



# Enhancing Performance by Integrating Mental Skills and a Pre-Performance Routine

## Why is it important to prepare mentally for performances, and why should performing artists have a pre-performance routine that includes mental skills?

Becoming an elite performer doesn't happen overnight. It takes knowledge, skill building, and practice.



A pre-performance routine is typically a set of cognitive and behavioral elements a performer systematically engages in before each performance (Lubert et al., 2023). It enhances concentration by directing attention to task-specific cues and minimizes internal and external distractions (Lubert et al., 2023). Performance preparation that includes mental training has been shown to help manage performance anxiety and support optimal performance. The use of mental skills such as visualization, imagery, breathwork, and cognitive self-talk can help performers focus their energy, calm anxiety, cope with the stressors and demands of performance, and increase confidence, thereby improving their overall performance. It is important to remember that a pre-performance routine should be individualized for each performing artist based on their performance needs, their comfort level with, and overall understanding of the skills.



Preparing mentally for an audition, an individual performance, or a full competition season is just as important as preparing physically.

According to a 2023 study by Gómez-López and Sánchez-Cabrero, 95% of performers have experienced some form of stage anxiety over the course of their career (shown in the chart below). Research supports the belief that this percentage can decrease if performing artists are given the knowledge and tools to create a pre-performance routine using mental skills that work best for them and their type of performance. Thus, not only enhancing their future performances, but also improving their overall psychological, emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

**Research has found:**


Using a combination of psychological skills training (PST) techniques, such as goal setting, imagery, relaxation, and self-talk, has shown both performance improvement and a reduction in performance anxiety in musicians (Henshaw & Collyer, 2022). Furthermore, “Interventions that exclusively used either motivational self-talk or imagery as an approach consistently revealed the best results” (Niering et al., 2023, p. 19). By learning and practicing mental skills, including imagery and breathing techniques leading up to an audition, university music students were better able to cope with music performance anxiety, improve the quality of their musical performance, and increase their confidence and focus during performance (Spahn et al., 2015). Researchers have found that by learning and incorporating the skills of cognitive restructuring, relaxation, goal-setting, imagery, and visualization techniques, performers had a significant reduction in self-rated music performance anxiety and an increase in performance quality over the course of the study, with continued use of the mental skills techniques (Braden et al., 2015).


Another study found that learning imagery exercises that incorporated elements such as the emotions felt before and during performance, as well as the tactile sensations experienced when playing an instrument as part of mental rehearsal, led to an increase in self-awareness and self-confidence in performers (Clark & Williamson, 2011). Strycharczyk et al. (2021) write that for visualization techniques to be effective, they should be grounded in real life with a focus on positive feelings and thoughts towards one's performance.

**What might incorporating mental skills into my daily routine look like?**

Incorporating mental skills into your daily or pre-performance routine will look different for each performer and can vary depending on the type of performance they'll be executing. An example for a dancer may look like the following:

- When at the studio, the dancer can mentally prepare for their class or rehearsal by using positive self-talk to encourage and boost their confidence. They can also practice a breathing sequence, such as inhaling and exhaling with a three, four, or five count cadence for six rounds.
- During class, the dancer can reinforce information or corrections from their instructor by mentally rehearsing the skill or sequence. If they notice negative thoughts coming up, they can try to reframe and refocus those statements into positive ones. Additionally, taking a few deep breaths can help if the dancer notices their stress or anxiety spiking.
- After class, the dancer can mentally review their class or rehearsal and practice any skills, sequences, or full routines as they ride home, shower, or get ready for bed. They can also practice diaphragmatic breathing to help them relax and decompress from rehearsal and their day.






## Mental Skills Exercises to Try Out & Integrate into Your Pre-Performance Routine:

### 3-Part Breath for stress reduction & breath control

**Part 1**  
Inhale slowly through the nose expanding the belly, rib cage & upper chest

**Part 2**  
Exhale slowly through the mouth completely squeezing all the air out of the upper chest, rib cage & belly

**Part 3**  
Repeat the inhale and exhale as many times as you need

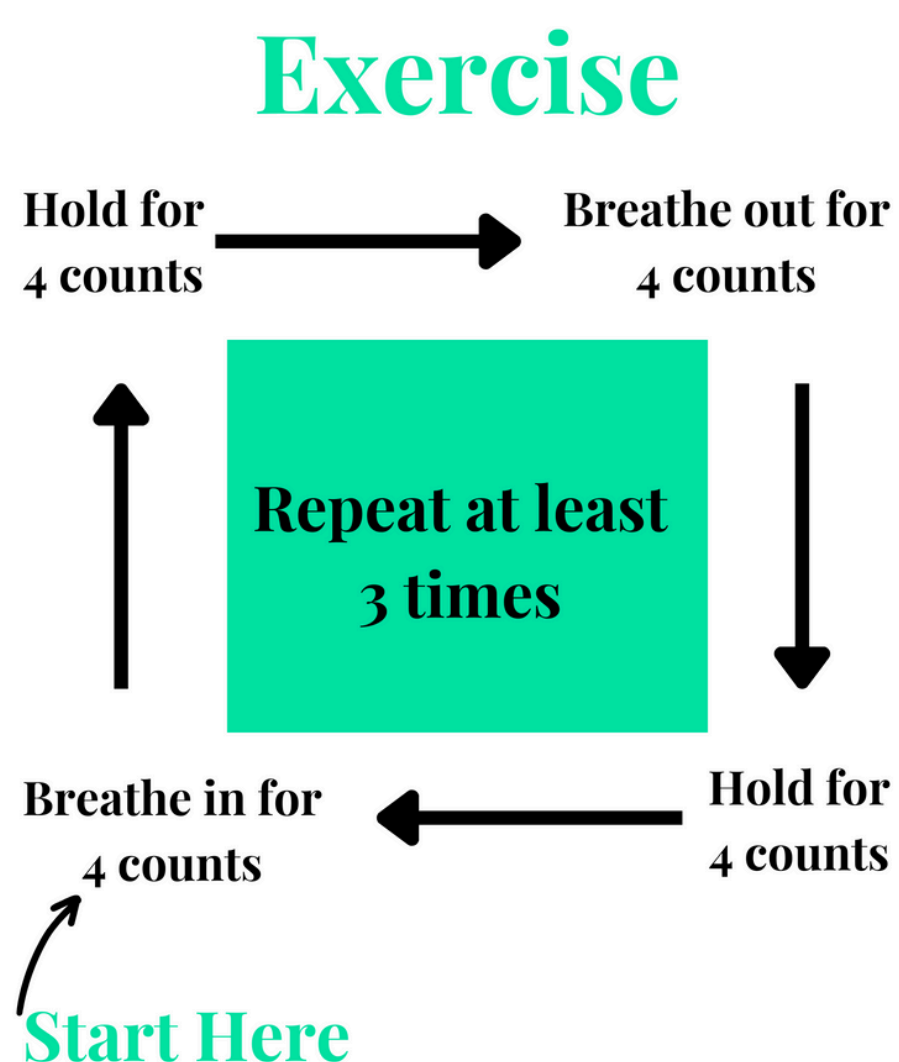


Like diaphragmatic breathing, the **Alexander technique** can be practiced by lying down with one's feet planted on the floor, knees facing the ceiling, and creating spinal alignment by placing books or a yoga block under the head. It can be integrated into the pre-performance routine to prevent injury, improve technique, and lessen performance anxiety. One of the principles Alexander focused on was that of “psychophysical unity, a concept proposing that how one thinks about an activity affects how one does it and that every action in one part of the body is supported or interfered with by the rest of the body” (Ashe, 2020, p.27). Studies of musicians who have practiced the Alexander technique as part of their performance preparation have shown that performance anxiety has been reduced and performance quality increased (Lawrence, 2015).

**Alexander Technique Whispering “Ahh” Exercise**  
This exercise can be practiced while lying down with knees propped up or while sitting tall, cross-legged. Start by taking a few deep breaths. Then, on an exhale, whisper a long, slow, controlled “ahh”. When you run out of air, inhale through your nose. Repeat the sequence. On the exhale, remember to let your jaw comfortably open, but not to the point where your “ahh” becomes a “haa”. On the inhale, your lips should barely touch so that they are together, but your teeth are apart. As you progress through the exercise, think of something amusing, pleasant, or happy, this can add openness and raise your soft palate.

**Diaphragmatic breathing** is a form of deep breathing that can reduce one's heart rate and stress by stimulating the vagus nerve and increasing venous blood flow towards the heart (Strycharczyk et al., 2021). When first learning the technique, it is recommended to practice lying down (Strycharczyk et al., 2021) and in a non-stressful environment. Once a performer is more comfortable with the practice, they can incorporate it while in other positions such as sitting in their dressing room before a performance, standing in the wings waiting to go on stage, or other times when they are feeling stressed or anxious. Dancers often take shallow breaths getting air only into their upper ribcage rather than deep breaths because they are mindful of how breathing can change the shape of their bodies. Nevertheless, in not taking deep breaths which could be noticed on stage, the amount of oxygen that gets into their blood to nourish and support their working muscles is reduced (Thompson, 2020). However, when taught and used correctly, diaphragmatic breathing can help stabilize the lumbar spine and distribute the forces of gravity more equally (Thompson, 2020).

**Box Breathing Exercise**



Popular visualization techniques involve the use of **imagery**, **mental snapshots**, and **scripting for performance** as part of mental and visual rehearsal (Lubert et al., 2023; Niering et al., 2023). **Imagery** involves the performer mentally picturing themselves executing a specific skill. It can also be used to practice pre-performance routines to make them more automatic, which mentally frees the performer up during periods of elevated performance pressure (auditions, competitions, etc.). **Mental snapshots** refer to one's ability to see oneself performing certain activities and then using those mental pictures as models for their performance. This type of imagery practice is particularly beneficial for performers who are visual learners. **Scripting for performance** involves mentally walking through one's performance and planning how they want it to go. Another way to incorporate visualization is by using an anchor word or image, which can be a quick way to get refocused and reengaged. Also known as using “**holistic cue words**” (Weisinger & Pawliw-Fry, 2015, p.133), they can help keep a performer from overthinking during skill execution.

**Effective mental rehearsal involves all the senses, including feeling the muscles activate as they would when performing the skill.**

**Anchor Breath Exercise**  
Take a deep breath in through the nose and out through the mouth when walking into the audition, competition, rehearsal, or performance space to “anchor you” in the space, the moment, and your character.

**Deep Breathing and Imagery Exercise**

This exercise is simple enough to get in and out of it easily no matter where you are. Start by closing your eyes and, while taking deep breaths, imagine a place that brings you peace, calm, and joy. Engage as many of your senses as you can to experience this place as fully as possible. Once you're mentally in this calming place, start breathing with a cadence. Each breath in and out will be done on three counts. Three counts to inhale and three counts to exhale. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

**Black Curtain Count Down Meditation Exercise**

Start this exercise by closing your eyes and picturing a black curtain where the numbers will appear and disappear as you count down. Start with one hundred, and slowly, with each inhale and exhale through your nose, count backwards until you reach one. Example: 100 (inhale), 99 (exhale), 98 (inhale), 97 (exhale), etc.

**Be aware of your thoughts, they directly impact your emotions and actions.**  
If you find yourself in a destructive or unproductive mindset, you can reframe your thoughts to be more productive and encouraging.

**Reframing Exercise**  
Add the word **“yet”** to your thinking and comments on your progress.

**Examples:**  
“I can't land my triple pirouette **yet.**”  
“I can't remember this monologue **yet.**”

Then add the word **“but”** followed by a positive or more productive statement or goal.

**Examples:**  
“I can't land my triple pirouette **yet, but** I'm going to keep practicing.”  
“I can't remember this monologue **yet, but** I will know it by tech week.”

**Self-talk** can be used to focus attention and energy and is a widely endorsed and researched performance enhancement tool in sport and performance psychology literature (Van Raalte et al., 2016). It's important to remember that self-talk is individualistic and needs to “feel right” for the performer. If it's forced or feels awkward, it can deplete cognitive resources, whereas when it feels right, it uses less cognitive energy and is more likely to support optimal performance (Van Raalte et al., 2016).

Incorporate positive thinking and self-talk into your daily routine by affirming your self-worth and recalling past success.

**Example:** “I have been rehearsing my dance routines every day. When I practiced like this for my last competition, I performed really well.”

Pratt (2020) suggests one exercise for incorporating self-talk into a routine is to **write down positive and encouraging statements** and place them where they'll be visible when you need to be reminded most, such as a dressing room mirror.

**Examples of Positive & Productive Self-Talk**

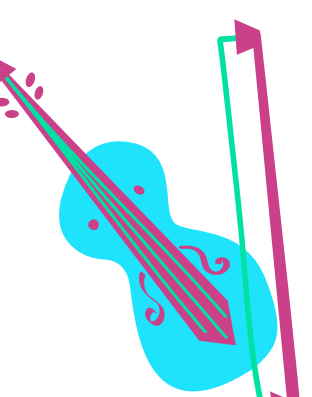
- I am capable, I can do this!
- You've got this!
- I will give my all during this performance.
- You're doing great!
- Turn just like you did in rehearsal.
- That sequence was beautiful!
- I have been preparing for this competition and I am ready to perform.
- I am proud of myself for the progress I have made this season.
- Whatever the outcome of this performance, I will learn and grow from this experience.


**Conclusion:**

As psychological research continues to expand within the performing arts world, psychological skills training and its benefits are being praised by performing artists who swear by them. They're not only sharing the positive impact the techniques have had on their careers but also encouraging their use within the performing arts community and the broader human collective. One of these performers is New York City Ballet Principal Ballerina Megan Fairchild, who uses imagery and breathing techniques to calm her “overly active anxiety” (Fairchild, 2021, p. 19) before big performances in addition to using meditation techniques to decrease stress (Fairchild, 2021). Another is Lin-Manuel Miranda (composer, lyricist, and writer of hit Broadway musicals *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*), who, in his 2018 book, shared many of the upbeat, positive messages he would tweet first thing in the morning and then again at night. Suzuki (2021) believes that his positive, optimistic, and incredibly creative mindset is due, in part, to these daily positive self-tweets. By publicly sharing how they have used mental skills to enhance and support their performance and careers, artists like Fairchild and Miranda are normalizing the use of mental skills not only for other performing artists but for younger generations of performers in the making.

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