

Overcoming performance anxiety through positive visualisation.

by Ewan Mains (ewan@ewanmains.com)

Performance Anxiety (*PA*) can affect anyone. I was troubled by it for many years to the point I would physically start to tremble and uncontrollably shake - it became a real issue at one point that I could no longer ignore, so I had to address it. It used to be a seldom talked about or discussed problem - brushed under the carpet or often just self medicated with drugs or alcohol to mask the symptoms. I had little material to use as reference to solve my problem.

I then came across a book, written some nearly 60 years ago now by a plastic surgeon called Maxwell Maltz. That book is called '*Psychocybernetics*' ⁽¹⁾ and it became the ground-breaking basis for just about every self-help style book on the planet since it was first published. My recovery from *PA* and many of my ideas and concepts are based on parts of Mr Maltz's thinking. It's taken me a few years to get it figured out in relation to performance and how it works for me, so I thought I would share my own take on it, and the more specific methods I use to counteract *PA* .

The first thing to understand is that *PA* goes way beyond normal nervousness - *PA* can be utterly debilitating to the point where you cannot perform any more whereas plain old nervousness actually is a perfectly normal and positive emotion that we all experience. Natural nervousness serves a purpose to sharpen our responses and reflexes when we are in a situation of natural stress (i.e. a performance). Nervousness and stress in small doses like this are very good for us in this way and completely necessary if we are to perform at our best. It only becomes a performance issue when the nervousness and stress are coupled with anxiety. When these guys team up, this gives us the potential situation for *PA* to arise. The adrenaline overtakes us and ends up in control of our bodies- this is where *PA* comes in and this is the point where natural and healthy *stress* turns into *distress*.

One of the biggest things to realise is that *PA* is of our own making. We construct the anxieties that give it the foundation to build upon. The good news is that it's entirely very 'curable'. Yes, - entirely curable.

The majority of *PA* or *distress* is caused through what's called 'negative feedback'. We basically construct reasons for ourselves to fail purely because we are so scared of failure or of making mistakes. This is where the negative feedback loop begins. We stress, we think, we worry about what 'may happen'. That initial worry about the 'what may happen' evolves into us imagining ourselves making mistakes, we start to envisage the worst that can happen, we say to ourselves 'what if?'. We think to ourselves ' ooh - here's that tricky section coming up that I keep messing up - I hope I don't mess it up like last time' (when we do this, we tend to replay in our minds the mistake happening) and by consistently and constantly doing this, we are reinforcing that worry and anxiety, thereby giving the anxiety enough food for a lifetime.

The anxiety leads to more distress, more nervousness, more adrenaline, more worry, more doubt, more envisioning negative things happening until the whole negative feedback loop spirals out of control and we end up a literal quivering heap and unable to perform at all!

As a musician, our imagination is one of our most powerful and underestimated tools in our armoury. In essence, by worrying about performances and letting ourselves imagine, worry and mentally re-enact the worst things that could happen, we are effectively hypnotising ourselves into this negative feedback loop state of mind, so that come performance time, we are either so worried about it that we cannot perform due to the amount of adrenaline rushing around our bodies, or we end up conforming to our own negatively imagined visions and fulfil our own prophecies of performing inadequately.

So - how do we get out of this?

What we need to do now is to de-hypnotise ourselves from these false beliefs.

We need to change that negative feedback spiral into a positive one. We take the thoughts and symptoms that were working against us and turn them around. It really is almost as easy as it sounds, BUT, like your instrument it does require regular practise to get the benefit from it. **This not a one step, 'here's a magic pill' instant fix. It's a technique that requires life-long and ongoing practise in order to be effective.**

The following exercise is one I have devised myself over the years and I use this regularly to help any ongoing issues that I may face or come across. At this point, I am pretty well practised in it, so I find it easy to slip in and out of even for just 5 minutes before a show or concert. I treat it a s sort of 'meditation' nowadays. I sometimes also do this exercise when I am warming up - i.e. playing simple, soft, long tones on my instrument. I also find it's a great exercise to re-centre myself when life starts to get a bit too much!

The Exercise:

Find a quiet place to sit or lie down - whatever is most comfortable for you. I prefer to close my eyes, but you can do it with your eyes open. Ensure that you're not going to be interrupted for the duration of the exercise. (put your phone off etc.,)

Think of a time when you felt very relaxed & happy, this can pretty much be anything in your past. (What we're doing here is trying to re-create the state in which your brain is most susceptible to positive dreaming.) Try to think about sights, sounds, colours etc., smells in particular are very good for me at triggering certain memories. Take a couple of slow, deep breaths and take in your surroundings. Allow yourself to think that this is a nice place to be in and be a part of your experience.

As you repeat this exercise, it helps if the first few times you do it that you keep it at the same place - that way you're reinforcing the familiar feeling of being in this place and you'll find it easier and quicker to re-visit it once it is established. As you move on in time and become more adept at the exercise, I find it helpful to change the environment occasionally.

Once you feel that you're in a nice place and comfortable, you feel yourself focussing on your breathing. Nice, slow gentle breaths, in and out like gentle waves on a beach. Look around and see your instrument lying there in front of or next to you. You smile as you see it there as you hadn't noticed it before. It's sitting there looking great and makes you just want to pick it up. As you pick it up, you look at it and marvel at how it's made, all the twists and turns, the nuances of it, you see details in it you've not noticed before. It sits in your hands more perfectly than you have ever felt it - it's weight balancing out. Now you see yourself about to start playing - this can be anything from practising scales, to playing a solo in front of an audience etc.,

It doesn't have to be real or even remembered, but the more detail you can put into your experience, the better.

In this place, you are happy, confident and relaxed. Any pressures that have been niggling at you aren't relevant here as they can wait for now. As you pick your instrument up and start playing the first few notes, see yourself playing confidently, with the most amazing sound you have ever heard.

See people around you look at you in awe as the sound you are making is touching them. Imagine that you are executing a flawless performance, any issues that you had in the past are no longer issues. Allow yourself to feel some of that rush in the pit of your belly, only this time, it's not nervousness - it's excitement at what's coming from your instrument - the sounds and colours as the notes fall flawlessly around you. Continue your playing - any tricky passages you have had trouble playing in the past, just flow past and out of

your instrument without so much as a flutter. Imagine yourself playing the way you really want to hear yourself. Revel in the beautiful sound that you're hearing and creating.

Allow yourself to imagine playing without mistakes, a beautiful sound and the performance you always want to hear. Even if you are just imagining practising scales - hear them come out of your instrument perfectly, no hesitation, no strain or stress. You and your instrument are connected at a level deeper than you've ever felt before.

Spend as long as you want on this part. Your 'gig' or practise session can go on for as long or short as you like.

As you naturally finish your performance, slowly put your instrument down & allow the lovely warm sensation of accomplishment to wash over you. You feel as happy as you have ever felt, more accomplished than ever. Your connection with you, your instrument and music is complete. As you put your instrument down, you start to notice the details again around about you, the sights, sounds and smells. Take a couple of slow deep breaths and gradually feel yourself leaving your place and drifting back to your room. As you slowly come to, you will feel refreshed and accomplished.

If you repeat this technique on a daily basis, even if you can't get to your instrument to physically practise, you will notice an distinct improvement over time and a reduction in PA , overall anxiety and stress.

Remember, you can do this technique pretty much anywhere and for as short or as long as you want. If you've ever seen top athletes just before a race they will usually be somewhere solitary and quiet - ever wondered why? Now you know - they're already running and winning the race in their head before their feet touch the track.

If you would like to know more about these techniques, I can highly recommend the books '*Psychocybernetics*' by Maxwell Maltz and '*Effortless Mastery*' by Kenny Werner (which is more targeted at musicians).

- (1) *Psychocybernetics*; Maltz, Maxwell, **ISBN-10: 0671700758**
- (2) *Effortless Mastery*; Werner, Kenny, **ISBN-10: 156224003X**

Thanks for reading!

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