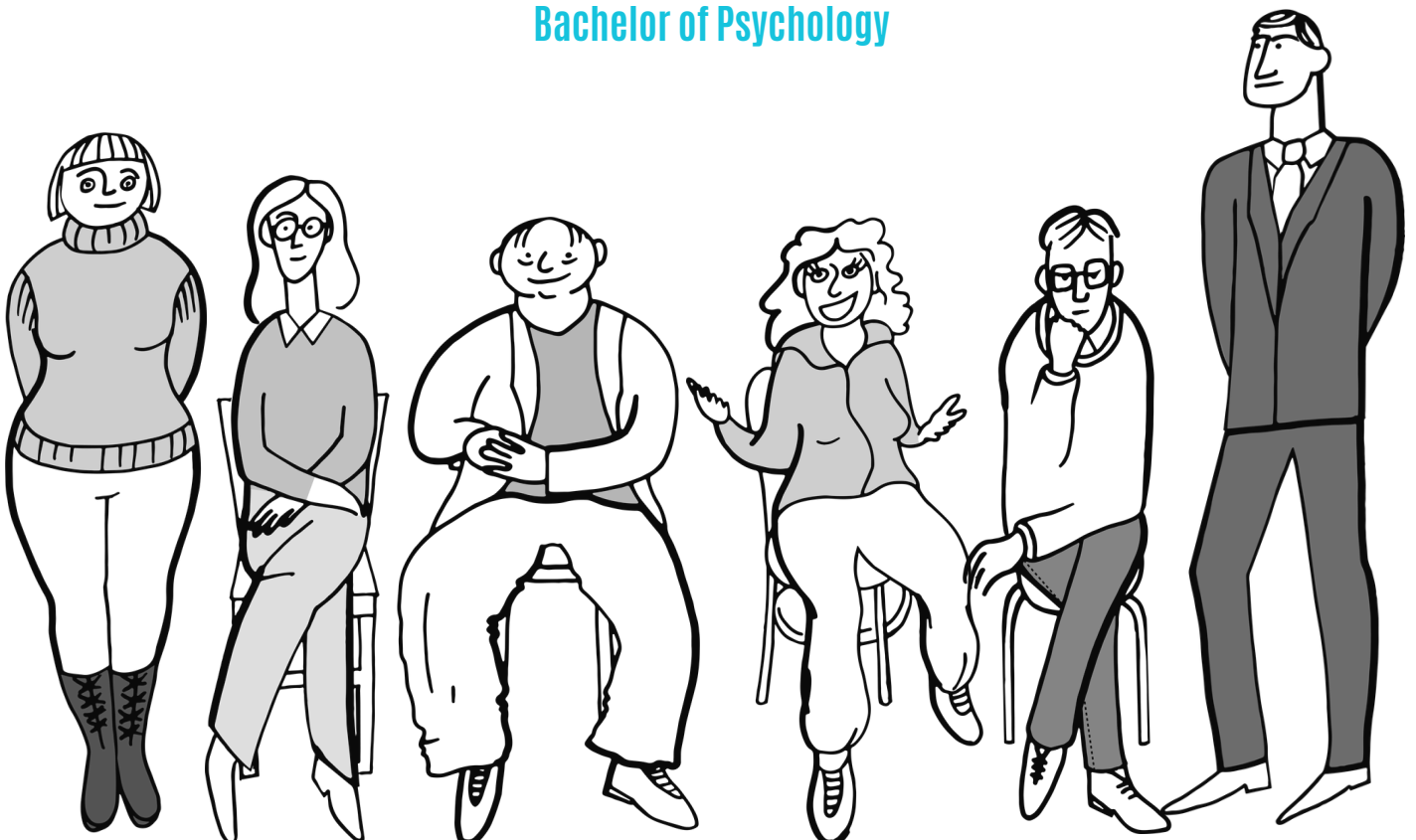




Thinking Your Way to the Stage

The Power of Thinking in Performance Anxiety

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Performance Anxiety and Thinking

Various coachings talk about psychological skills and mental coaching, with which performance can be developed in anything. This is not a lie, but what is really behind all this? Every moment as ourselves is based on our thoughts – I think, therefore I am, as the philosopher Descartes stated. Mindfulness and other conscious presence methods aim at emptying the mind and controlling thoughts, but even then you think about something, such as for example staying in a certain breathing rhythm. Most therapies are based in the end on supporting people to learn to think about things from different perspectives. Performance anxiety can also be influenced by learning thinking.

There are many types of interventions used for performance anxiety. Interventions can be roughly divided into three categories according to the meta-analysis of Allen and partners (1989): systematic desensitization i.e. gradual exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and skill training. More recent research comparing different psychological interventions for fear of public speaking (FoPS) found that all types of interventions reduced social speaking anxiety (Ebrahimi et al., 2019). The study also showed that cognitive and behavioral interventions had an effect even after the intervention (Ebrahimi et al., 2019). Cognitive interventions refer to various exercises and therapeutic approaches aimed at changing patterns of thinking and behavior. It is not, therefore, about one magical method that helps people and makes them perform better. It is about the modification of a person's way of thinking and behavior through the method, i.e., adopting new thinking and action patterns. Thus, I dare to claim that behind all action is the ability to think.

Everyone has their own way of thinking. You have likely developed certain habitual ways of thinking about different topics, and these may vary depending on the context. You think about performing in a certain way and you think about yourself as a performer in a certain way. Your way of thinking may have changed over the years or it may have remained the same for however long. When was the last time you truly re-examined your thoughts about performing? Organizational psychologist Adam Grant wrote the book *Think Again* (2021) about rethinking thinking. The core message of the book is that we rarely become aware of how we think, we rarely revisit thoughts we've already formed, and we rarely recognize what we don't know about our own thinking, because we tend to assume thinking is automatic. The key takeaway is that by examining and learning about our thinking, we can change many things within ourselves and in our surroundings.



Let's examine the subject from the perspective of performance anxiety. Jonkinlaista jännittämistä kokee noin 70% suomalaisista (Martin, 2021). About 70% of Finns experience some kind of nervousness (Martin, 2021). Performance anxiety is one sub-form of nervousness. It is a very normal and universal experience, but its research field is very messy, as nervousness is experienced and verbalized in different ways depending, for example, on culture. Personality studies show that, for example, the trait of neuroticism has been linked to higher anxiety and nervousness (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992). That is, highly neurotic people experience on average more tension and anxiety. Anxiety weakens cognitive processing efficiency more than performance efficiency, but a relative amount of anxiety helps to motivate (Derakshan & Eysenck, 2009). Additionally, within the introversion–extroversion spectrum, one subdimension relates to how people experience nervousness in social situations. Even if your personality and/or temperament make you more prone to nervousness or anxiety, it does not mean that your performance anxiety cannot be eased. Although personality traits are somewhat permanent ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, their levels change throughout life. According to studies, for example, the level of the neuroticism trait decreases with age (Roberts & Walton, 2006).

Performance anxiety may therefore possibly involve something related to a person's somewhat permanent traits, but that does not mean a person cannot learn to manage performance anxiety. You find the best tools for performance anxiety by experimenting, and a good place to start is by examining your own thoughts related to performing. For instance, you might feel nervous about performing because you believe you don't know how to perform; essentially, your thought is: "I don't know how to perform". Now, let's rethink that thought: "How do I know I don't know how to perform?", "Where did the thought that I can't perform come from?", "Is the thought fact or fiction?", "Who defines 'correct' performing?". It is therefore about your mindset toward performing, and by rethinking, you can strive to change your way of thinking about performance. It sounds simple, but why doesn't everyone just do it?

Patterns

Humans have a natural tendency to seek and notice patterns. Patterns help to quickly perceive situations and reach conclusions. Imagine that you step outside and there is moisture in the air, oppressive air pressure, and dark clouds in the sky. You make a quick conclusion with your thinking by chaining 1+1 together and end up with the result: "it will rain soon". A similar pattern-likeness can be in you regarding performing: "Performing makes me nervous because people stare, so I do not like performing." You carry this pattern of thoughts with you year after year and do not deviate to think about the matter again. This is not about low IQ, as according to the study by Lick and partners (2018), the higher the IQ one has, the more easily one trips in thinking into stereotypes, because one is more skilled at perceiving patterns. Patterns, for their



part, are automatic conclusions created by thinking, which do not always base on truths. You must be motivated and sensitive to notice the patterns of your thinking and brave to think about the matter again: Why do I not like performing? Why do I get nervous about performing? Why does people staring feel uncomfortable? Do I know or do I think or is it my opinion that I do not like performing? Questions can be continued forever and the matter thought about from many different perspectives, so that you are able to identify what you really know, what are assumptions, what you do not yet know that you do not know, and what are just your opinions that you hold onto tightly.

Flexibility of Thinking

How can a person then learn to think about performing again? The answer may lie in mental flexibility. The human mind has an incredible ability to adapt in order to survive. We need flexibility of mind — that is, flexibility in thinking — to cope and get through challenges. When faced with change, people are capable of adjusting to the new and managing it. Flexible thinking is about the ability to view things from multiple perspectives, meaning that the first thought you consider true is not the only possible way to see the situation. As you begin to work on your own thinking about performing, remind yourself of this flexibility. The beliefs you hold as “truth” are not the only thoughts your mind can contain — there is room for alternatives. Developing this flexibility requires conscious effort. It involves, for example, rethinking and reflecting on the emotions that performance anxiety brings up, as well as creating new thought patterns and putting new ways of acting into practice based on them.

Self-fulfilling prophecies and cognitive biases

What, then, makes it difficult for us to think flexibly? Humans are prone to thinking errors. Various biases — known as cognitive biases — guide our thinking without us even noticing. These biases are like railway tracks that require conscious effort to step off from. Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that supports one’s existing beliefs, opinions, and ideas (Nickerson, 1998). For example, if you hold a belief shaped by your thinking such as “I’m not good at performing” or “I get nervous about performing,” it is very likely that you use confirmation bias each time you perform. You may interpret even the smallest details in your surroundings, such as a single audience member’s smirk, in a way that reinforces your belief that “I’m not good at performing.” In their study, Hansen and Hansen (1988) found that angry faces were recognized more quickly among happy faces than happy faces among angry ones. Anxiety further slowed down the detection of happy faces: the more anxious the person, the slower they were to notice happy faces. Derakshan and colleagues (2009) found a similar effect when studying eye movements.



So you are not necessarily thinking truths, but rather reinforcing your own views and feelings through a bias which can prevent you from enjoying performing. No one is immune to confirmation bias. For example, the criminal investigation process has been studied, and it has been found that investigators can make erroneous conclusions due to confirmation bias, especially in cases where the investigation proceeds by searching for a suspect based on a specific profile (Lidén, 2023). Thinking in criminal investigations can become narrowed if one only looks for clues and evidence that support pre-existing beliefs. So, when it comes to your own performances, try not to search for “evidence” only through the lens of beliefs you’ve created yourself, instead aim to think flexibly.

Inner speech

An important part of changing your thinking is how you speak to yourself. What does your inner speech tell you, and what kinds of thoughts does it stem from? Through inner speech, you can influence the physical sensations of performance anxiety. Nervousness is essentially about the activation of the nervous system. The reasons why the nervous system becomes activated specifically in performance situations are partly individual. Background factors may include negative experiences, trauma, learned behavioral models, thinking patterns, or cognitive distortions. The way we talk to ourselves can influence whether we feel nervousness or excitement about performing, which in turn can affect performance. In Brooks’ (2014) study, it was found that when participants re-labeled their feelings of nervousness as “I am excited,” instead of trying to say “I am calm,” they felt more excited, spoke for longer, and perceived themselves as more confident, competent, and persistent. In this experimental study, Brooks found that reappraising anxiety as excitement may be more effective than trying to calm oneself down. It is therefore worth paying attention to your inner speech. Speak to yourself kindly, and remember to question your own negative inner dialogue.

Final thoughts

Performance anxiety is very normal, and there is no single correct solution to it. Since human behavior is guided by our capacity to think, one way to begin exploring your performance anxiety is to understand the powerful role of your own thinking. Pause and reflect on your thoughts, and remember to occasionally reconsider your old beliefs, habits, and “truths.” At the end of the document, you will find a cognitive defusion exercise, based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The purpose of the exercise is to create distance from your thoughts and the emotions they evoke, helping you recognize that thoughts and feelings are not always as absolute as they seem. You will also find some reading recommendations and the references for the studies mentioned in the text.

Thinking Your Way to the Stage - Dare to Take the First Step

Exercise

Cognitive Defusion (Distancing from Thoughts):

The purpose of this exercise is to practice distancing—that is, the ability to face different thoughts and emotions without identifying with them (thoughts ≠ feelings).

Choose a thought that bothers you. For example, one that may be holding you back from doing something you would like to do—whether it relates to performing, presenting an idea in a work meeting, or sharing something difficult with a loved one. Anything works!

1

Write the thought in the middle of a piece of paper and read it once.

(e.g., “I am not capable of being an impactful performer.”)

2

Next, add the phrase: “I have a thought that...” in front of it.

Read the sentence again a few times:

“I have a thought that I am not capable of being an impactful performer.”

3

Then add: “I notice that...” to the beginning of the sentence:

“I notice that I have a thought that I am not capable of being an impactful performer.”

4

Now read the sentence out loud and pay attention to how it feels.

Does your original statement still feel as true as before?

In this process, you have created distance from the original thought and reconsidered it. People can narrow their own thinking and create “truths” that are not necessarily accurate. Sometimes, thoughts are just thoughts—and it can be helpful to treat them as such, rather than as absolute truths. Not every thought is as big as the truth.

This exercise is adapted from: “Kolme tapaa havainnoida itseä”, in: Lappalainen, R., Lehtonen, T., Hayes, S. C., Batten, S., Gifford, E., Wilson, K. G., Afari, N. & McCurry, S. M. (2004). Hyväksymis- ja omistautumisterapia käytännön terapiatyössä. (7th ed.). Jyväskylä: Bookwell Oy.



Recommended Reading

- *Irti sosiaalisesta jännittämisestä*. Jan-Henry Stenberg, Eero-Matti Gummerus, Salla Saiho, Satu Pihlaja, Saara Halme, Minna Helkavaara, Grigori Joffe & Matti Holi (2016).
- *Nyt on sinun vuorosi loistaa – Esiintymisen kielen opas*. Niina Sainius & Kikka Pohjaväre (2021).
- *Saa jännittää – Jännittäminen voimavarana*. Minna Martin (2021).
- *Think again – The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. Adam Grant (2021).

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