RELAX AT INTERVIEWS

You wake up and a chill runs through your belly and up your spine …

“Oh no. Today I have that interview. I can’t believe it’s today already. I have a bad feeling about today…Something’s not right. I didn’t get enough sleep and I feel like crap. And wouldn’t you know I’ve got that big pimple on my neck. I’m bad at interviews anyway. What if they ask me something and I just have a mental block? What if my voice starts cracking up? I’ll look like such an idiot. I’m going to stuff it, I know. It’s all such a game...What am I supposed to be proving? What’s the point in even turning up? Maybe I’ll get another job. I can always say I’m sick. Nah, they’ll know straight away… Might as well get up and face the music.”

Anxiety before an important event is a normal and common experience. That’s one reason already to be a bit kinder to yourself and when you feel those familiar symptoms:

- butterflies in the stomach
- hot flushes or chills
- restlessness
- cold clammy hands
- trembling or shaking
- fear and apprehension
- feeling sick or nauseous
- dry mouth, rapid heart rate
- breathing more quickly
- mind becomes alert

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Most of the sensations of anxiety listed above result from physiological changes in the body that help with running away or fighting off a predator. It’s called the body’s “fight-or-flight” response, an ancient, built-in mechanism to prepare the body to respond quickly to a perceived threat, like a giant mammoth bearing down on you. The heart rate increases to pump more blood which is redirected to the muscles in the arms and legs, the breathing rate increases to oxygenate the rising blood flow, sweat is produced to cool the body during it’s exertions, blood clotting increases to deal with possible injury, and so on.

These changes are useful when there is a physical threat to deal with it. However, although most threatening situations in modern life do not call for such a physical response, the ‘fight-or-flight’ response kicks in anyway. It’s just the way we’re made.

The ‘fight-or-flight’ response is meant to be a short-term solution to immediate danger. It is of no use to maintain such a state over long periods of time. In fact, it can become harmful to the body’s immune system over a long period.

Moderate amounts of anxiety can actually enhance performance. If you were completely relaxed, you may not give your best. Therefore, moderate amounts of anxiety should be welcomed, and you can use your “pumped-up” condition to give you extra presence in the interview.

Unfortunately, past performance experiences that did not go well for us can mean we interpret even moderate amounts of anxiety as a sign of trouble, that something is “wrong” and that the next performance will also go badly. A vicious spiral can start which can lead to increasing anxiousness and pessimism. It is always preferable to try to catch that cycle early before it gets out of hand.

Here are some strategies to help you manage and make use of anxiety before, during and after the interview. Later we will look at some control strategies for the longer term. Besides your career plans, what other goals do you have? Reflect on your life goals as well. For example: Raising a family in a healthy environment; Buying your dream home; Achieving recognition through creative efforts; Creating an estate; Travelling the world etc. This will help you to understand where work ‘sits’ within your life.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Prepare – Make sure you do your homework before the interview. See if you can find out who might be on the panel. Think about what they might ask. Reduce the unknowns as far as possible, so that you can answer “What if…?” thinking with “I’ve thought of that…”
Make use of the anxiety – This means accepting that mild to moderate amounts of anxiety are a normal and helpful part of the process of facing challenges. This means not letting yourself be too “afraid of the fear”, but rather riding it out and using it to generate energy and presence.

Challenge negative thinking – “Worry thinking” has been shown to be a significant component of anxiety. Unhelpful thinking includes such things as exaggerating, discounting positives, over-generalising, all-or-nothing thinking, “shoulds” and “musts”. These thoughts often seem “automatic”, and are seductive. Be aware of and critical of your automatic thoughts and don’t be fooled by them. Actively dispute them with a more realistic balanced appraisal of the situation, taking into account your strengths and prior preparation. Don’t allow them to run rampant.

**QUICK RELAXATION TECHNIQUES**

**Natural Breathing**

Observe your breathing, there is no need to control it – your body knows very well how to breathe. Notice the outward breath, and the natural shoulder drop as you breathe out, and the downward movement of your rib cage, the slightly increased feeling of heaviness at the end of the outward breath. As you follow the outward breath, observing not controlling, your natural breathing rhythm will re-establish. Observe five or six outward breaths whenever you feel the need. You can do this with your eyes open and looking quite normal. Practice on your own first. (Bretag 2008, Personal Communication)

**The Relaxer**

First think about your jaw and allow it to hang loosely with a warm cushion of air separating your back teeth – upper jaw from lower.

Then think about your shoulders and allow them to drop back down to their normal position as you breathe out. Think about your hands and allow them to hang loosely at the end of your arms. Then think about your belly and allow it to relax and hang out as you take three or four easy breaths. So it’s jaw, shoulders, hands, belly, breathe. (Boord 2007, Personal Communication)

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

In this technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation, and you become more aware of physical sensations. You may choose to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat. (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research MFMER 1998 – 2008)

**Medication**

Alcohol, cannabis, benzodiazepines and beta-blockers are substances used by some to cope with performance anxiety. Alcohol, cannabis and “benzos” (e.g. Valium) have a sedating effect that can impair performance. Beta-blockers are known to reduce physiological anxiety symptoms but “the evidence for the efficacy of beta-blockers in treating the cognitive and psychological symptoms of performance anxiety is lacking” (Ipser, Kariuki and Stein 2008). You should see your doctor if you are considering the use of such medications.

**DURING THE INTERVIEW**

The panel wants you to succeed – in almost every case the interview panel want to help you bring out your best. Having interviewed others, they are sympathetic to signs of nerves and will usually overlook things such as a cracking voice or a little sweat or tremor. Remember that most anxiety is felt rather than seen. We generally feel worse than we actually appear to others.

Look at the panel – eye contact not only creates a good impression on the listener but will help you focus on what you are saying, (particularly if the listener is reacting with nods and smiles etc).

Take your time – if you’re feeling anxious or rushed, try to slow down, listen to what you have been asked, take a pause to consider your response. A thoughtful pause can help you frame your response and can demonstrate your maturity to the panel.

**AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

Keep a balanced view of your performance – be a constructive and helpful evaluator of your efforts. Make an effort to notice and congratulate yourself on the things you think you did well, not just what you didn’t like about the process; e.g. “I did well to hang in there even though I felt very nervous.”

Try to be specific in your evaluation – not “that was terrible!”, but “I didn’t answer the questions from X very clearly.” Specific criticism will help you improve your performance next time.
Pamper yourself – no matter how things went, you deserve a reward for your efforts. Take a warm bath, ring a friend, or buy yourself a small luxury. Bring yourself down gently from the adrenalin rush with some light exercise.

LONGER-TERM STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CALMNESS UNDER PRESSURE

A proven method for overcoming anxieties about performance is repeated exposure. In simple terms, the more you do it, the less scary it becomes. Take any opportunities that arise in your daily life to present your ideas to people, give talks or presentations, speak up, tell stories at parties or ask questions in class.

Try to stay with the feared activity until the anxiety diminishes. The most common mistake people make is leaving the situation when they feel that the fear is about to become overwhelming. This will only strengthen the fear response. Cultivate a nurturing attitude towards yourself by eating well, looking after your health, taking time to chill out, being with friends and doing things you enjoy.

Normalise stress as a valuable asset in good performance. If you are too relaxed you will not function at your peak. If you experience no anxiety at all, you have better check whether you have a heart beat!

Regularly practice some form of calming, relaxing activity such as meditation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, self-massage and so on.

Be mindful of your tension levels throughout the day. Several times a day bring awareness into your body and see how it feels. Ask yourself: “Are my neck and shoulders tight? Is my belly agitated? How fast am I breathing?” Take a couple of slow breaths and let yourself relax that part of your body as much as you are able.

Become more aware of the “critical voice” in your head: Often we don’t notice how much negative talk goes on in our heads, much of which is distorted and irrational. If you catch yourself thinking something distorted and negative about yourself (e.g. “You’re such a wimp”, challenge it rather than just believe it (e.g. “I would have liked to have confronted him about that. Next time I could say…”).

Remember to consult you doctor or counsellor if you feel worried by your level of stress or anxiety, and they can give you more specific advice.

COMMENTS FROM FLINDERS GRADUATES

“The Mock Interview Evening: You can receive feedback about your interview performance from industry professionals, which I found invaluable, and you’ll get a lot of interview tips as well. Having attended this event made me more confident when I had my real interview.” Chris, Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science (Honours), Environmental Scientist, Australian Water Environments.

“Thankfully, during the interview they only asked questions relating to the key selection criteria on the initial application. They also allowed us to give the same answers that we had given previously. For the most part it was relatively informal and nowhere near as daunting as I expected. … If you do make it to an assessment centre, stay relaxed and do not stress if one of the tasks doesn’t go so well. I definitely stuffed up one of the written tasks, but managed to well in the other tasks and was still successful in getting the job.” Josh, Bachelor of Science in Marine Biology (Honours), Graduate Development Program, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

“I even practised shaking hands, and learnt meditation to practice calming down and slowing down my breathing.” Julie, Bachelor of Commerce, Graduate, PricewaterhouseCoopers.

COUNSELLING SERVICE

You can use the free, confidential Counselling Service at Flinders University. Phone 8201 2118 or call in to make an appointment at The Student Centre, Level 3.

• www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/healthandcounselling/

Best Wishes for your interview! Lesley Bretag, Counsellor, Health, Counselling and Disability Services, Flinders University.

SOURCES

Most of the ideas in this pamphlet are freely available. Specific acknowledgement is given to:


Mayo Clinic Medical Education and Research
www.mayoclinic.com/print/relaxation-technique