or of performing it at a level that will raise expectations of even better task achievement. But what does this actually mean? In this article, we explore performance anxiety as experienced in three dimensions: physical sensations, thoughts, and behaviours.

When we feel anxious or afraid, a rapid response called the Fight or Flight response is activated in the body². It overrides everything else and primes our muscles and minds to deal with danger – whether the threat is real or perceived. These changes are needed to get our bodies ready to confront or escape. The changes are summarised in the figure below. They are natural, automatic, and evolutionarily helpful. They do not mean we are out of control, or that something bad is going to happen. But what creates such an experience of threat in the face of a performance? For this, we look at the next dimension of performance anxiety – thoughts.

Thoughts

When ex-professional dancer and current applied sports psychologist Chantale Lussier-Ley³ asked a group of dancers what they thought about when they felt performance anxiety, their responses were, “I’m scared of doing something wrong”, “People will laugh at me”, “I might trip and fall”, “I can’t do it”, “It should be perfect”, “I have to make it”, “People might not accept or love me”. Themes of fear of failure, perfectionism and social comparison run through these, filtered also by absolute, do-or-die thinking patterns, beliefs in “shoulds” and “musts” and predictions of catastrophe that heighten anxiety and make it even more paralyzing. As dancers train, they naturally strive for perfection – the right angle, timing, blocking, expression, extension, isolation and so on. But sometimes, striving gives way to expectation and fear of failing to meet these expectations sets in – no matter how unrealistic they are.

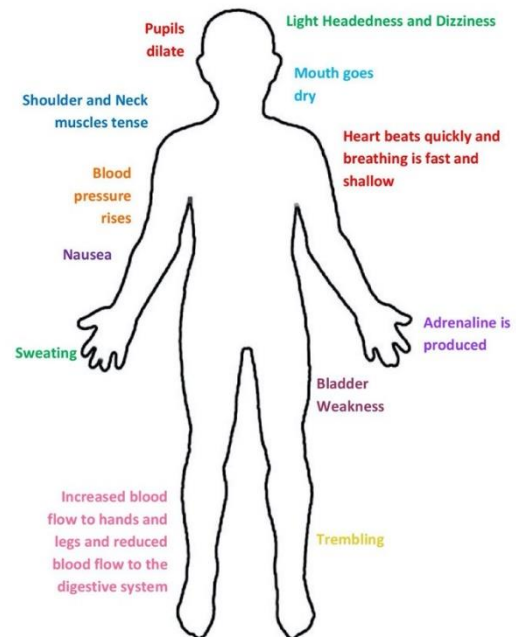


Figure 1. The Fight or Flight response²

To understand how our thoughts contribute to our experience of performance anxiety, we need to understand a simple anxiety equation:

$$\text{Anxiety} = \frac{\text{Probability of feared event} \times \text{Severity of feared event}}{\text{Ability to cope if feared event occurs} + \text{Others' ability to help if feared event occurs}}$$

Figure 2. The anxiety equation¹

When the numerator or top part of the fraction (probability or likelihood of a feared event occurring multiplied by the expected severity of the consequences of the feared event) is roughly equal to the denominator or bottom part of the fraction (our anticipated ability to cope plus others' ability to help if the feared event occurs), we generally feel less anxious and are able to manage.

However, with unattainable expectations and harsh rules about what failure to meet those standards means, the probability of a feared event (e.g. making a mistake during the performance) occurring feels high and the expected consequence severe (e.g. people might not accept or love me). We might also feel unable to cope with this and predict that others will be likewise unable to provide the help we require, tipping the fraction so that it's top-heavy. When this occurs, we feel just like the fraction – overwhelmed, anxious and like we might tip over.



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Behaviour

This brings us to the final dimension we experience performance anxiety – behaviour. Generally, unhelpful behaviours in response to anxiety can be classified in two categories: avoidance and safety behaviours. Avoidance refers to avoidance of actions (e.g. skipping practice, making sure not to look at oneself in the mirror) and of thoughts and emotions (e.g. numbing ourselves, pushing thoughts away). Safety behaviours are behaviours that try to keep us safe or help us half-avoid the experience if we have to do it anyway. Safety behaviours in performance anxiety may look like over-practising at the cost of sleep and work commitments or constantly seeking reassurance about one's performance.



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When we avoid or employ safety behaviours, we are precluded from the opportunity to learn and build experience. For example, someone who avoids looking at themselves while they practice loses the opportunity to actually see what their lines look like and make relevant adjustments. They also lose the opportunity to appreciate any improvement they made and therefore maintain a negatively skewed perspective of their quality of dance. Someone who avoids experiencing performance anxiety or employs safety behaviours loses the opportunity to learn that allowing themselves to feel anxious might not be as scary as it seems. They also lose the opportunity to

learn that they could still perform well while feeling anxious. Together, these maintain an overestimation of probability and severity of a feared event and underestimation of their own and others' abilities to cope, keeping performance anxiety going from one performance to the next.

That being said, performance anxiety is not "bad". A certain level of performance anxiety is natural and makes a lot of sense. In fact, at optimum levels, performance anxiety or stress can enhance performance⁷. Too little or too much stress does not have the same facilitative effect. Thus, the skills discussed below are to help you manage when you feel overwhelmed, not to stamp out anxiety completely. As discussed above, anxiety is natural and evolutionarily important.

Managing Performance Anxiety

So, what can we do to manage performance anxiety? We follow the same three dimensions. Firstly, to manage overwhelming physical sensations that may interfere with performance such as nausea, trembling or sweaty palms and feet, deep breathing is an excellent strategy. Some may have heard of or even tried this before with limited success, but there are 5 key steps needed to make it work:

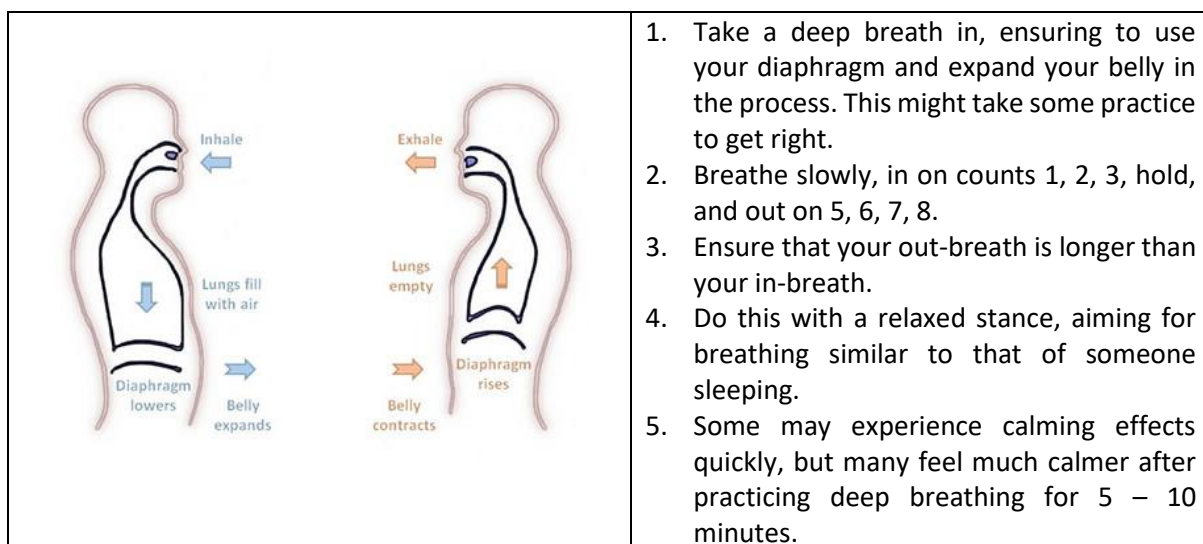


Figure 3. Deep breathing.

In the same way you would practice choreography multiple times before performing it, deep breathing needs to be practiced well so that it can be used easily when you are feeling anxious. Now moving to the second dimension – thoughts. Explore your predictions of the probabilities and severities of your feared situations with curiosity and the attitude of a detective. What is the probability really, of your feared situation occurring, from 0 – 100%? What is the evidence for this? Has it happened or almost happened before? How many times? Is there something you can do about it?

Next, how severe are the consequences likely to be? Are the standards you hold yourself realistic? What is the evidence for this? Think about a dancer you look up to – have they never made a mistake before? Is it even possible to be perfect? Using factual evidence to estimate what the probability and severity of feared events looks like provides us with a more realistic perspective, thereby reducing the numerator in the equation.

Finally, behaviour. Is there something you are avoiding in dance? Or have you been trying to avoid the experience of anxiety? Often, that is fair enough. We might not have felt like we had the resources to be able to face and deal with the anxiety and it might have felt like the only way to cope. However, avoidance and safety behaviours only keep the cycle of performance anxiety going. Facing your fears can be intimidating, but doing it at a gentle, compassionate pace will help. You can think of it like climbing a ladder from the least anxiety-provoking rung to the most anxiety-provoking rung and set yourself challenges that way.



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Challenging your thoughts and behaviours is necessary to overcome and manage performance anxiety. However, this process may be anxiety-provoking in and of itself. It is essential therefore, that you approach this process and yourself with compassion and kindness, accepting experiences and yourself in each moment of the journey. Remember why you dance – it probably goes beyond constantly worrying about setting and meeting expectations of yourself. An exercise that you might find helpful is the self-compassion break⁴. The three steps and examples of what you might think to yourself are outlined below.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acknowledge that you are feeling anxious. 2. Acknowledge anxiety as a common human experience. 3. Be kind to yourself. What do you need to hear right now? Tell that to yourself. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I'm feeling anxious right now. 2. Anxiety is natural, it makes sense that I feel anxious before a performance. Everyone feels anxious sometimes. 3. May I be kind to myself. I'm going to be okay; I can do this.
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Figure 4. Self-compassion break⁴

Performance anxiety is a common, natural experience, especially in the life of a dancer. You do not need to stamp it out, but you might benefit from deepening your understanding of performance anxiety and observing what it looks like for you. That is the first step to managing and overcoming performance anxiety. You can give some of these strategies and skills a try too. All the best for your next performance – I hope you have a different experience of performance anxiety and enjoy yourself. Break a leg!



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