Performance Anxiety – Dr. Hans Sturm

Everyone who has had to give a presentation of any kind in front of an audience has felt a surge of nerves. For the fortunate few, mild excitement helps enhance their performance. For instance Doug Yeo (http://www.yeodoug.com), bass trombonist for the Boston Symphony, describes on his website how his early experiences were formative in his healthy performance outlook. He took group lessons from a young age and after a time his mother invited him to play with her at church. While performing in public was exciting, it was also a very nurturing, a safe place to play for an appreciative audience. The act of performing was exciting and enjoyable and his early experiences instilled a confidence in Doug that remains to this day.

Every dedicated musician deserves a calm and confident demeanor spiced with excitement to allow them to reach their highest level for every performance.

Unlike Doug, the vast majority of musicians experience uncomfortable performance anxiety on levels ranging from mildly distracting to outright debilitating. The most common physical symptoms include "butterflies" or upset stomach, shaking hands, cold sweats, a racing heart, and fast shallow breathing. Typically these symptoms are accompanied by nagging obsessive thoughts. The result of this "fight or flight" response to an imminent performance can sabotage even the most careful preparation. Anxious nerves can be overwhelming and leave an artist feeling vulnerable and undermine the confidence necessary to give a performance that reflects the desired inspired intentions.

So what is the cause of all of this anxiety, what is it in our bodies or our minds that is responsible for creating this fear? The answer is a very small almond-shaped portion of the brain called the *amygdala*. This small group of nuclei is responsible for helping the brain to process and consolidate emotional memories into long-term memories. The amygdala responds to both positive and negative stimuli and acts like a thermostat for the "fight or flight" response, sending signals to other areas of the brain including those that control the sympathetic nervous system, reflexes, and the release of dopamine into the blood stream (capable of increasing the heart rate, blood pressure, etc.). A fear cycle effect is created when fear creates symptoms, increasing the fear, and in turn creating more dramatic symptoms. The end result is that the amygdala becomes sensitized over time to increasingly higher-charged emotional memories created by performance stress and adjusts by creating a long term memory that higher levels of anxiety are to be associated with performances. The good news is that the amygdala is also responsive to positive stimuli and it is possible to retrain the brain over time to significantly lower performance anxiety.

Reprogramming the brain to reduce performance anxiety takes time, patience, and a holistic approach. The most successful strategies feature a menu of activities including some form of meditation, guided visualizations, breathing exercises, performance practice and yoga or other slow moving focused exercise such as Tai-chi. Just like learning a piece, these techniques must be practiced regularly and mindfully to gain a lasting benefit.

- Meditation and guided visualizations help to quiet the mind and replace anxiety driven images with calming ones of success. Take slow breaths and use images and words that have meaning for the music you are playing.

- Breathing exercises likewise help to reduce the heart rate and blood pressure and allow the body to relax.

- Performance practice, playing in low stress informal settings, helps prepare the mind and body for the experiences of playing in higher profile settings and helps to develop more confidence. To prepare yourself for common physical symptoms, try practicing with an increased heart rate, such as after exercising. To prepare yourself to keep your focus and concentration, try practicing with noisy distractions.

- Yoga or other slow moving exercises help to improve flexibility, strength, posture, breathing, and concentration.

- If you find you have a rush of nerves just before a performance, do the opposite of the intuitive and challenge your mind to make you as nervous as possible. By embracing the nerves and accepting the feeling, the nerves will subside and the fear of potential nervous damage will abate, helping to break the fear cycle. Re-focus and re-center yourself using breathing and imaging techniques.

- If you feel your concentration lagging during a performance and that you are becoming distracted, sing the music in your mind as you perform. Remind yourself that you are the storyteller and your version of the story is unique and valuable.

Practicing for many hours for most musicians is simply not enough to be fully prepared for a high stress performance experience. Anxiety can be managed if it is prepared for and, furthermore, recent studies show that a degree of anxiety is necessary for a stronger performance (http://pom.sagepub.com/content/11/1/37.abstract).

For those interested in reading more about performance anxiety there are numerous books and websites devoted to the issue. This list is by no means comprehensive and is offered as a starting place.

Books:
Zen In the Art of Archery, Eugene Herrigel 1981
Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway, Susan Heffers 1981
Effortless Mastery, Kenny Werner, 1996
Stage Fright, Michael Goode, 2003
A Soprano On Her Head, Eloise Ristad, 1982
Audition Success, Don Greene, 2001
Fight Your Fear and Win, Don Greene, 2002
Performance Success, Don Greene, 2001

Websites:
http://www.bulletproofmusician.com/
http://www.dongreene.com/
http://www.musiciansway.com
http://www.mostlywind.co.uk/performance_anxiety.html

It should be noted that some performers have turned to drugs to alleviate the symptoms of performance anxiety. Specifically, *beta blockers* (Inderal, Lopressor, and Toprol, among others) have been used to reduce the physical symptoms of the "fight or flight" response including increased heart rate, shaking, fast shallow breathing, and cold sweats. A 1987 survey of ISCOM orchestras found that almost a third of the musicians were using beta blockers regularly. While these drugs can help alleviate the outward symptoms of anxiety, they do nothing to enhance a performance, increase creativity, or control one's internal dialog. Furthermore, with the reduction of adrenaline, many performers feel that their performances are deadened. Nevertheless this is a trade-off many are willing to make even though it may create a non-addictive dependence to the drug. Lastly, care must be taken when considering the use of beta blockers. They were originally developed to help patients with heart conditions such as chest pain, high blood pressure and irregular heartbeats. If the dosage is not carefully monitored by a prescribing doctor, beta blockers can cause dizziness, light-headedness, drowsiness, and blurred vision. Other potentially more serious reactions including easy bruising, swollen hands or feet, confusion, and depression. Allergic reactions can also occur including the development of a rash, itching, or trouble breathing. A doctor should be consulted if any serious side effect develops. (http://www.ethanwiner.com/BetaBlox.html)