



Stage Fright and Breathing – Interrelation effects Power: With Mental Training to a More Expressive and Sound Voice

Renate Publig

Workshop Transcript

Introduction

What does “interrelation effects power” mean in context with stage fright and breathing? The effects of stage fright can be visualized as a **downwards spiral**:

=> flat breathing effects raise of the pulse rate, knots in solar plexus, chest and throat and a tension of the diaphragm which can cause severe problems (from blackout up to panic attacks).

Why not reverse this vicious circle into an **upward spiral** by gaining control again over the breathing? Why and how this works is topic of this workshop.

Note: This workshop focuses on acute interventions which immediately can help to lower the effects of stage fright. To get more severe cases under control in the long run, long-term interventions are highly recommended.

In order to understand the causes of stage fright, short explanations are given which are only meant as summarization, not as a scientific elaboration.

Biological causes

The biological causes of stage fright are less complex and therefore easier to be handled. A part of our brain, the so-called **limbic system** constantly scans our surroundings and our reactions upon them. It evaluates and responds to new situations automatically based on experiences.

Stage fright is basically a “survival program,” triggered by the limbic system in order to protect us from attacks by predators. The reason why our limbic system classifies a performance as an “attack” is rather simple: There is an easy way to distinguish between predators (eyes frontwards, fangs!) and prey animals (eyes sideways, only front teeth and molars). According to that schema, humans are ... predators.

Our brain usually doesn't classify encounters with humans as a threat. But the situation of a performance – alone on the dark stage, spotlights, pulse raised – alerts the limbic system which can easily cause an enormous **adrenaline** rush. (*Note: per se, adrenaline has positive effects. An*

agreeable level mobilizes our energy reserves and keeps us focused! The problems start when we “drown” in adrenaline.)

=> **Acute intervention: Get moving!**

An increased adrenaline level can easily be reduced by **moving**. As acute interventions right before a performance, the following exercises are helpful:

- **Stretch** (inhale while stretching, exhale while relaxing!)
- **Tense** (for example hands, arms plus shoulders; tense for a few seconds – don’t stop breathing! – and then release the tension immediately)
- **“Sonic movements”** (clap hands, click fingers, stamp etc.)

Nerves

The vegetative (or autonomous) nervous system regulates the processes in the body which we cannot control. It is constantly active and e. g. regulates breathing, heartbeat and metabolism. For this purpose, it receives signals from the brain and sends them to the body.

=> The **Sympathetic system** puts us into the “fight or flight”-mode. E. g., it inhibits salivation and digestion and increases heartbeat and blood pressure. It corresponds with **inhaling**.

=> The **Parasympathetic system** enables us to relax. It stimulates salivation and digestion and reduces heartbeat and blood pressure. It corresponds with **exhaling**.

=> **Breathing** helps to control the autonomic nervous system!

=> **Acute intervention: Breathe!**

When the breathing gets flat and the diaphragm no longer responds as usual, the following exercises can help:

- **Exhale** in bursts (three times); Afterwards, let the lungs get filled with air (= don’t inhale actively!)
- Effect: activates the reflex breathing.
- **Inhale with teeth on lower lip**; When lungs seem to be completely filled with air, open mouth promptly while still inhaling. Experience this last “boost” of inhalation.
- Effect: activates the diaphragm.
- **Thymus Tap**: Place index finger in the U notch at the top of the breastbone and slide it down about an inch; this is where the thymus gland is located (responsible for the immune system). Tap “as you feel”: with your finger(s), fist or palm, as soft or strong as you find it pleasant.
- Effects: decreases stress, strengthens immune system, improves oxygen flow.
- **Alternate Nostril breathing** (Yoga: Nadi Shodhana):
Bend the index- and middle finger. Exhale. Then:
 - close the right nostril with your thumb – inhale; open the right nostril;
 - close the left nostril with the ring finger – exhale;
 - keep the left nostril closed – inhale; open the left nostril;

- close the right nostril with the thumb – exhale (repeat appr. 10 times)
Effects: increases parasympathetic activity; connects brain hemispheres; helps to balance, relax and focus.

Psychological Causes: The “Inner Monsters”

The psychological causes are much more complex since they correlate with our experiences, our opinion on ourselves, the pressure of the surrounding and how we deal with it etc. But it is mainly our brain, our thoughts about ourselves which cause troubles. Irmtraud Tarr referred to these thoughts, these “inner voices” as to

- the **hypercritic** (“*you are not good enough!*”)
- the **doubter** (“*are you sure you are ready to go on stage?*”) and
- the **scaredy-cat** (“*I am sure I will have a blackout and everyone will laugh at me!*”).

Thoughts

“It is not things that disturb us, but our interpretation of their significance.” — Epictetus

“The soul becomes dyed with the colour of its thoughts.” — Marcus Aurelius

The performance of our brain is enormous: We have 60.000 to 80.000 thoughts per day; 25% are negative, 5% are positive – and 70% are completely irrelevant (approximate numbers!).

And how many thoughts are we able to think at the very same moment? **One.**

If we manage to become aware of this one thought we can gain control over it and e. g. change a negative thought into a positive one. We are able to calm our thoughts.

Acute intervention: **BREATH MEDITATION**

The most effective way to focus and control our thoughts is by monitoring our breath. One way is to observe yourself inhaling and exhaling. This can be done anywhere, at any time. (Don’t try to alter the breath and don’t evaluate or judge. Simply observe.)

A more effective method is

- **Vipassana** or “mindfulness meditation”: Basic instructions: choose a quiet place; ideally, sit cross-legged, put your hands on your thighs, palms showing upwards. Close your eyes, observe your breath and try to shut out all other thoughts.
(If you are interested in this highly effective method, there are several classes which offer guided meditation).
- “Variation for singers”: combination with breathing “**teeth on lower lip**” to activate the diaphragm.
- Ultimate variation: combination with **twisted cross-legged** seat – sitting (or “the **crocodile / monkey pose**” – lying): Sit as described above. Exhale. With the inhale, twist upper body to the right (sitting bones always stay on the ground!) and put the right hand behind your back as close to the spine as possible, palm flat on the ground, finger tips show away from the body. Take a few in- and exhales. Return with an exhale. Repeat to

the left side.

Effects: activating, energizing, massage for digestive organs, stimulates detoxifying, releases, stabilizes, balances, focusses.

Those exercises are only a small selection of effective acute interventions. And breathing is the main aspect to consider when dealing with stage fright. A lot of other methods and aspects (acute and long-term interventions) can be found in my book “Meistere dein Lampenfieber” (“Master your stage fright”; only available in German).

In case of any questions, do not hesitate to contact me at renate.publig@gmx.at.