

WELLNESS TIPS

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Welcome back to a new semester! Today Wellness Tips focuses on performance anxiety, as new experiences, such as beginning clerkships and taking Step 1 are on many students' schedules, in addition continuing to work with SPs and small group presentations.

Performance anxiety is commonly associated with musical or theater performances or giving speeches, but it can occur in many other settings in school, work, athletic competitions, and when called on to give small presentations. It can occur in any setting in which one experiences considerable worry about being evaluated and judged by others, including peers, superiors, and faculty.

Performance anxiety can be triggered by almost any situation in which you want to perform well, and you are worried about doing so.

If you experience performance anxiety, you're not the only one. Performance anxiety is common and low levels can enhance performance. One estimate is that 40% of all US adults suffer some degree of stage fright. But anxiety can become so intense that it hampers one's performance. And it can lead to avoidant behaviors.

Symptoms include:

Flushing, pounding heart, sweaty hands, mind going blank.

Dizziness or light headedness, nausea.

Hands/knees trembling, shaky voice, dry mouth.

Experiencing performance anxiety is not typically related to being unskilled for the task at hand. It is likely to occur when one is qualified to manage, handle, produce, or perform the task which is presented. There are many famous people who experience performance anxiety prior to engaging in their activity. Performance anxiety is worry that is disproportionate to the demands of the task at hand.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Remind yourself that performance anxiety is a common experience to some extent:

Jitters are part of the process.

Don't perseverate on becoming nervous in a future situation:

Redirect your thoughts.

Reframing can be helpful:

For example, sweaty palms and beating heart indicate that you are ready for the challenge – not that you are about to fail.

Remind yourself that you have been preparing. For example, although you have not been assigned to a clerkship, you have practiced presenting patient workups.

Your anxiety is not an indicator of how your performance will be perceived by others.

Avoid dwelling on what could go wrong:

Thought Stopping is a technique in which you interrupt a negative thought as soon as you identify it.

You can then challenge the thought. For example, you can tell yourself the thought isn't helping you and it's a waste of your time.

Refocus to more positive thoughts such as positive outcomes from previous situations or ways in which you have prepared for the event.

Focus on your strengths and success handling previous challenges.

Visualization – Some athletes and musicians use visualization to mentally rehearse successfully completing each component of an upcoming performance:

Visualize yourself being calm and focused while presenting a patient history, responding to a staff physician's questions, or taking a test, for example to practice and prepare for the situation.

Address additional stressors to moderate your anxiety.

Step 1 practice exams and talking with students who have been through a specific clerkship will help you know what to expect.

For example, check out the location/route for your Step 1 facility.

Journaling can help you get those thoughts out of your head.

Relaxation exercises and mindfulness can be helpful and are most effective when practiced regularly.

Relaxation breathing exercises can be done inconspicuously while in a group.

Release physical tension by:

- taking a deep slow breath and imagine sending it to your feet.
- Then exhale completely and repeat.
- Roll your shoulders.
- Bend your head towards each shoulder to release tension in your neck.

These can be done while waiting to begin your test.

The goal is not to completely get rid of anxiety but to decrease it and control your emotions.

If anxiety is too disruptive and interfering with your performance on a regular basis, consider scheduling an appointment with a counselor in the MSCC, your primary care provider, or psychiatric/mental health provider for assistance and to consider options available. Sometimes medication can be helpful in addition to cognitive or behavioral strategies.

Anxiety and Depression Association of America. "Conquering Stage Fright."

<https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder/treatment/conquering-stage-fright>

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<https://www.brainfacts.org/thinking-sensing-and-behaving/emotions-stress-and-anxiety/2018/what-is-performance-anxiety-102518>

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/face-it/201304/performance-anxiety>

WebMD. "State Fright (Performance Anxiety)." Smitha Bhandari. November 13, 2019.

<https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/stage-fright-performance-anxiety#1>

See the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips. <https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Stay Safe and Stay Well.

Contact the MSCC with questions or concerns or to schedule an appointment with any of our counselors.

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