

Still, after well over a decade working in this field, I cannot say the words 'performance anxiety' without a smirk. It is, however, no laughing matter. Performance anxiety can kill careers before they've even begun.

I have yet to meet anyone that truly loves getting up on stage in front of a load of people and speaking, singing or playing to them without a care in the world. Some of those I know who are confident in such things merely 'don't mind it'. In essence we're all in the same worry boat. So, fact 1) we all feel the same, we all worry we're going to make idiots of ourselves. But knowing that doesn't ease the pain of that growing nausea in the build up to the gig, so what can you do about it?

Contrary to most things we read, anxiety isn't all bad; it's simply the body's fight or flight response kicking in due to a perceived stressor. If you didn't have this you would probably not be such a good performer, and you could run the risk of being eaten alive by a pack of wild animals. You need to work with the stress and accept that it is part of the performance, and to find ways of dealing with it to ease the gut wrenching fear of being bottled off stage.

Alexander technique has been long used by musicians to improve posture, preventing repetitive strain injury and to relieve anxiety through raising awareness of what is going on in your body and making corrections to alleviate issues. You could take a course if you have the cash, but taking note of the basics and applying them to your own life could really help.

Step 1; ideally lie down on your back with your feet on the floor and knees to sky. In most venues this will be a bit awkward to say the least, so instead find somewhere to sit comfortably without the need to hold your body up, so you can relax your muscles. Turn your attention to your breathing and how your body feels. Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly, breathing out slowly; it might help to say 'ah' slowly. Turn your attention to each of your muscles and consciously relax each group from head to toe. If this seems alien then watch some You Tube videos and practice at home, this is a technique that can have far reaching benefits so go for it! If you can develop an acute awareness of muscle tension it will not only relieve stress but will also help your playing technique and you'll feel much more in control.

Step 2; form a clear intention of what you want to achieve. What do you intend to do when you step out on stage? How exactly do you want to sound? Use positive language, so rather than stating to yourself "don't cock up the solo", say "nail the solo". Focus on what you want, not on what you don't.

Step 3; once you get out on stage it may help to focus on one spot near the back of the room

where you're not staring directly at one person. The blinding light from several par cans shining in your eyes can either help or hinder this technique, if you find the lighting too bright find a comfortable place to lay your gaze... and not at the floor.

Step 4; being stressed tends to make us hyper focus on detail. This is great when you're in the rehearsal rooms writing, but not on stage. Remember you are showing your creation to others not trying to work on where your sound is going next. Concentrate on the whole and the present.

You could (and you should!) try mingling with the audience and other bands beforehand. Not only will this calm you to remember that everyone is equal, but you might also make some new friends and have a good time. Limit alcohol and caffeine until after the show - Dutch courage may help in ancient battles, it doesn't help you transition around a fret board effectively. Some reports even say to drink orange juice 30 minutes before taking to the stage as the acidity allegedly calms the nerves. If nothing else it would deliver one of your five a day so what have you got to lose?

If you find that the performance anxiety pushes out to other reaches of your life, that there may be deeper set reasons to it or if it pushes you towards panic attacks, keep using the breathing techniques above and make an appointment to see your GP. Although the help they will offer won't be specifically musician focused, they should be able to refer you on for therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy, which will empower you to make the changes to negative thought processes and actions that are holding you back.

Keep calm & carry on.

Karina.