

STAGE FRIGHT 101

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It begins with the warning signs of the flu – a sudden queasiness in the pit of your stomach, the abrupt feeling that something just isn't "right". Then come the secondary symptoms: faint nausea, an inability to concentrate or focus, followed swiftly by an overwhelming adrenaline surge and the need to be somewhere, anywhere, but here.

Left to its own devices it can, like the flu, completely overpower you, forcing you to miss work with complete disregard for the consequences to your career. And like the flu, it eventually passes - usually when the infectious agent is removed.

I'm speaking, of course, about stage fright, which usually ends as soon as the performer is out of the building and away from the scene of the crime. Not the garden variety of stage fright, which hits about half an hour before showtime and disperses almost as soon as you reach the microphone, but crippling stage fright.

According to *The Book of Lists*, statistically the number one fear of people in the United States is public speaking, beating out fear of bankruptcy, illness, and death. For those of us who choose to be performers, this information is puzzling – if you're afraid to stand up in public and speak, why even try to do it? God knows, it's easy enough to stay home.

Oddly enough, many performers feel the need to perform, but also suffer from debilitating stage fright. I have a friend, one of the most famous performers in the world, who used to vomit before every performance out of sheer terror – yet she has made her living as a performer for more than 40 years.

In the old days, public speaking advisors used to tell people with stage fright to "imagine the entire audience is naked". Nowadays we know that old homily doesn't do much good; the one time I tried it, I got so grossed out that I missed the next three chords!

Adrenaline is our friend

Overwhelming stage fright comes from our primitive "fight-or-flight" response. It lives in an area of the brain so old, we can't even know when it began. Probably back before we were human; even back to when we walked on all fours. Back when cavemen ruled the world, this fight-or-flight effect was invaluable, enabling us to respond to extreme danger quickly and efficiently.

In studies of cats using spectral thermography, when the cat sees a mouse, its entire system responds. Adrenaline surges through the bloodstream, sharpening reflexes and the ability of the brain to make instantaneous decisions. Heart rate increases, body temperature shoots up, extra blood floods paws and brain. (In a human, this increased flow also causes our hands and foreheads to break out in a sweat.) The digestive system shuts down, closing the saliva ducts and making the mouth dry. Focus on the mouse is now paramount, with everything blocked from the field of vision but the prey.

In the same way, when we were confronted with a dangerous creature back in primal times, our fight-or-flight response focused and strengthened us. We had adrenaline for strength and flight; increased blood flow to the parts of our body that most needed it. The digestive system shut down, eliminating hunger and using the digestive energy for more immediate needs. Everything was focused on one thing – survival. And it was a great survival tool.

Nowadays it's rare that we face attack by a savage beast, but the fight-or-flight response remains hardwired into our systems. Anyone who's ever been dressed down by a teacher in front of a grade school class recognizes the symptoms. Because of the adrenaline outpouring, blood leaves the stomach organs to race toward more immediate defensive areas like the hands; this causes cramping and nausea. The breath comes faster so you can get more oxygen, but you feel like you're hyperventilating as a result. Eventually your body decides that even *thinking* is an impediment to survival, and shuts down your rational brain functions so instinct can take over.

Properly used, adrenaline is our friend. Most performers count on a little bit of fear in the moments before they enter the stage. It strengthens our resolve, sharpens our focus, and reminds us that we're about to do something extraordinary. Coping with destructive stage fright doesn't mean eliminating fear, it means making *friends with your adrenaline*, and learning to use it to best effect. As Mark Baxter says, "Your job before a gig is not to deny fear, but to manage its symptoms."

What are you *really* afraid of?

Fight-or-flight only occurs when we're afraid. In many ways, debilitating stage fright is like a massive allergic response, where the body mistakes a food like peanuts for a threat to its survival, and reacts accordingly by swelling to protect the area. Unfortunately, that swelling can cut off your oxygen, and cause life-threatening symptoms. With allergic responses, we usually know what the culprit is. With stage fright, things get a bit more complicated.

So the first step in stage fright is figuring out what's provoking such terror.

No one answer works for everyone. Some people have a tape running in their heads from their childhood, when someone they trusted kept throwing negative self-imagery at them. ("*You'll never be any good at this*" or "*Nobody like you can be a performer – you're not pretty/smart/talented enough*" or "*If you try doing that, the whole audience is just going to laugh at you.*".)

Since the unconscious doesn't know the difference between the truth and a lie, those phrases go in with all the force of a lightning strike, and they stay there until you take steps to undo or override them. In my case, I suddenly got stage fright as an adolescent when my single *Society's Child* was at its height, and with good reason: I was receiving death threats daily, while clagues would buy tickets to my shows and try to boo me off stage. It took years for me to trust an audience again, even though my rational mind knew it was safe.

Ruthless self-examination can offer immediate help. Making a list of what you're *truly* afraid will happen, no holds barred, can have surprising results. Start with saying out loud "What am I afraid of?". Don't just confine it to "What am I afraid of when I walk on stage?" What are you afraid of, period?

Write it down, and then, without editing yourself, say your answers aloud and write them down too. Once you've set your fears down on paper, you can look at them with your rational mind and examine each to see just how real that fear is. You'll find that most are illusory disasters your conscious and/or unconscious have cooked up, while trying to figure out the worst possible scenario to protect you from. After all, how many of us have ever gotten booed off a stage, or had rocks thrown at us while performing? How many of our lovers would leave if we turned in a bad show? How big a failure can blowing it in front of 100 people be? Being in front of an audience is not, in and of itself, dangerous – it's our *perception* of what we imagine can happen that creates the fear. And luckily for us, we can change that.

So take heart. Scott Sindelar, a licensed psychologist who specializes in counseling professionals with public-speaking anxiety, says “The reason people can overcome stage fright – as opposed to other fears – is that human beings can change their perception of a situation. In public-speaking situations, there are ways we can control what’s going on around us. You can’t do that with, say, fear of flying.”

Tad Simons says “...the causes of the anxiety and panic and stress are specific and easily identifiable... other more serious forms of psychological dysfunction – obsessive behaviors, panic disorders...mental illnesses – are much more difficult to treat because their causes are difficult to isolate.” In other words, someone who obsessively washes their hands or pulls out their hair but doesn’t know what triggers it is in much worse shape; you *know* what triggers your stage fright – going on stage!

What do you really want to accomplish on stage?

Most of us think “I want to perform”, not “*Why* do I want to perform?” But the *why* comes before the *want*, if you dig deep enough.

What’s your real goal during a show? Do you want to make the audience like you? respect you? make them happy or sad? Are you hoping to get a recording contract or management out of it? Or do you just love being up there, because your ego is so starved that you need applause and approbation from strangers? There’s nothing wrong with any of those reasons, but they bear examination.

Try getting through a list of what you’d like to accomplish for yourself, then move out of your own ego and into the hearts of your next audience. Of course you’re performing for your own pleasure, but think about the pleasure your show can give others. Get out of yourself for a little while.

What about drugs? Can they help?

Beta blockers: A 1986 study by FLUTE of 2,122 classical musicians reports that slightly under 22% of those musicians occasionally used beta blockers for “non-medical reasons” – e.g. for performance anxiety. That’s a lot of performers.

Beta blockers such as Inderal block the physical receptors of a person’s natural fight-or-flight response. These receptors are found all over our bodies: brain, lungs, arteries and more. The body was built smart; if you lost an arm, you still had blockers available. If your lungs were laboring, there were spare blockers to be had.

The blockers fit into the receptors and keep epinephrine (adrenaline) from binding to them, undoing the fight-or-flight response. But according to recent studies, beta blockers seem to block beta receptors only *outside* the brain. In other words, they won’t help things like trouble sleeping the night before a performance, or negative inner voices that repeat bad tapes like “*You’re not good enough to do this*”. They can also, on the bright side, cause relief of migraines, and decreased tremors. Sounds good, doesn’t it?

Unfortunately, they can also bring about bronchoconstriction (which can cause asthma attacks), lowered blood pressure, and decreased force of heart contractions. They can significantly worsen certain medical conditions such as diabetes, so they *must* be used under a doctor’s care. Performers usually take them in small doses, and only for concerts. However, they can cause physical dependence, so as with any drug, you must be very cautious.

Interestingly enough, testing shows that beta blockers don’t improve your performance; they only relieve the problems arising from a fight-or-flight response. If your shaking hands are causing you to play badly, it will *seem* that your playing has improved, because those symptoms will be gone.

Sleeping aids: Several performers told me their stage fright manifests as an inability to sleep the night before a performance. No one functions well without enough sleep; sleep deprivation studies have shown that temporary psychosis can result if one goes without sleep too long. Draw a distinction between trouble falling asleep (you lay there for an extra half hour, then sleep the night through), and real sleep loss (you don't fall asleep for three hours, you wake up every hour in a panic, you're exhausted the next day). If you're going to use sleeping aids, consult with your doctor to find something with a short half-life (the amount of time the drug stays in your system before being eliminated completely). Don't fall into the habit of using them when you're nervous, or can't get to sleep right away; that will eventually destabilize your body's natural ability to fall asleep, and you'll wind up dependent on them.

Alcohol & street drugs: Paul Williams says it better than I can: "I self-medicated til I was 49 years old, and experienced the audience through the haze of alcohol and cocaine, numbed to the full sensation of the exchange... First, I was numbed to the sense of joy that comes from having faced your fear and survived – and it's truly joy, because the gift is a subconscious knowledge that other bottomless terrors may be pretty shallow... The second and perhaps biggest gift is the knowledge that authentic Paul (or whoever) is enough for the moment... that I don't need to go acquire something, learn something, add anything, to share my gifts with the world. Maybe that's been the best thing about the last eleven-plus sober years. The chance to really connect with people, and to realize that they're seldom really monsters. They're just people, and what we have in common in is the line the music and words are written on."

Alcohol and drugs don't eliminate stage fright; they just bury it where you can't be affected until you fall into the hole they've made. Far better to actually rid yourself of the monkey on your back.

Non-medical interventions

The goal of most non-medication approaches to stage fright is to convince us that there is nothing to fear, since fight-or-flight manifests only when we perceive (or think we perceive) great danger.

Long-term therapy: Frankly, I don't think traditional long-term therapy is that helpful for someone whose only problem is stage fright. If you suffer from serious stage fright, you need help right here and now. Unraveling the root cause should ultimately make it go away, but it doesn't help the show you've got booked next month.

Short-term therapy: Cognitive and behavioral therapy seem to be more effective, since their focus is on a specific problem. By the way, if you're going to use a therapist, make sure to find one who's treated performers before!

Hypnosis has been remarkably successful, much for the same reasons behavioral therapy works. A hypnotist deals with "re-framing" your performance anxiety while you're at your most relaxed, teaching you to visualize that performance in a safe environment, while reinforcing feelings of calm, centeredness, and control. Studies show that working with a qualified hypnotist can reduce stage fright in a single session.

Other relaxation techniques: Yoga, bio-feedback, and other relaxation techniques are helpful for everyone. When you're tense, the tension contracts your circulatory, muscular, digestive and respiratory systems. It literally ties your body up in knots, contracting the vocal chords so you can't trust your voice, constricting the muscles so you can't play. There are inexpensive group classes and/or seminars available in most cities.

You are what you eat: There's apocryphal evidence that eating turkey, rich in tryptophan, before a performance can calm the fight-or-flight response. Certainly no one who's fallen asleep after Thanksgiving dinner would argue the point! Since both nicotine and caffeine stimulate adrenaline, avoid those on the day of show.

Immediate suggestions:

Breathe: Breathe, breathe, breathe. This is absolutely the best thing you can do for yourself when you're suffering from stage fright; I can't emphasize it enough. Take deep, slow breaths, the kind you take when there's a pleasing scent in the air. Count them, and do at least twenty. Breathing is the first line of defense against fear; physiologically, it oxygenates the brain and triggers the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls the relaxation side of your internal cycle. Just think – you can go without food for days, you can go without water for half a week, but you can't go without breathing for more than a few minutes. So breathe.

Be prepared: Know your work, know your parts, know the stage. Have your clothing, makeup, charts ready well before you have to leave the house, so there's no last minute panic to contend with. . Get there early enough to walk around onstage, so your body is familiar with the layout. Check the seating and imagine it full of bodies, all wanting to enjoy your show, all wanting you to do well. Audiences don't want you to fail; they want you to succeed. They're already rooting for you; half the battle is over.

Have your set list done at least an hour before showtime; in a pinch, it will give you something to focus on.

Visualize : Lay down or sit in a quiet place with no distractions – your bedroom, a couch in the living room, anywhere you're comfortable. Slowly, breathing deeply, *imagine* yourself getting ready for a show. As you begin to exhibit fight-or-flight symptoms, intervene consciously. Breathe deeply again and again; remind yourself that this isn't a "real" show, it's only imaginary. Walk through the preparation and show step by step, stopping when you become frightened and going back a few steps to the time when you were calm and controlled.

Think it sounds stupid? Think about this – recent studies show that pianists who *imagined* practicing in their heads, without touching a keyboard, improved as rapidly as those who practiced at the instrument. Athletes have known this for years, as books like *Zen & the Art of Archery* prove. Strong visualization practice will stand you in good stead, even if you don't have incapacitating stage fright.

Practice self-talk: That's right – talk to yourself. *Listen* to your thoughts, the ones just below the surface, when you get scared. Counteract self-doubt with positive messages. It might seem goofy, but when you tell yourself over and over again "I'm prepared", or "I can do this well", it goes in on a subconscious level. The more you tell yourself positive things, the more strength that perception has inside you. Intervene with any negative self-talk on a cognitive level; if you find yourself saying "*I can't do this*", tell that voice to STOP! The *stop!* will also go into your subconscious. Don't wait until the day before a show to do this – start right now.

Do something physical: Many comedians start their show by running onto the stage, carrying a prop like a chair. This has the advantage of settling the adrenaline into your system, while using up a little bit of the excess adrenaline immediately. You can run on, or walk across the entire stage, wave, then make your way to the microphone – any kind of movement will help. Even jumping up and down in the wings, or shifting from foot to foot, is good.

Practice performing: The only way for a performer to practice getting over stage fright is to practice performing in front of an audience. Book shows your career doesn't rest on. Play everywhere and anywhere – around the campfires at festivals like Kerrville, in front of your family and friends. Check the local Elks Club, old age homes, high schools and the like. Of *course* they aren't paying gigs! Of *course* they're not going to get you a record contract! That's the whole point – give yourself experience re-framing your stage fright in situations where it doesn't matter if you fail. We've all failed on stage at one time or another; this sort of practice allows us to fail in a safe situation.

Focus: If you've ever had a "panic attack" you know how difficult it is to stop the process once it begins. A standard tool is to focus on an object within sight, like a chair. Start describing the object to yourself aloud - what color is it? what shape? Stay on that one object until you can see every part of it clearly when you close your eyes. Asking and responding aloud will force you to breathe, and breathing will calm you; it's automatic, part of your body process, and it won't be distracted by your fear.

Know your body: In addition to giving you more control, this will give you something to focus on. How do you walk? Does your head tilt forward when you sing? What about your physicality would you like to change? Work with a mirror until you can move, stand, and sit in ways that make you feel stronger, taller, more capable. Keep your shoulders relaxed and your knees unlocked. Your body transmits emotions; it's the first thing an audience will see. If you feel good about the way you appear, that's one less fear to cope with. The more you practice, the more your bearing will become a body-memory, until that stance is your "natural" stance.

Give yourself an edge: Use whatever works, whatever makes you feel lucky or comfortable. If you have a talisman, keep it by you. Lozenges, particularly those with glycerin as a main component (Pine Bros. Honey Cough Drops for instance) can help with dry mouth. Know where the toilet is and use it in plenty of time; you don't want to be dealing with an aching full bladder mid-show!

Be conscious of your pre-show ritual: Everybody has one, be it shuffling from one foot to the other just before going on, or starting makeup exactly 60 minutes before your call. Watch yourself next time you do a show; what do you *need* to help you? Don't go diva here, but don't slight yourself either. If you require 5 minutes of silence at some point and there's no privacy available, step outside and take them, or lock yourself in a bathroom.

Give up control: You can't control everything, so let it go. If you've really prepared, you've done all you can already. Trust your instincts. It's not instinct telling you to be afraid, it's a false perception of danger that your own mind has created. Give up trying to control everything uncontrollable about the situation, and life will become much easier.

Lose the dream of perfection: Every artist has it; we wouldn't be artists if we didn't demand, and expect, perfection from ourselves. This is not a bad thing. However, obsessing about it can run you into the ground. Nothing is perfect, no one is perfect, no show will ever be perfect. Train yourself to remember that, as Scarlett O'Hara says, "Tomorrow is another day." Whatever failure or embarrassment you experience today will not be remembered by anyone but you at your next show, which will be in a different venue with a different audience.

And try not to judge yourself *during* the performance. First, you'll probably be wrong; some of my most effective shows from the audience standpoint are the ones I liked least. Second, it destroys your focus. And third, it wastes your energy. Reserve judgment and stop beating yourself up.

Turn mistakes into lessons: I played the Universal Amphitheater in LA once with Billy Joel as my opening act. (Really.) He did a brilliant, high-energy show that had the audience on its feet, and he completely blew me off the stage. The audience, who were hoping the second half would be as good as the first, was disappointed, and rightly so. Compared to Billy, my band was under-rehearsed, my energy level was nil, and my planning (lights, sound, set list) inadequate at best. I watched people begin to leave halfway through my set, and I barely got an encore, whereas he'd gotten several standing ovations. I was depressed for days, until I forced myself to make a list of why it had happened that way. Once I looked at my list, I realized they were all things I could correct, and set about doing so. It wouldn't happen now, but I'm glad it happened to me then.

Don't rush your show: Rushing creates extra adrenaline, which creates anxiety, which creates more adrenaline. Audiences are always more patient than we think. Take a breather now and then; let yourself consciously relax. Don't be afraid of silence! Don't be afraid to stop. Make them wait; they'll be hungrier when you begin the next song.

Be truthful: If you're nervous, say so. Don't use it as an excuse, just mention it as a fact. Audiences like the underdog; *they* wouldn't want to be in *your* shoes, and they sympathize with your fear. Don't ask for pity, but expect compassion.

Remember! The audience is there to have a good time; they don't want you to fail. I've been a performer since I was twelve, and there are only a few instances where I can recall the audience being nasty from the start – inevitably when they saw me appear to open the show, when they'd expected to see the lead band immediately. Those people out there want to enjoy your show, not your demise!

If you start to freak out on stage: Focus on something. Keep your eyes still; that will stimulate the parasympathetic system and relax you. Take control of your thoughts with a reality check – say your name and address to yourself. When you panic, it's hard to remember facts, because the rational mind shuts down. Focus on one or two facts and keep repeating them while you vamp or stand still.

Some other useful tools:

Do a web search under *stage fright performer* or *performance anxiety* with a search tool like Google.com. Some good sites I found while researching this article were Toastmasters International, 3M Meeting Network, and Mark Baxter's site. Many universities post advice on reducing test anxiety, which is very similar to stage fright, and offer good visualization and body exercises for relaxation. David Leisner has an excellent article in *American String Teacher* which is also posted on the web. Some books you may find helpful are *The Audition Process: Anxiety Management & Coping Strategies* by Stuart E. Dunkel (Pendragon Press) and *The Inner Game of Music* by Barry Green and Timothy Gallwey (Doubleday).

The last word:

“There are two types of speakers: Those that are nervous, and those that are liars.”
Mark Twain.

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