

Additional Ideas to help with Performance Anxiety

Created as a supplement to the presentation, "Overcoming Stage Fright: Helping Students Become Resilient Performers," for Durham Music Teachers Association, November 12th, 2020

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Performing is a skill that needs to be practiced.

In addition to what we covered in the presentation, it's helpful to brainstorm ways you can offer a supportive studio experience in graduated performance situations. I intentionally set up graduated performance opportunities throughout each school year, with very low-stress opportunities at the beginning and leading up to the formal studio recital at the end of the school year. I work with each student to help them find an appropriate way to be involved that challenges them in a way they can work to achieve, even if it is simply attending the event or helping to announce the performers. At our formal recital, all students are given a special sheet with all of the performers' names, pieces, and extra space where they can write a short supportive observation about each performance. It helps put the students in a "positive audience" frame of mind, helps them keep focused on the present moment and not get stuck in ruminating about their performance, and after I collect and combine all of the comments, it gives them a lovely collection of observations from their peers on their musical offering. It is a perennial recital favorite of both students and parents.

Exercises to help calm your system:

Paying attention to the “turn around”- This is a very powerful tool that I use whenever I’m doing the Noticing Exercise I teach to my students. Paying attention to the transition between inhalation and exhalation very effectively pulls my brain from the autopilot of breathing and helps me notice the hang-time between “in” and “out.” It is in the space of these moments that I truly feel that I’ve stepped out of the river of chaos that life can sometimes become.

C.A.L.M.- I think this is a great progression for quick way to help relax tension and anxiety that has crept into our body. Do a few rounds of **C**hest, **A**rms, **L**egs, **M**outh. The first round is just noticing what you can about the state of those areas, and then in subsequent rounds you can explore how much you are able to relax the areas, one at a time. I often think of how we loosen or tighten lug nuts when changing a tire... adjusting the pressure gradually in each section as we progress through the pattern.

Square/Box Breathing- Breathe out for 4 counts. Pause for 4 counts. Breathe in for 4 counts. Pause for 4 counts. Repeat. There is evidence that intentional deep breathing can calm and regulate the autonomic nervous system. I stay away from using the phrase “hold your breath” with students because it tends to invite more tension. If we “pause” our breath, there is more a sensation of floating rather than grasping or squeezing.

4-7-8 Breathing- By *extending the exhale* more than the inhale, we can activate our parasympathetic “rest and digest” nervous system. (Extending the inhale activates our sympathetic “fight or flight” nervous system.) In this breathing exercise we first exhale completely, then breathe in through the nose for 4 counts, pause for 7 counts, exhale for 8 counts.

How you practice matters.

-Focused repetition. Make sure your brain is focused on your task before you start making any sound. Don't continue practicing if your focus isn't there. Build in lots of opportunity for repetition, because it is crucial to building the skills. Always have a goal for each sound you make so you build what you want, instead of reinforcing what you don't want. There is much wisdom in the warning: "don't practice mistakes."

-Different "angles." Encoding, or learning the information from as many different angles as you can gives it more sticking power in your brain/motor memory. The other side of that coin would be to also retrieve the information from as many different angles as you can. Be creative with coming up with distractions to challenge your memory. Ex. Sing/hum through your piece while tossing a ball with someone or against a wall. Any spots where you lose the "trail" of music need to be strengthened through more study. | Trying playing through the piece with your eyes closed. | Perform your piece with music playing in an adjacent room.

-Mental practice. This idea of mentally performing your piece is proven performance psychology. Imagery, imagining all of the senses, feeling every part of body and how it functions throughout the performance, allows the motor neurons to practice in the most ideal environment... one where you control all of the variables. You can have many run-throughs where you give all of your attention to exactly how you want the piece to go. This is a valuable companion to include in your practice techniques after you thoroughly know the piece.

Recommended Reading

How We Learn: The Surprising Truth About When, Where, and Why It Happens, Benedict Carey, 2014. There's always great new research being done in the world of cognitive neuroscience. This book offers good information to help make practicing more effective.

Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds, Wendy Sullivan and Judy Rees, 2008. This is an interesting book to help you think differently about how you communicate with students and find ways to help them learn according to their unique ways of interacting with the world.