

Countering Stage Fright

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Hello students, I am here, Smita Jha once again. Well, the topic is countering stage fright, and can stage fright be cured? So, today's discussion is basically about- can stage fright be cured? Because there are several myths and stories about this public speaking or stage fright. And such myths and stories sometimes misguide also, you know, the people concerned. So, it is very important to know the basic fundamental ways to cure this stage fright. From a biological perspective, stage fright is the body's fight or flight response- which I discussed earlier also- produced in reaction to the perceived danger of public speaking. As I said earlier, that this is a kind of obsessive syndrome related to your self-image, more prone to future danger than to the present.

And the reason behind the brain secretion or the hormonal secretion- the amygdala, the part of brain sends a distress signal that causes the hypothalamus to send signals to the sympathetic nervous system, and the adrenal glands release adrenaline into the blood stream, which causes the all too familiar symptoms of stage fright. Increased heart rate and blood pressure, heavy breathing, sweating and a terrible feeling in the pit of the stomach. So, see these are the symptoms. And why it is happening? That we discussed already.

But can it be cured? That is a very pertinent question. A world-famous pastor who speaks to sold out stadiums, once admitted that in his first year as a minister, his hands would shake as he approached the lectern, means the podium. His palms would sweat and his heart would raise, he had severe stage fright. When he overheard a critical comment about his speaking, he would focus on it and replay it over and over in his head. So, the question is that how did he get over it.

And someone asked him that- how did you get over it? Well, the person concerned said, I started speaking to myself in a more positive way instead of tearing myself down. I built myself up, he said. The minister also began to practice. He rehearsed for hours and hours ahead of every sermon. The latest neuroscience research concludes that the preacher

intuitively did two things right- reappraisal and rehearsal.

What is reappraisal? Changing the channel. And the minister in this context, the minister said that he overcame the fear of public speaking by changing the internal channel. Instead of focusing on what had gone wrong or the negative comments he overheard, he focused on what he did right and the people who were moved by his message. That is, the bright side of his lecture. He just ignored the mistakes for which he was being criticized.

So, looking towards the brighter part, he gathered confidence. Further the minister was engaging in what psychologists and neuroscientists called cognitive reappraisal. Cognitive means thought process. According to neuroscientist Gregory Berns, cognitive reappraisal is the act of reinterpreting emotional information in such a way that the emotional component is diminished. In his book titled "Iconoclast," Berns writes emphatically: "There is growing neurobiological evidence that when people reappraise emotional circumstances, the prefrontal cortex comes online and inhibits the amygdala.

" In other words, the part of our brain, that is amygdala, that triggers the fight or flight response- and elevates your heart rate when speaking in public- is more easily tamed and controlled, when we reframe our internal thoughts from negative to positive. Berns' observation has been validated by many scholarly research experiments in the last few years. So, you must read this book "Iconoclast" and know what Berns speaks about this-stage fright. In a paper titled "Rethinking Feelings", researchers at Columbia University conclude: "we can change the way we feel by changing the way we think, thereby lessening the emotional consequences of an otherwise distressing experience." Reframing the way we think about external events is nothing new, and this observation has been made throughout history.

From Marcus Aurelius to William Shakespeare, great leaders and great writers, great thinkers have always known that we can choose how we interpret events or experience incidents. As Shakespeare wrote in "Hamlet," "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Dr. Sian Beilock is a psychology professor at the Human Performance Lab at the University of Chicago. She wrote the book "Choke," to explain the science of why some people stumble, stammer, when the pressure is on while others thrive.

She tested people in high pressure situations, including a sports, test-taking, and giving presentations. It is very hard to function at peak performance when you are in tension, worried about what people all think- obsession for the audience. Anticipations of an event and specifically anticipation of others judging you is enough to put pressure on, before you have even arrived at the performance stage. So, according to Beilock, the prefrontal

cortex is also the seat place of our ability to reappraise a situation or event. Reappraisal is one of the main cognitive tools we use to reflect on what others do and change our own emotional responses accordingly.

Rehearsal and reappraisal, these two, are very important points. Rehearsal and reappraisal will help you to reach a high-performance state of mind. Reappraisal means you know, evaluation yourself in the positive manner. If you change your perspective about public speaking and rehearse under stress, you might find yourself looking forward to your next presentation, instead of dreading it, and this is on records. Public speaking is the number one fear in the world.

Millions of people are limiting their careers because of this irrational fear. A study on anxiety-inducing activities like public speaking found that intuitive response- consciously trying to calm down- is not the best strategy. As we are discussing that can stage fright be cured, you should know about the fact as I said, that there are myths and stories about this. Instead people instructed to say to themselves, "I am excited," before a stressful ordeal performs better. And the counterintuitive finding comes from a series of experiments conducted by Alison Wood Brooks, published in the "Journal of Experimental Psychology".

The basic take away? Forget about coming down. Everyone knows that anxiety can hurt performance. It can ruin sometimes, your career also. Sure enough, studies have found that people who are anxious are distracted, cannot think straight, and find their working memories impaired. Surely it makes sense then to try and calm down.

Actually the evidence suggests not. In one experiment, 140 participants were told to prepare a public speech. Before delivering it half were told to say to themselves, "I am excited," and the other half, "I am calm." This was an experiment done to know about the mental frame of the presenter. The speeches were videotaped and analyzed by independent raters who found that those who had said "I am excited" consistently performed better than those who told themselves "I am calm."

" Excited people were more persuasive, competent, confident and persistent. Plus, they spoke for longer, presumably because they were enjoying it more- means personal interest and involvement. So, they were enjoying it. So, do not say "I am nervous," say "I am really excited" and mean it while saying this. Ancient wisdom and modern science point to the beneficial effects of numerous breathing techniques, because when you are in a nervous state, you are panting, heart palpitation rate is very high.

But most breathing exercises have a tranquilizing effect. They cause you to relax and

lose energy, which is exactly what you do not want. You want to be alert, alive, and in the zone- that is lively. So, here is a counter intuitive breathing technique that will pump you up, not space you out. The stimulating breath also called the Bellows Breath, the stimulating breath is adapted from a yogic breathing technique.

Yogic, and its aim is to raise vital energy and increase alternates. Inhale and exhale rapidly through your nose, keeping your mouth closed, but relaxed. Your breaths in and out should be equal in duration, but as short as possible. This is a noisy breathing exercise. Do not do it in front of the audience.

Because this technique is not that you go to the stage and you start doing it. This is a technique that is advisable to exercise when you are alone, when before, much before, the presentation and not only once. Make it a regular exercise. That is control on the breath. The speech, you know, quality, well to some extent, it is God gifted.

But the larger extent, you can develop it with practice. That is why that inhale or exhale is the best exercise to control over breathing because shortening of breath, breaking of breath, a small breath breathing panting- these are the symptoms of stage fright, nervousness. Try for 3 in and out breath cycles per second, like faster. This produces a quick movement of the diaphragm suggesting a bellows. On your first try do it for 15 seconds.

Do not do it for more than 15 seconds on your first try. Each time you practice the stimulating breath, you can increase your time by 5 seconds or so until you reach a full minute. If done properly, you will feel invigorated, comparable to the heightened awareness you feel after a good workout. You should feel the effort at the back of the neck, the diaphragm, the chest and the abdomen. And try this breathing exercise when you are getting ready to go on.

It will certainly boost your energy level. So, stage fright can be cured, can be reduced, can be minimized and do not just rehearse. We all know that practice makes perfect and that rehearsing your presentation is important. But did you know there is even a better way? Mental practice can get you closer to where you want to be in life and it can turn you into a confident and effective presenter too. In fact, just practicing physically is less effective than combining traditional rehearsal with visualization.

What my point, is like, even I myself apply this when I walk. I try to rehearse to think how to start, how to speak, how to conclude. And see, this will give you confidence when you walk, when you sit for meditation, when you think of this particular event and you must confirm yourself, the way to start and the way to conclude and in between. Though

nothing is definite that you have to do this, because it is such kind of presentation is spontaneous also. But then, how to start, how to conclude- that depends on you if you practice it.

A study looking at brain patterns in weightlifters found that the patterns activated when a weightlifter lifted hundreds of pounds were similarly activated when the weightlifters only imagined lifting the weight. In some cases, research has revealed that mental practices are almost as effective as true physical practice and that doing both is more effective than either alone. Begin by establishing a highly specific goal, imagine the future. In fact, picture yourself as already having achieved your goal, speak about it as though you had already achieved it. Hold a mental picture of it as if it were occurring to you right at the moment.

Imagine the scene in as much details as possible, hypothetically, and this is a kind of training. Engage as many of the five senses as you can in your visualization. Who are you with? Which emotions are you feeling right now? What are you wearing? Is there a smell in the air? What do you hear? What is your environment? So, when you are physically active, your body releases endorphins. Hormones help raise your confidence, lower stress and put you in a great mood- means, good hormone. Try doing at least 30 minutes of exercise before you step in front of an audience.

Take a walk around the block or theater before the doors open. Do yoga the morning of your performance to ease your mind and stretch your body. Flexibility of mind and flexibility of body. Dance backstage to release any built up energy. Try doing power poses before you walk on stage.

For instance, place your hands on your hips with your chest out like Wonder Man and Wonder Woman. It is also said, watch a funny video, means, to make you laugh. Sometimes, all you need to loosen up or to neutralize is a good laugh. Put on your favorite movie or a funny comedy sketch while you are getting ready, to help you relax. Believe it or not, laughter actually helps you de-stress and reduce anxiety.

Focus on what is playing rather than worrying about the performance and let out all of those giggles. Try watching a motivational speech to help you feel more confident when you listen to others- how to speak? That will give you confidence. Take time to relax. Meditation and deep breathing exercises can help you calm down. Before you step in front of an audience, take some time to be alone to ease the tension from your body.

Sit down in a quiet space and meditate for 15 to 20 minutes or close your eyes and count your inhales and exhales. Let the worries and fears of performing slip away. It is okay if

they pop up while you meditate or breathe. But allow them to come and go rather than focusing on them. Shake out your jitters, flap your arms and legs around before you hop on a stage.

Believe it or not, a little wiggle before you start your performance or presentation can make a big difference. Those butterflies in your stomach and your racing pulse come from built-up nerves and stress. Many performers find that shimmying their bodies before they step on a stage helps them relax and physically shake away their nerves. So, try playing the shake-out game back stage.

Shake a limb 16 times. Then move on to another, and then another. Repeat for a count of 8, 4, 2 and 1. Stand or sit up tall. Your posture can drastically change your mood.

So, try to sit up straight. If you are feeling a bit nervous before you present your speech or go on a stage, take a deep breath and roll your shoulders back. A standing or sitting up taller boosts your confidence levels giving you the strength to overcome a stage fright. If you are sitting, scooch to the edge of your chair if you can, as this can help you to sit up straighter. Set yourself a timer. Tell yourself you are only allowed to be nervous for a certain amount of time.

It may sound silly. But giving yourself the time to be nervous can help you overcome your stage fright. Sit with those scared or jittery feelings for 30 minutes or an hour. Then when the allotted time is up, stand up, brush it off, and say, "I got this." This step does not work for everyone.

And that is okay, individual variations are there. The goal is not to feel 100 percent stage fright-free at the end of your nervous time; it is to give yourself a space to focus on what you feel. So, you can redirect your attention to other things more easily. And yes, very important, avoid caffeine. Coffee and soda cause your adrenaline to rise giving you even more jitters. So, consider is keeping your morning cup of coffee the day of your performance and opt for a tall glass of water instead.

Your body will thank you and so will the dry mouth caused by a stage fright. If you need an energy boost, try eating a balanced meal or taking a power nap. I am sure that these are the steps that can reduce stage fright. In the next lecture, I will enlighten you on the more aspects- how to reduce stage fright.

Till then, thank you very much. Looking forward to meeting you again. Thank you.