

12 Ways to... **Overcome Stage Fright**



Essential tips for musicians,
singers and performers

Tash James
Vocalist | Educator | Coach

12 ways to...

Overcome Stage Fright

I've struggled with stage fright for years.

The very first solo I sang, aged 14, I ended up sounding like I was attached to one of those tummy-whittling machines from the 1950's. My voice shook in a way I hadn't imagined even possible, and the whole experience was utterly mortifying! The *sensible* thing would have been to stop trying years ago; stop putting myself through the stress and turmoil of facing an audience ever again. The *easier* option would have been to limit my love of singing to the shower only.

So why didn't I just quit?

Because, despite the nerves, I just LOVE to sing!

And a part of that includes performing. It's just the way it is. So I've had to figure out how to live with the nerves, and how to work with them so they don't sabotage my performances.

So how did I do it?

First, I had to understand what was going on with me. How come I would be fine singing alone practising, and yet turn to a quivering mess whenever I had to do the same piece in front of others?

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Turns out, my reaction was completely normal. Our bodies and brains haven't evolved that much since basic survival was a daily concern, and so the amygdala in my brain detects 'danger' even when there's no actual risk to life.

Why would a performance be detected by the amygdala as a threat? It's not exactly a sabre-tooth tiger... or is it!??

We're social creatures. The thought that an action of ours might lead to judgement, condemnation or even banishment from the social group is, to the primitive part of our brains, terrifying.

Even today, our reputations matter to us. So thoughts like 'what if I screw up?' carry a lot of weight, and can lead to us experiencing anxiety. Our brain hasn't evolved quickly enough to realise there's a big difference between our worries today compared to centuries ago, and so the effects we experience are not necessarily proportionate to what we're facing, *but they are real.*

Knowing this can put us a step closer to reducing anxiety, but it may not be enough. The following tips are things that help me every time I perform.

I really hope they help you too.

- Tash 

With weeks to go before a performance:

1. Practise

Kind of obvious, but the more prepared you are, hopefully the less anxious you'll be as you can focus on the performance and it will be in your bones by the time you have to get onto a stage. If you can, practise in a similar setting to the one you'll be performing in. If you can get to the venue and practice there, fantastic. Failing that, practise in front of an audience when you can, and think about how you can recreate the final performance setting in your practice sessions.

2. Visualise

Think about – and maybe even write down – how you'd like to sound. How you'd like your body to feel. How you would like to feel emotionally, before, during and after. Finally, how you'd like to make the audience feel by witnessing your performance. Do this in the weeks and days leading up to the actual performance, and the actual event hopefully won't feel like such an unknown quantity.

3. Research your material

Whether your performance is something you've written yourself or is by someone else, *its creation has a story*. Understanding its backstory and engaging with this can be a great way to take attention (and therefore pressure!) off yourself, and allows you to refocus on the importance of the piece(s) rather than on yourself and how nervous you might be.

4. Reframe negative thoughts

Try to deal with worries ahead of time. Bring to mind what is concerning you about an upcoming performance, and see if you can put a different spin on things. For example, the thought 'the audience will judge me' is a really common thought, but it isn't especially helpful, and also isn't necessarily true. It's actually more realistic to think about the fact that the audience has decided to spend their time (and maybe their money too) listening to and watching me, and therefore it's far more likely that 'they want me to do well, so they can be entertained.'

5. Let go of tension *With days to go before a performance:*

When you practise – and practise as if you're doing the real performance – try to notice if you can feel any tension, and if so, where it is. For me, I sometimes feel tense in my throat, which is exactly the last place a singer wants to feel tense! Close your eyes, and imagine your breath, when you inhale, is circling the tense area, making space around it and softening it.

Do this every day or as often as you need in the lead up to your performance.

6. Write a mantra or reminder

Think ahead so that on the day of the performance, and the minutes leading up to it, you can have a quick sentence or phrase to snap you quickly into the right state of mind. It could be a reminder such as 'You love this! Enjoy it!' or one I love from Research Professor Brené Brown, which is 'people, people, people', a reminder that her audience are only people, just like her, rather than thinking of the audience as a terrifying unknown quantity.

7.

Take it easy

With hours to go before a performance:

If you can, dial back what you do in the hours ahead. If you're a singer, actor or orator and it's an option, try not to use your voice excessively the day of your performance.

8.

Take care of the practical stuff

Make sure you have everything you need packed way ahead of time. Have your clothes ready. Know how you're getting to the venue and how long it'll take. Put an alarm on your phone if you need to, to make sure you're on your way when you need to be.

9.

Warmup

With minutes to go before a performance:

This can be whatever you know works, and should be something you're already really familiar with. For me, it involves (at the very least) stretching, some breathing exercises and lip bubbles or vocal sirens. If I have more time and a green room, the warm-up will be longer and more comprehensive.

10.

Acknowledge your nerves

Despite all the work you've put into conquering your fears, it's really likely you'll still feel nervous. Instead of trying to push, high-kick or otherwise cajole the nerves as far away as possible from you (which never, ever works), accept them. This next part may sound a bit crazy but... thank them! Really! Your negative, pessimistic thoughts right now are actually trying to save you from a sabre tooth tiger! So thank the thoughts, let them know we've actually evolved a lot further than they are aware of, and if you need them, you'll let them know.

11. Mantra

I'll repeat my mantra (which I created a few days ago, see above) to myself to ground myself in the moment and remind myself of what matters.

12. And if all else fails, channel someone brilliant!

Of course, you want to be authentically you. But even the best of the best get inspiration and confidence from others. Ever notice how Beyonce moved a lot like Tina Turner when she first started out as a solo artist? Or how nearly every R 'n' B male artist channels Michael Jackson at some point in their career?

Imagine how your favourite performer would hold themselves, would stride onto the stage, or how they'd engage with the audience. Channel their best bits, and then make them your own.