

# I CAN'T GO ON!

## Coping with stage fright

Stage fright, or performance anxiety, is a feeling of dread and fear that comes over a performer before and/or during an appearance or performance in front of an audience. It occurs especially, but not only, when performing for the first time, though even well-established performers can suffer.

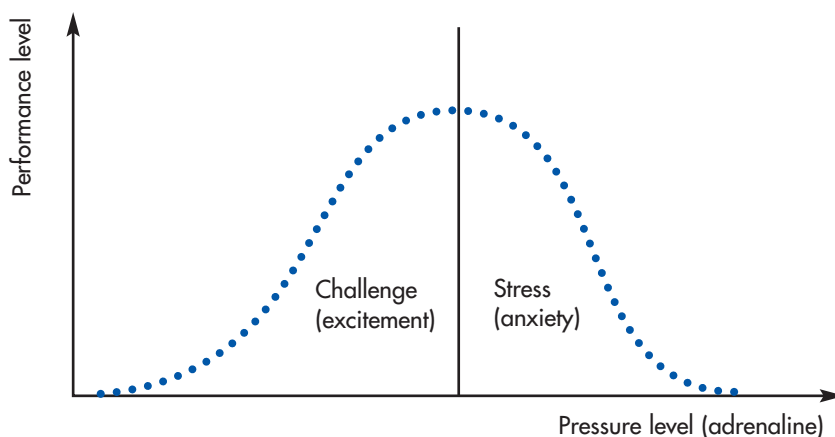
It usually starts on the day of the performance and may get worse as the show gets closer, but it can happen at any time, without warning. If your nerves take over, your performance could really suffer. Here are some of the symptoms:

- Sweating – especially in the hands
- Dry mouth
- Heart beats faster and can be felt in the chest
- Breathing gets faster and heavier
- Dizziness
- A sick feeling (although actual vomiting is less common)
- The urge to keep rushing to the loo

You may also have some negative thoughts, being very worried about the performance and feel as if you might not be able to cope with it, etc. This may become so persistent that you can't think of anything else.

Some level of excitement is necessary to make a good performance, but when this turns into stress, it can be a problem. The graph below shows how this can work. The more the pressure of performance increases, the more the excitement goes up, but after a certain level, the performance level starts to drop as excitement turns into stress. This effect is driven by the acute stress hormone – adrenaline.

## How excitement turns into stress



**By Dr Sanchita Farruque, BAPAM**

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 Dr Penny Wright, BAPAM

The many causes of stage fright can be grouped into certain types:

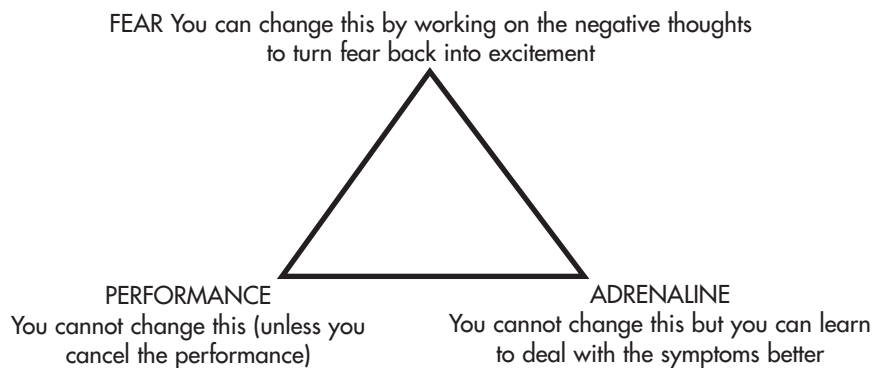
- First time performing on stage, although it should be noted that it can strike even the most seasoned performers.
- Poor preparation – if you haven't learnt your piece or lyrics properly.
- Nervous personality type – which might also have deeper psychological causes.
- The importance of the performance itself.
- Outside factors about the gig: the venue, difficulties with promoters and/or staff, poor acoustics, etc, that you have no control over.

### How you can deal with stage fright

There are a few ways of trying to reduce stage fright, but it may never completely go away and some people would say that a performer needs a certain amount of 'nerves' to perform well. What this means is that, as long as the energy feels more like excitement than dread, then it's fine to have a little bit of anticipation.

However, because this can be very hard to judge, it's not always possible to control the excitement and stop yourself feeling afraid.

### The triad of performance anxiety



Below are some strategies for reducing these feelings. First, we list non-medical strategies, followed by medical interventions:

### Ways of dealing with stage fright that don't require medication

You can work on the physical/mental/technical aspects by:

- Preparing for your gig! Learn your parts/words, etc. and do this well in advance. The night before is NOT enough!
- Doing some less important performances to take the edge off the main performance that is worrying you.
- Distracting yourself with other activities. Anything that takes your mind off things will do, but don't get too engrossed in your displacement activity!
- Managing the adrenaline with deep breathing. Use the bottom parts of your lungs (abdominal breathing) to slow down your heart rate and calm the nerves.
- Doing some physical exercise or warm-up as this helps to relax you. See the warm-up exercises factsheet 'Don't cramp your style'.
- Trying complementary therapies, such as massage, meditation, yoga, Tai Chi, Pilates and Alexander technique, to name but a few. These will help to relax you physically and mentally.
- Eat foods that release serotonin (the 'happy hormone'). Examples are bananas

or dark chocolate (but watch out for the caffeine effect of chocolate, which can create more stress!) and keep hydrated (NOT with alcohol! – as this can impair your performance).

- For dry mouths, drink water, gently bite your tongue (if you are about to get on stage and you have no water to hand) as this will produce saliva in the mouth.
- Counselling –if none of the above seem to help, or if you have some deeper psychological concerns that would benefit from one of the talking therapies. (Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy – CBT – is widely used for stage fright). You should look for a therapist who has experience in treating performance anxiety.

### **Medical ways of dealing with stage fright**

The drugs that can be used to ameliorate the symptoms of performance anxiety are available on prescription only. Even if you have a prescription, you must follow the dosing instructions carefully at all times. Self-medicating is highly dangerous.

The drugs used are:

- Beta blockers. These slow the heart down, reduce the sweating and help to calm the nerves. These drugs are very serious and should only be used 1-2 hours before a performance and at a dose that has been prescribed by your doctor. This dose – or amount of drug – will depend on the individual, your age, gender, size, etc. and so it is not possible for you to guess how much you can safely take, by yourself.
- Tranquillisers. Again these are very serious drugs and need medical guidance when being used. These have the same side-effects as alcohol, in that they tend to make the individual rather clumsy and drowsy. Clearly this is not ideal for performers.

The best line of action is to explore the non-medical ways of dealing with stage fright first, and to resort to medication only if these don't seem to help on their own.

Stage fright is something that can affect you, to varying degrees, when you have to perform. There are many different causes of it and different ways to deal with it. Being aware of it and open about it is a good start. The more you share your fears, the less you will suffer alone. Get yourself help that works for you and you should find that, as you perform more and more, the bad effects of stage fright get less and less stressful, reaching a level you will be able to cope with.

**Don't forget - try to enjoy yourself!**

### **SEE ALSO ...**

**BAPAM Factsheet 1**  
**Don't cramp your style!**

**BAPAM Factsheet 6**  
**The drinks are on me!**

**British Association for Performing Arts Medicine**

**Totara Park House, 4th Floor, 34-36 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8HR**

**ADMIN 020 7404 5888 • CLINIC LINE 0845 602 0235 • FAX 020 7404 3222**

**GENERAL ENQUIRIES [admin@bapam.org.uk](mailto:admin@bapam.org.uk) • CLINIC [clinic@bapam.org.uk](mailto:clinic@bapam.org.uk)**

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