

Overcoming Performance Anxiety

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BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL



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Q I get anxious before I negotiate—sometimes for hours or days leading up to the conversation. The result is that I shy away from negotiating, knowing that my anxiety stands in the way of me performing well. Are there any tricks for getting over my anxiety?

A: First, you are not alone. Even low-stakes negotiations evoke feelings of nervousness in many people. In fact, research shows that the most common emotion associated with negotiating is anxiety.

Yet, anxiousness can have adverse effects on one's negotiation results. When we get anxious, blood flows away from the parts of the brain that help us think creatively, evaluate effectively, and make sound decisions. We can find ourselves making hasty concessions, disadvantageous agreements, and premature exits.

Not surprisingly, a more positive reaction to negotiation opportunities can lead to better results at the table. Here are some things you can do to manage your anxiety and enjoy better outcomes:

- **Prepare in advance.** Surprisingly, research shows that most people enter negotiations without having performed any advance preparations. Feeling unprepared and not knowing what steps to take during the negotiation can augment feelings of nervousness and anxiety. So take time in advance of the negotiation to think through how you will present your ideas, respond to pushback, and navigate the conversation. If possible, role-play the negotiation with a friend or colleague, using the practice and their constructive feedback to hone your skills and readiness.

- **Recall times you did well in negotiations.** Your anxiety might be the product of the hippocampus and amygdala regions of your brain subconsciously associating an upcoming negotiation with negative memories associated with

past negotiations. By bringing positive experiences into your consciousness, you can short-circuit the negative reaction you otherwise might experience, namely anxiety.

- **Focus your attention on the opportunities embedded in the negotiation.** Your focus affects your emotions. So rather than adopting a negative mindset driven by thinking about potential negative outcomes, concentrate on your opportunities for success in the negotiation. Doing so will spawn creative energy and positive results.

- **Psych yourself up.** Rather than trying to suppress the physiological byproducts of anxiety (by trying to calm yourself down), reframe the heightened arousal as “excitement.” One way of doing this is by verbalizing it—telling yourself and others, “I am excited about this negotiation.” Hearing yourself say the words can trigger authentic feelings that, in turn, will help you do better in the negotiation.

- **Take charge of the dynamic at the table.** There are many things you can do at the table to influence the negotiation process and the results. For example, something as simple as shaking hands at the outset of a negotiation has been shown to lead to more balanced agreements and value creation. Research shows that more favorable deals are struck between counterparts who like, trust, and respect each other. So simply adopt behaviors that evoke those reactions.

- **Slow down.** All too often when negotiating, we convince ourselves that we have to come to an agreement at the conclusion of the conversation. Removing time-related pressures can alleviate anxiety. So resign yourself to take as many breaks as you need throughout the negotiation, and consider delaying commitment to another time, until after both sides have had time to weigh their options and come up with even better, more creative proposals. **■**