

OVERCOMING STAGE FRIGHT

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Studio founder Tricia Grey, MM

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“Be careful what you water your dreams with. Water them with worry and fear, and you will produce weeds that choke the life from your dream. Water them with optimism and solutions, and you will cultivate success. Always be on the lookout for ways to turn a problem into an opportunity for success. Always be on the lookout for ways to nurture your dream.”

Lao Tzu

Stage fright is an overpowering feeling of nervousness that hits you when you are either about to go onstage or when you are performing. It can show up as anything from butterflies in the stomach and a pounding heart to a full-scale anxiety attack and meltdown when simple nervousness is allowed to turn into anxiety.

The physical symptoms of anxiety include a racing heart, a dry mouth, a shaky voice, blushing, trembling, sweating, A feeling of lightheadedness, and nausea.

These occur because anxiety triggers the body to activate the sympathetic nervous system when adrenaline is released into the bloodstream. The bodily response to perceived danger is known as the fight-or-flight syndrome. The sympathetic nervous system evolved in early man to help him deal with dangerous things in the environment.

These reactions, while appropriate for the caveman, create responses in us that are out of proportion to most actual situations in our lives.

When a person is in flight-or-flight mode, with adrenaline coursing through their system, the neck muscles contract (obviously not a good thing for singers!) bringing the head down and shoulders up. The legs and hands begin to shake, and muscles throughout the body contract and become tense.

People who are in fear mode experience constriction of the blood vessels in the extremities of the hands and feet because the majority of the blood supply is being directed to the vital organs. An increase in blood pressure causes the body to overheat and sweat- not the look you want onstage!

Breathing increases in depth and rapidity, providing the body with extra oxygen for the muscles and organs. The pupils dilate and the digestive system shuts down to conserve energy, leaving the singer with dry mouth, nausea, or butterflies.

If you experience stage fright, take heart- you are not alone. Many well-known performers experience intense stage fright.

Why does something we love to do so much cause us such torture sometimes? It's a dichotomy- we aspire to be singers and performers, and yet, we often struggle with conflicting emotions about performing.

One reason performers may suffer stage fright is the sinking feeling that they are not prepared. Preparation for a performance is a process that should take place over time, with numerous rehearsals and repetitions of every aspect of the performance.

Last-minute preparation and inadequate rehearsal time will sap your confidence; by the time you get to the performance, you should have rehearsed enough times that every word, note, move, and gesture is automatic.

Preparation includes vocal study and technique training. A lack of confidence in your voice and feeling unsure about whether or not the voice will work can completely undermine your performance. Working consistently on your voice by vocalizing daily, improving your vocal technique, and creating new and better vocal habits by having a weekly voice lesson is crucial.

When performance day arrives it is too late to focus on technique, hitting the high notes, or anything else other than performing.

If you are vocalizing every day and taking a voice lesson every week, your voice will be tuned up and ready to roll, like a finely tuned automobile. You will be able to count on your voice to do what you want it to do, so you can focus on what you should be thinking about- the performance.

Nervousness is also tied to focus or where you place your attention. If you are focused on simply trying to remember the words to a song that is not rehearsed enough, your focus is on the wrong thing.

Your nervousness will dissipate if you can put your focus outward. Think about who you are communicating to. You are either singing the song to another character, or you are ruminating to yourself and having an inner conversation. What is going on in the story of the song you are singing?

Don't be future-oriented- projecting what might happen if you fail, if someone doesn't like you, if your voice cracks or you forget the words. Become completely immersed in the moment and in what is going on at the moment you are living now, instead of the "what if's" of what might occur in the future as a result of this performance.

Make that moment real to you, and your nerves will disappear.

You cannot control the outcome of any situation-particularly an audition or performance. So let it go; either the audience will love you, or they will not, and you have no control of either situation. If you are worried about what someone else thinks, you will always be nervous.

Cultivate an attitude of *I am here to have fun, and I am going to enjoy this process no matter what the outcome is*. Let go of expectations, hopes, dreads, and the need to be perfect. Just enjoy your moment onstage.

Here are some things you can do to prevent stage fright:

- Address, challenge and refute your negative perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, images, and predictions related to your performing, your career, and your future. Talk back to your negative thoughts! For more about this, see the article on Self Talk in this book.

- Challenge your insecurities about showing vulnerability and perhaps being considered less than perfect. A performer is someone who can be vulnerable onstage. Learn to accept yourself as you are right here, right now.

You are a work in process!

You are always evolving and getting better. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone—you are where you are and what you are at this moment, and that is good enough! You simply need to do the best you can today. And tomorrow you will continue learning and growing, and you will be even better

- Avoid, avoid, avoid using alcohol or drugs to deal with anxiety and stage fright. You will create a situation where you begin to feel that you cannot perform without it. Many performers have fallen into the trap of *just a little ___ to take the edge off*. Don't even go there. Gut up and get through it and prove to yourself that you can. Every time you do this without chemical help, you will increase your self-confidence and self-esteem. The stronger your self-confidence and self-esteem become, the more invincible *you* become!

- Try meditation and breathing techniques. Both reduce anxiety and help you learn to control the fight or flight syndrome and the resulting physical manifestations of it. Visualize your success: Instead of using your mind to rehearse failure by running through the terrible “what if’s” in your mind, use it to rehearse your success.

- Instead of thinking about how awful you feel, shift the focus from yourself and your fear to your true purpose—contributing something of value to your audience. Think of your music as a gift that you are giving your audience. Imagine your audience as welcoming and approving rather than scary and judgmental. See them as all rooting for you to succeed.

- Stop frightening yourself with thoughts about what might go wrong; focus your attention on thoughts and images that are positive calming and reassuring. You can choose your thoughts so choose thoughts that work for you instead of thoughts that demoralize you!

- To stay relaxed, treat your body well. Exercise, eat well, and avoid toxic substances. Limit or avoid caffeine, sugar, alcohol, and drugs. Do a stretching routine or yoga every day. Get a little bit of sunshine every day and take your vitamins, particularly Vitamin D, which almost everyone in North America is deficient in because we are indoors all the time. Drink lots of plain water; If your body is hydrated and in balance, you will be able to deal with all emotions more effectively.

- Work on your self-talk. Read the article about self-talk below and take the suggested steps to combat your inner critic.

- Keep your posture tall and open and project an impression of confidence to your audience by smiling. You may have to *act as if* or *fake it until you make it*, but if you act confident and assured, you eventually will be.

- Give up trying to be perfect. Mistakes are part of the human condition. You don't have to be perfect to be adored by an audience. Just be your natural self and accept that you, like everyone else on the planet, will often be less than perfect. And that is just fine!

If you are interested in private voice lessons please register for a no-obligation introduction session with Sing Like a Star Studios founder Tricia Grey, MM, or with one of the SLaS Associate Teachers at: www.singlikeastar.com

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