

Performance Anxiety Protocol

A step-by-step protocol for managing anxiety before exams, presentations, auditions, and competitions — grounded in reappraisal and breathing research.

Evidence-based approach: arousal reappraisal research (Jamieson et al., 2010; Brooks, 2014) and cyclic sighing research (Balban et al., 2023).

Why It Works

Performance anxiety and excitement produce nearly identical physiological signatures — elevated heart rate, cortisol, and a diverted redistribution of blood flow to skeletal muscle. What differs is the label your brain assigns to that arousal. A 2010 study by Jamieson, Mendes, and Nock in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found that participants who were coached to reinterpret pre-test arousal as a performance-enhancing state scored significantly higher on a practice GRE than participants told to calm down.

A follow-up study by Alison Wood Brooks (2014, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*) replicated this with public speaking and singing tasks: telling yourself "I am excited" before a stressful task outperformed both suppression ("I am calm") and no intervention at all. Separately, a 2023 Stanford study by Balban and colleagues in *Cell Reports Medicine* found that five minutes of a specific breathing pattern — the cyclic sigh — reduced physiological arousal and improved mood more than mindfulness meditation of equal length.

Section 1 — The Week Before

1. Rehearse under mild stress

Practice the actual skill (the talk, the routine, the material) at least once under conditions that mimic real pressure — an audience of one, a timer, a recording.

2. Name the physical sensations you expect

Write down exactly what your body does under pressure: racing heart, dry mouth, shaking hands. Naming it in advance reduces its power to surprise you.

3. Pre-load the reappraisal

Decide now that you will label pre-event arousal as "excited," not "anxious." This is a rehearsed decision, not something to figure out in the moment.

4. Sleep and caffeine planning

Avoid new caffeine doses the day of the event — sensitized arousal reads as anxiety more easily. Prioritize sleep the two nights before, not just the one directly prior.

Section 2 — The Day Of

- **Arrive early, not right on time**

Rushing compounds sympathetic activation before you've even started. Build in a 15-20 minute buffer to sit still before the event.

- **Do a 5-minute cyclic sigh session**

Two inhales through the nose (a short second inhale on top of the first) followed by one long exhale through the mouth. Repeat for 5 minutes before you begin.

- **Verbalize the reappraisal out loud**

Say "I am excited" or "my body is getting me ready" — out loud if possible. Brooks' research found the spoken version outperformed silent self-talk.

- **Avoid last-minute cramming**

Reviewing material in the final minutes increases perceived stakes without proportionally improving performance. Stop preparing at a pre-set cutoff.

Section 3 — In the Moment

- **If panic spikes mid-performance**

Take one cyclic sigh (double inhale, long exhale) without stopping what you're doing where possible. This can be done almost imperceptibly.

- **If your mind goes blank**

Pause, breathe out fully once, and restate your last sentence or point. A brief pause reads as composure, not failure, to an audience.

- **After a visible stumble**

Name it briefly if appropriate ("let me try that again") rather than internally spiraling. Continuing to perform while ruminating compounds errors.

Section 4 — The Debrief

Within a few hours of the event, write down three things: what your body actually did (vs. what you predicted), what worked from this protocol, and one adjustment for next time. Remember that anticipation and reality, which is itself part of what reduces anticipatory anxiety, is what your brain updates its prediction instead of defaulting to worst-case forecasting.

Sources

Jamieson, J.P., Mendes, W.B., Nock, M.K. (2010). Turning the knots in your stomach into bows: Reappraising arousal improves performance on the GRE. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Brooks, A.W. (2014). Get excited: Reappraising pre-performance anxiety as excitement. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Balban, M.Y. et al. (2023). Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal. *Cell Reports Medicine*.