

Level 7A

Threat vs. Challenge

Our brains and bodies respond differently depending on how we interpret a situation. When we see a performance situation as a threat, we may focus on what could go wrong, whether we are capable enough, or what the consequences might be if we fail.

Our attention can become focused on danger, mistakes, or evaluation.

When we see the same situation as a challenge, we are more likely to focus on what the situation asks of us and what resources we can bring to it.

The situation itself may not change—but the way we relate to it can.

Threat might sound like:

- “What if I mess this up?”
- “I’m not ready for this.”
- “Everyone is going to notice my mistakes.”
- “I have to get this right.”

Challenge might sound like:

- “This is difficult, and I can meet the difficulty.”
- “What does this moment ask of me?”
- “I have prepared for this.”
- “I don’t need to be perfect. I need to respond to what is in front of me.”

The goal is not to force yourself to think positively or convince yourself that everything will go perfectly. Instead, challenge thinking helps us acknowledge difficulty while also recognizing our ability to respond.

Ask yourself:

- What about this situation feels threatening?
- What resources do I have available?
- What is this situation asking of me?
- How can I approach this as a challenge rather than something I need to avoid?

Remember:

You do not have to feel calm to approach something as a challenge. You can feel nervous, uncertain, or uncomfortable and still choose to move toward the challenge.

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Defusion: Creating Space from Your Thoughts

We all have thoughts before and during performance.

Some thoughts are helpful. Others are distracting, critical, or frightening.

Defusion is a skill that helps us notice our thoughts without automatically treating them as facts, instructions, or predictions.

Instead of getting caught up in:

“I’m going to mess this up.”

We can create some distance:

“I’m having the thought that I’m going to mess this up.”

That small shift can change our relationship with the thought.

The goal is not to get rid of negative thoughts. Thoughts will come and go. The goal is to notice them without allowing them to automatically control our behavior.

Instead of:

- “I can’t do this.”

Try:

- “I’m noticing the thought that I can’t do this.”

Instead of:

- “Everyone thinks I’m terrible.”

Try:

- “My mind is telling me that everyone thinks I’m terrible.”

Instead of:

- “I have to be perfect.”

Try:

- “I’m having the familiar ‘I have to be perfect’ thought.”

Once we create some space from a thought, we can ask:

“What do I want to do next?”

This brings our attention back to choice and action rather than allowing a thought to automatically determine what we do.

Remember:

A thought is something your mind produces.

It is not necessarily a fact, prediction, command, or reflection of your ability.

You don't have to believe every thought you have.

Level 7A

Controllables, Influences, and Uncontrollables

Performance can become overwhelming when we spend our energy trying to control things that are outside of our control.

One useful strategy is to separate performance demands into three categories:

1. What I Can Control

These are things directly influenced by my choices and actions.

Examples:

- My preparation
- My effort
- My attention
- My attitude
- My routines
- How I respond to mistakes

2. What I Can Influence

These are things I cannot completely control, but my actions can affect.

Examples:

- Level dynamics
- Relationships
- The energy of a group
- How others respond to me
- The audience's experience
- A teacher's or director's perception
- The outcome of a competition or performance

We can influence these things, but we cannot guarantee the result.

3. What I Cannot Control

These are things that happen outside of our direct control.

Examples:

- Other people's thoughts and actions
- Audience reactions
- The past
- Unexpected events
- The final outcome

When we focus heavily on uncontrollables, we can become frustrated, anxious, or distracted.

Instead, ask:

“Where can I put my energy right now?”

This does not mean ignoring the things we cannot control. It means recognizing them without allowing them to take all of our attention.

Remember:

You may not be able to control the outcome, but you can control how you prepare, respond, communicate, and engage with the moment.

A useful performance question is:

“What is mine to do right now?”

Level 7A

Black-and-White Thinking

Under pressure, our thinking can become more extreme.
We may start seeing situations as all-or-nothing:

- I either succeed or fail.
- I am confident or I am insecure.
- I performed well or I was terrible.
- I am prepared or I am completely unprepared.
- I made one mistake, so the whole performance is ruined.
- If I don't win, all of my work was pointless.
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This is sometimes called black-and-white thinking or all-or-nothing thinking.

Performance is rarely that simple.
There is usually a much larger range between the extremes.

The goal is not to replace every negative thought with a positive one. Instead, we are practicing more flexible and accurate thinking.

Ask yourself:

- Am I seeing this situation as all-or-nothing?
- What exists between these two extremes?
- What is another, more flexible way to describe what happened?
- Can both things be true?
- “That was difficult AND I handled part of it well.”
- What can I learn from this without turning it into a judgment about myself?

Remember:

One moment does not define an entire performance.

One performance does not define your ability.

One mistake does not define you.

Performance is a process made up of many moments, choices, and opportunities to respond.