

Manage Situational Anxiety

Brief: One of the simplest ways to counteract situational anxiety is to consciously invoke what is called the relaxation response.

Learning Objective: Understand practical ways to manage situational anxiety.

Key Terms:

- Situational anxiety: A short-term form of anxiety triggered by a specific event, such as public speaking.
- The relaxation response: A term coined in 1975 by Harvard physician and researcher Dr. Herbert Benson to describe how the parasympathetic nervous system counteracts the stress response.

Ways to Manage Situational Anxiety

When someone perceives a danger in their environment, such as an upcoming public speech, they often experience what is known as the “stress response,” which is an activation of their sympathetic nervous system. Their body releases adrenaline into their blood stream causing a chain of reactions to occur. It’s common to experience feelings of anxiety as a by-product of this biochemical cascade.

Stage fright, or performance anxiety, is a type of situational anxiety often experienced in relation to public speaking. When you experience stage fright, you will often have an increase in blood pressure, which supplies your body with more nutrients and oxygen in response to the fight or flight instincts. In addition, your rate of breathing may increase, allowing your body to obtain the amount of oxygen needed to support your muscles and organs during fight or flight.

Interestingly, your pupils will also dilate, making it difficult for you to read any notes that are in close proximity. However, your long range vision will be improved, making you more aware of your audience’s facial expressions and nonverbal cues during your performance.

The Relaxation Response

One of the simplest ways to counteract the stress response is to consciously invoke what is called the relaxation response. The term was first coined in 1975 by Harvard physician and researcher Dr. Herbert Benson. Dr. Benson describes a series of physical responses you can use to calm the body down as the fear response ratchets the body up. The goal is to activate your parasympathetic nervous system, which will cause you to relax.

The key to activating the relaxation response involves the following:

1. Assume a comfortable seated posture, preferable in a quiet space.
2. Choose a meaningful word or phrase that you will say to yourself internally and repeat for a period of time (3 to 20 minutes—you may want to set a timer).
3. If you find that you get distracted by other thoughts, disregard them and return your attention to the word or phrase you chose.
4. If you find you drift off to sleep, that's okay. You need the rest!
5. When you become aware that you've drifted away, simply return to your word or phrase.
6. That's it! It's a simple process, but it has been proven to be extremely effective.

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is another way to activate the relaxation response. A simple way to achieve this is to find a quiet place, close your eyes, and focus on your breath. Breathe in slowly and deeply for four heartbeats. Hold your breath for a heartbeat or two and then slowly exhale for four heartbeats. Continue for twenty breaths, or until you feel yourself begin to calm down.

Practice, Practice, Practice

One of the biggest concerns people have about speaking publicly is how they'll sound to others. The easiest way to overcome this concern is to practice your speech early and often. The more comfortable you become with the wording, the less you have to worry about in terms of delivery. Practice in front of a mirror or, better yet, record yourself.

Warming Up Before You Present

An effective way to shake off the pre-speech jitters is to fight fire with fire. You may already be feeling an increased heart rate and shortness of breath. Even brief physical activity can help you channel that nervous energy into a knockout performance for your speech. Get your endorphins firing by quickly jogging in place or bouncing on your toes or the balls of your feet.

You will also want to make sure your muscles are loose and limber, particularly those of your face and mouth. Try reciting some tongue twisters to loosen up your tongue and test your articulation. Gently massage your cheeks and jaw to relax your facial muscles.

From Concept to Action

Have you ever tried to relax by breathing deeply? At one time or another, most of us have—even if we weren't aware that we were practicing a technique to activate the relaxation response. Take a few moments (it really only takes a few moments) to practice deep breathing. Reread the instructions above and then close your eyes and focus on your breath. When you

open your eyes, notice how your body feels. Are you more relaxed? How has your breathing, your muscle tension, and your vision changed?

OER TEXT SOURCES:

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