

Level 8

Performance Anxiety: Finding Your Optimal Zone

Feeling nervous before or during a performance does not automatically mean something is wrong. In fact, some level of physical and mental activation can help us perform at our best. The goal is not necessarily to eliminate anxiety, but to learn how to work with our energy and attention so we can stay engaged with what matters.

The Inverted-U

One way to understand the relationship between arousal and performance is the Inverted-U Theory. The basic idea is that performance tends to improve as our level of arousal increases—up to a certain point. Too little activation can leave us feeling flat, unfocused, or unmotivated. Too much activation can make it harder to think clearly, stay present, or execute skills automatically.

Think of it like a volume dial:

Too Low → Optimal Zone → Too High

A Body-Based Strategy: Grounding With Cold

When your nervous system feels highly activated, a brief grounding strategy can help you reconnect with the present moment.

One option is using an ice pack or something cold. Place the cold object against an area such as your hands, forearms, or the back of your neck for a short period while paying attention to the physical sensations.

A Cognitive Strategy: Notice, Unhook, Refocus

Sometimes the biggest problem is not the thought itself—it is getting hooked by the thought.

You might notice:

“What if I mess this up?”

“Everyone is better than me.”

“I can’t be nervous right now.”

Rather than arguing with the thought, try:

1. Notice: “I’m having the thought that I might mess this up.”

2. Name: “I’m getting hooked by worry.”

3. Refocus: Bring your attention back to something you can do right now.

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Stop-Reset-Refocus

When performance demands pile up, it can feel like there is simply too much happening at once.

You may be thinking about what just happened, what might happen next, what other people are doing, whether you are performing well enough, and what you need to remember—all while trying to execute the task in front of you.

Imagine your working memory as a desk.

When the desk is clear, you can easily find what you need. But when papers, notebooks, coffee cups, and random objects begin piling up, it becomes harder to find the one thing you actually need.

When too much is competing for your attention, the answer is not always to try harder. Sometimes you need to clear the desk.

That's where Stop-Reset-Refocus comes in.

1. STOP

Pause.

This does not necessarily mean physically stopping what you are doing. It means interrupting the automatic cycle of reacting, worrying, rushing, or trying to solve everything at once.

Ask yourself:

“What is happening right now?”

Notice what is happening in your body, thoughts, emotions, and attention.

You are not trying to fix everything yet. You are simply creating a little space.

2. RESET

Clear some of the clutter.

Take a breath. Feel your feet on the ground. Relax your shoulders. Notice the room around you. Let go of whatever just happened for a moment.

You might use a simple physical reset:

- One slow breath
- Feel your feet
- Look at one object in the room
- Notice one sound

3. REFOCUS

Now ask:

“What is the most important thing for me to attend to right now?”

Your refocus might be:

- “My next breath.”
- “My next movement.”
- “My cue.”

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Comparison: Turning It Into Information

Comparison gets a bad reputation, but comparing yourself to others is not inherently harmful.

Comparison is something our brains naturally do. We look around, notice differences, and use other people as sources of information about where we are and where we might want to go.

The problem is not necessarily comparison itself.
The problem is what we do with the information.

Comparison Can Point You Toward Your Values

Sometimes comparison is useful because it reveals something you care about. If you feel jealous of someone's confidence, perhaps confidence matters to you. If you admire someone's discipline, perhaps consistency is important to you. If you envy someone's creativity, perhaps creativity is something you want more of in your own work.

Instead of judging yourself for having the reaction, get curious about what it is pointing toward.

Comparison can become a compass when you use it to identify what matters—not a scoreboard you use to measure your worth.
The goal is not to stop comparing yourself to others.

The goal is to notice when comparison has become unhelpful, take the useful information from it, and then return your attention to your own performance.