Conquering Stage Fright

Stage Fright Is Just Biochemistry

By Charlie Lovett

For better or worse, everyone suffers from stage fright at one point or another. Whether you consider the adrenaline rush that accompanies stage fright as good or bad, it can affect your memory, and that is clearly not good when you're onstage! What can you do to combat stage fright? Playwright Charlie Lovett shares a few tips.

Overcoming stage fright can be as easy as snapping your fingers... literally!

Have you ever had that feeling of fear in the pit of your stomach as you’re about to step onto the stage? What if you forget your lines? What if you can’t remember your blocking? What if you MESS UP?! No matter how well you’ve rehearsed, sometimes the stage fright comes just the same. Well, here’s some (sort of) good news. It’s not your fault; it’s just biochemistry.

I was reading in Bob Harris’s book *Prisoner of Trebekistan* (Yes, I’m a huge *Jeopardy!* fan), that what you might call stage fright is a natural biochemical reaction to stress. When our body detects a threat or comes under stress, it pumps us full of adrenaline and all sorts of other chemicals that make us ready to fight, scream or run. At the same time, it shuts down parts of the brain not needed for these reactions, like our memory. That’s why we can forget lines if we’re experiencing stage fright.

What to do? Well, the first thing is to rehearse enough that you eliminate as much of the stress as possible. Harris talks about rearranging his living room to look just like the *Jeopardy!* set and wearing his game day clothes for practice. We do the same thing in the theatre—it’s called a dress rehearsal. If we can convince our brains that a particular situation, such as performing in a play, is not stressful, then our brains will not react with all that nasty chemistry that shuts down our memories. So even if you know your part well, it is important to rehearse a lot and do your best to stay relaxed while you are rehearsing.

Still, once you know there is an audience out there, sometimes the nerves return. What can you do? Harris has a great idea about how to fool your brain. It turns out we can train our brains to use certain stimuli to trigger specific emotions or feelings. The idea of a theatre full of people might stimulate the “nervous” feeling, but we can counteract that with another stimulus and train our brain to respond to that stimulus instead. So how do you do this?

During the course of your rehearsal period, do the following several times. Sit alone in a dark room and relax. Think of a peaceful, serene time in your life, a time completely free of stress. When you feel completely relaxed, it’s time to start training your brain. Pick a physical stimulus (it might be snapping your fingers or tapping your palm with a finger—anything you don’t do on a regular basis) and repeat that stimulus over and over as you remain in your relaxed state. Eventually your brain will learn to associate that stimulus with a state of relaxation. Then, when you feel yourself getting nervous backstage, close your eyes and repeat this stimulus. If you’ve fully trained your brain, you will start to feel the stress disappear, and your memory will stay clear and sharp.
Bob Harris claims this technique is a winner. After all, it helped him win over $150,000 in cash and prizes on *Jeopardy!* Here’s hoping it will help you put on a great show without an ounce of stage fright.