

UNNERVED

THE PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO
MANAGING ANXIETY

MELISSA M. PLAMANN

Workbook





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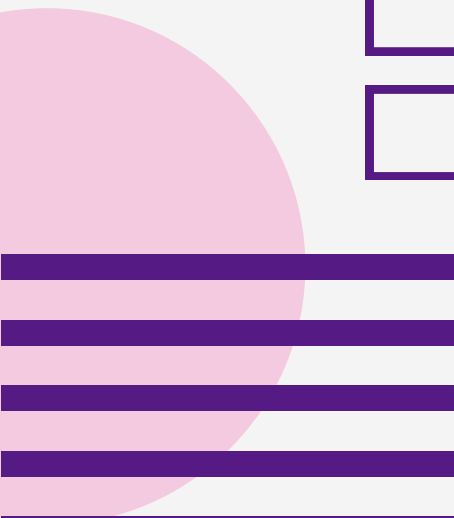
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WELCOME!

I'm so glad you're here! As a lifelong sufferer of performance anxiety, I finally decided to write *Unnerved: The Performer's Guide to Managing Anxiety* when in a single week, I learned that performance anxiety had derailed five separate performances of people about whom I care deeply. Wildly, these five people represented five entirely different generations, spanning from my 7-year-old child to my 77-year-old mentor.

In all of these scenarios, I wanted to offer more than empathy and an understanding pat on the back. I wished that I knew more about performance anxiety and could give them a book that outlined why and how anxiety attacks, what the root causes are, and how all of us could better manage the nerves in ways that would work for each of our unique personalities. I had not yet found that book, so I decided to write it myself.

This workbook is designed to accompany *Unnerved* and provide a better understanding of what makes YOU tick as a performer. If you do not yet have a copy, you can purchase through the publisher at [bloomsbury.com](https://www.bloomsbury.com). I recommend printing out this workbook and setting aside a new journal to use for the Questions for Reflection found at the end of each chapter in *Unnerved*. Use these resources to outline your own experience with anxiety, identify your unique triggers, and establish a plan for mitigating and interrupting anxiety in the future.



MELISSA M. PLAMANN



INITIAL ASSESSMENT

1

What has your experience been with performance anxiety throughout your life?

2

Create a timeline of the highs and lows of anxiety during your performing career.

3

What coping mechanisms do you employ when anxiety takes hold?

4

What do you hope to get out of this study of your own performance anxiety?



UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Performance anxiety unequivocally harms emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Data shows that 60–95% of performers experience performance anxiety to some extent; 70% of professional musicians suffer from performance anxiety severe enough to impact their performance. Many studies confirm that performance anxiety begins in adolescence and persists, for most, throughout their lives. It is markedly worse among student groups, and it acutely affects professional performers under the age of 45.

SYMPTOMS

The following are the most commonly reported symptoms of performance anxiety. Check any that you have experienced.

- ☐ rapid heartbeat
- ☐ sweating/trembling hands
- ☐ muscle tension
- ☐ shortness of breath
- ☐ nausea
- ☐ dizziness
- ☐ avoiding performances
- ☐ backing out of performing commitments

ANATOMY OF ANXIETY



Performance anxiety results from an involuntary engagement of the sympathetic nervous system, though a systematic process:

- The body continuously takes in information from the five senses. This information is then processed through the various parts of the brain.
- The brain constantly scans the environment for danger. At some point, usually right before a performance or at a critical moment during performance, it intuitively perceives a threat.
- The amygdala, sensing the threat, signals the adrenal glands to release adrenaline, fueling the fight–flight–freeze response.
- Involuntary processes respond to the threat, increasing heart rate, slowing digestion, redistributing blood flow, increasing respiration, etc.
- The brain then stores the memory of the threat and response, so even once the adrenaline burns off and the anxiety fades, there is now another stored memory cataloging this particular threat.

WHAT ARE YOUR STORED MEMORIES OF PERFORMANCE ANXIETY?

MEDICATION & THERAPY

Chapter 2 of *Unnerved* is devoted to treatment options, including medication (beta blockers) and several forms of therapy. Complete the following after you have read this chapter.

Multiple studies prove that combining medication and therapy is the preferred and most effective approach for combatting performance anxiety long-term.

Below is a list of the most common things performers try to mitigate anxiety. Check any that you have tried.

Circle those that were effective for you.

- ☐ beta blockers
- ☐ therapy
- ☐ yoga
- ☐ meditation
- ☐ hypnosis
- ☐ massage
- ☐ rest
- ☐ other:

Make a list of things you could work on with a therapist. This could include past traumas, relationships, performance anxiety, body image, etc.





EXPLORING ANXIETY

1 How do you experience anxiety? Does it manifest in racing thoughts, increased heartbeat, or flashbacks to past traumatic experiences?

Create a timeline for your own performance anxiety. What do you notice first, and when? What happens next, and so forth? How long is the entire process of performance anxiety before your adrenaline “burns out”?

2

3 Ask at least five performers how they manage their anxiety. Inquire whether they are comfortable discussing medications, mindfulness practices, therapy, etc.





THE ENNEAGRAM & ANXIETY

Chapter 3 delves into The Enneagram of Personality, which has been around for a long time, with parts of it harkening back to the ancient world. Through continuous refinement, it eventually took shape as we now recognize it around the 1950s. The enneagram maps nine different personality types, sometimes called “enneatypes,” and defines the basic characteristics, thought processes, fears, virtues, and traps of each type.

What does the Enneagram have to do with performance anxiety?

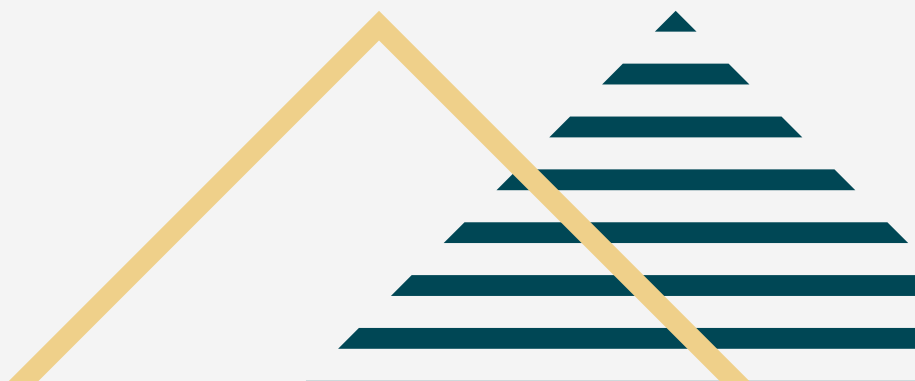
The Enneagram divides the nine types into three triads. Each triad tends most easily toward a driving emotion:

SHAME, FEAR, OR ANGER.

I belong to the **Shame** Triad, so for me performance anxiety has always been about embarrassment, unworthiness, and the flashes of Imposter Syndrome that appear when I step onstage.

But I have students who experience full-body panic—the traditional “stage fright”—and feel paralyzed by true **fear** when they perform.

I have also had a handful of students who present as controlled and cool-headed, but whose jaws and chests tighten with **anger** as they fly into an internal rage—either at themselves, others, or external circumstances—when things go wrong in performance.





EMOTIONAL DRIVERS

In order to determine your root emotional driver, you'll need to first discover your enneagram type.

Take the free online test here:

enneagramuniverse.com

In the space below, jot down some of the key features of your enneagram type that feel true to your personality.

Circle your Enneagram type below:

THE REFORMER

THE HELPER

THE ACHIEVER

THE INDIVIDUALIST

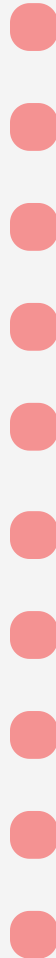
THE INVESTIGATOR

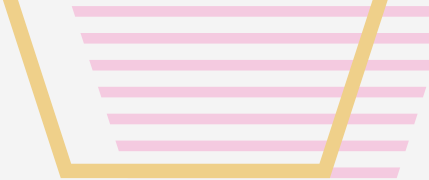
THE LOYALIST

THE ENTHUSIAST

THE CHALLENGER

THE PEACEMAKER





Each triad is predisposed to an emotional reflex—a feeling to which they most reliably turn. Those in the Feeling Triad tend toward **shame**; the Thinking Triad most readily feels **fear**, and the Doing Triad is quick to experience **anger**.

Feeling Triad – Helpers, Achievers, and Individualists

Thinking Triad – Investigators, Loyalists, and Enthusiasts

Doing Triad – Reformers, Challengers, and Peacemakers

MY ROOT EMOTIONAL DRIVER IS: _____

In the space below, reflect on how your root emotional driver impacts your experience of performance anxiety.

FEAR

SHAME

Anger

SHAME

Chapter 4 of *Unnerved* tackles shame. Complete the following after you have studied this chapter.

HERE ARE SOME KEY TASKS FOR MEMBERS OF THE SHAME TRIAD:

- Identify and trust the data (past successes and failures)
- Work to apply criticism to performance rather than personhood
- Uncover, tell, and believe the truth
- Identify shame and anxiety when they occur, ascertaining their true cause

1

How does shame feel in your body? When do you experience it?

Make a list of times when you have felt shame. Was it accompanied by anxiety?

2

MANAGING SHAME

Performers must **trust past experiences**, utilizing previous success as factual data that implies future success. Those living in the Feeling Triad have a very hard time believing that success is not simply a fluke or result of their cunning or trickery. To counter this, they must do the hard work of proving themselves wrong: they must document the actual evidence, proving to themselves that their successes are valid and honestly achieved.

Feeling Triad types must also remember that **criticism does not equate to failure**. When receiving criticism, Helpers, Achievers, and Individualists tend to accept those critiques as judgment on their character, rather than commentary on their performance.

**Create a list of your past performance successes.
Refer to this list as evidence that predicts future success.**



FEAR

Chapter 5 of *Unnerved* addresses fear as a driver of performance anxiety. Complete the following after reading this chapter.

HERE ARE SOME KEY TASKS FOR MEMBERS OF THE FEAR TRIAD:

- ☐ Identify fears and traumas, extinguish them through narrative retelling, and assign them novel positive responses (this method is covered in *Unnerved*, chapter 5).
- ☐ Engage in conscious risk-taking and combat procrastination.
- ☐ Determine when fear is limiting, particularly when it causes paralysis or procrastination.

1

How does fear feel in your body? When do you experience it?

Make a list of times when you have felt fear. Was it accompanied by anxiety?

2

COMBATING FEAR

Fear often appears when performers perceive a lack of autonomy. In *Fight Your Fear and Win*, Don Greene reminds that every performance is a risk, and he proposes **cultivating courage as the antidote to fear**.

Identifying situations to exercise courage is important, and it is necessary to experiment with various levels of risk. The **systematic logging of fears and courageous actions** can provide a data set that helps develop courage and confidence in one's ability to overcome fearful situations.

Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman suggests that it is necessary to identify interoceptive versus exteroceptive fear signals and whether they appear in an appropriate ratio for a given fear-triggering situation. By this, he means questioning whether internal fear signals (what manifests during performance as stage fright) and external signals (audience response, performance stakes, potential consequences) are appropriately aligned.

Create a log with a quantifiable score for the strength of interoceptive and exteroceptive fear signals, in which 1 indicates a very mild fear response and 10 indicates an incredibly strong fear response.

Copy this log into a journal to track performance fears and courageous action.

Fear Trigger	Internal Fear Signals	External Fear Signals	Action/Result	Duration of Fear Signals	Overall: Positive or Negative?
Performing a solo in studio class	4 - nervous, intrusive thoughts	2 - Everyone is friendly: low risk.	Played well, despite being scared.	Started 15 minutes before class, disappeared after playing.	Positive

Anger

**Anger is addressed in chapter 6 of *Unnerved*.
Complete the following after studying this chapter.**

Anger is perhaps the most complex feeling we have examined. Even emotion researchers disagree about the nature of anger and whether it is a primary or secondary emotion (an emotion fueled by or in response to another emotion). At its most fundamental level, anger is a response to a threat, which causes animals (humans included) to respond in a self-protective way.

Anger is an incredibly powerful and potentially dangerous emotion; a host of physical symptoms and diseases accompany anger, and suppressing anger eventually leads to physiological and psychological stress

1

How does anger feel in your body? When do you experience it?

Make a list of times when you have felt anger. Was it accompanied by anxiety?

2

DEFUSING ANGER

Perhaps you are familiar with the work of Gary Chapman, author of the popular *The Five Love Languages*. In a subsequent publication on anger, Chapman defines that anger is fueled by negative emotions and is the antithesis of love. The checklists below are derived from Chapman's research on anger.

WHEN ANGER APPEARS IN PERFORMANCE

- ☐ Identify and name anger: "I am angry."
- ☐ Ask whether this response is positive (triggering effective change) and/or loving (valid and just).
- ☐ If it is neither, let it go in the moment and deal with it later.

WHEN ANGER REQUIRES FURTHER ACTION

Anger is an incredibly powerful emotion. It is energy that can be harnessed to create meaningful change and actually improve performance.

- Examine the anger with curiosity. Note that anger may stem from current or past occurrences and may be directed internally at oneself, or externally toward others.
- List all possible responses and solutions, and enact the solution that will best serve all involved.
- Seek reconciliation and forgiveness, both from self and others. Work to finally release anger.

The Ultimate Goal:

Transmute anger from *destructive* to *productive*.



CULTURAL BAGGAGE

▼ **Performance anxiety is our affliction to deal with.** It's not fair, but since we know it is our thing, it is ultimately our responsibility—to ourselves, our families, our colleagues, our audiences—to figure out how best to manage it. And, unfortunately, it will always be part of us; performance anxiety is a chronic condition that we must continually monitor and treat. Additionally, there are undoubtedly some external pressures—cultural baggage, if you will—that put additional pressure on some groups and personality types.

Consult Chapter 9 for more detailed information on this topic.

CONSIDER HOW EACH OF THE FOLLOWING MAY IMPACT YOU

1

PERFECTIONISM - Perfectionism is a trait of some specific personality types, but it is also a defining characteristic of the performing profession at large. We must recognize that perfection is an illusion and determine what is truly “good enough” for particular life stages, settings, roles, etc.

2

EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS - Performance anxiety disproportionately affects students, and 20% of those who abandon music do so due to anxiety. Educators must be keenly aware of this statistic and foster healthy relationships with performance among student populations.

3

HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIPS - Hierarchies like student-teacher or conductor-instrumentalist relationships are inherently precarious and can breed performance anxiety, as performers strive to impress and please those in positions of power. Additionally, these relationships can foment anxiety exponentially if they turn toxic.



4

THE PANDEMIC - The pandemic itself was incredibly stressful, but those stressors did not disappear even as the threats and lockdowns eased. The World Health Organization reports that anxiety has increased 25% worldwide in its aftermath. For performers, the advent of livestream technology further increased anxiety.

5

GENDER - Gender is tricky. I am uncomfortable using female/male terminology, and yet there are several important studies showing that females are more susceptible to performance anxiety than their male counterparts.

6

HORMONAL SHIFTS - For performers with ovaries (51%+ of the performing population), hormonal shifts accompanying regular menstrual cycles can increase anxiety. Menopause and the preceding perimenopausal years wreak further havoc on anxiety and mental health; suicide in women is most prevalent within these later age groups.

7

OTHER FACTORS - Performers may face any number of additional factors contributing to anxiety: cultural expectations, financial situations, religious upbringing, etc. etc. etc.

**MAKE A LIST OF ALL THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS FOR YOUR PERFORMANCE ANXIETY.
WHAT IS THE CULTURAL BAGGAGE YOU CARRY?**





1

Do you struggle with perfectionism? What percentage would actually be good enough? Does this vary for recordings, live performances, lessons, etc.?

2

If you are a mentor to other performers (or may be in the future), how can you be mindful of their unique cultural baggage?

3

Speak with some close friends about the factors contributing to their performance anxiety. What are the common issues you all face? What is different?

4

How might you begin to lessen your personal load of cultural baggage? Do you require outside help or support?



ASSEMBLING THE TOOLKIT

PERFORMANCE PREPARATION

Unnerved includes multiple strategies for effective performance preparation, including techniques to interrupt anxiety when it appears during performance.

Please refer to Chapter 10 for more detailed information about each of the following tips.



MENTAL PRACTICE - Use when physical practice is unavailable or unadvisable. Break larger tasks up into very small chunks (15 seconds is ideal). Mental practice is especially valuable as it adds errorless repetitions.



VISUALIZATION - In real time, visualize yourself in performance. What do you see, smell, hear, feel? Visualize every detail, including dress, lighting, staging, applause, etc.



REFRAMING - Reframe a past traumatic event or fear-inducing moment. Recognize the challenges surrounding the event and try to appreciate the good elements that you could not notice at the time.



LOGGING MISTAKES - Determining *why* we make mistakes is integral in the practice process. Create a mistake log to note specific mistakes during rehearsal, and determine their root causes. These may be physical miscalculations, mental slips, or something specific to your performance mode. Collecting an Error Log can assure performers that they have actively resolved errors that may arise during performance.

INTERRUPTERS

Even with the best preparation, performance anxiety still creeps in. Sometimes, we can anticipate its approach; other times, it swoops in deftly when we least expect it. The good news is that performers can utilize tools like the physiological sigh to mitigate anxiety in real time when it occurs; I call these “interrupters.” Performance anxiety exists in a loop, a vicious cycle in which thoughts fuel anxiety, which in turn activates more negative thoughts. During performance, it is crucial to have interrupters on hand to arrest the snowballing of anxiety.

Interrupters can be grounding techniques, such as identifying something you can hear, see, smell, taste, or touch. You might scan the audience for a particular color or tap your finger against the back of your leg.

Certain techniques like humming and the physiological sigh have been proven to decrease stress and interrupt the anxiety loop.

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGH:

An intentional breathing pattern of two quick inhales followed by one long exhale.

The physiological sigh is a real-time tool that immediately calms the nervous system and slows heart rate. Based on the movement of the diaphragm, the heart either expands or contracts, forcing more or less blood to pump through it. This in turn determines whether the heart rate will slow down or speed up. Exhale-focused breathing causes the heart to slow down, thereby calming the nervous system.

WHAT ARE SOME INTERRUPTERS YOU COULD TRY?

Final Thoughts



Performance anxiety is at best a frustrating annoyance, and at worst a debilitating, life-threatening ailment. Certain performers are predisposed to higher levels of performance anxiety, due both to nature and nurture. But, while our first response may reflexively be shame, fear, or anger, we possess the power to truly control our second response. *Unnerved* is designed to cultivate healthier, more courageous second responses.

Even when we are fully prepared and mentally fortified, live performance is still live performance—**anything** can happen. In the end, performing takes resilience, nerve, and grit. We keep performing for a reason, though that reason differs for all of us. Many times, we succeed wildly; sometimes, we do not.

Sometimes we refer to particularly harrowing or stressful events as “unnerving.” Merriam-Webster defines that to “unnerve” is “to deprive of courage, strength, or steadiness.” That is what performance anxiety does—it robs us of the courage, strength, and steadiness that we painstakingly cultivate through endless hours of practice, rehearsal, and preparation. Only by more fully understanding yourself and exactly what drives your performance anxiety can you reclaim that nerve—through honesty, courage, determination, and transformative, intentional work. Performance anxiety will ebb and flow throughout a lifetime of performance, but one thing will remain certain: your potential is limitless.

Final Reflection



WHAT INSIGHTS
HAVE YOU GAINED ABOUT YOUR
UNIQUE EXPERIENCE WITH
PERFORMANCE ANXIETY?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melissa Plamann

Dr. Melissa M. Plamann is an avid performer, seasoned professor of music, and lifelong sufferer of performance anxiety. Through nearly two decades of coaching collegiate musicians, she has developed a system to help performers identify the root emotional driver of their anxiety and learn to manage it effectively.

Dr. Plamann is Wanda L. Bass Chair of Organ, Professor of Music, and Coordinator of Graduate Studies at Oklahoma City University. She and her husband Ryan have two delightful children, Charlie (11) and Maddie (8). They reside in Nichols Hills with their playful goldendoodle Arthur.

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