

Your hands shake, and drip with sweat.

Handout 2

**Your voice cracks.**

**Your mind races.**

**Your legs threaten to collapse.**

**Your thumping heart drowns out all  
other sounds.**

*Any minute now, the audience will break into small groups  
to discuss what a loser you are!!*

**You've got Stagefright!!!!**

## I. What Is "It"?

The four components of stagefright are:

- \* **Anticipation:** the nervous, negative, and largely unrealistic thoughts and mental images you experience in the minutes, hours, days and weeks (sometimes months!) before a scheduled performance.
- \* **Avoidance:** when you avoid performance situations because of fear, you unfortunately strengthen and maintain the stage fright. It prevents you from having the helpful experience of coping with the anxiety, and leaves you instead with the impression that you would have experienced a horrible disaster if you had actually tried to perform.
- \* **Anxiety and Panic:** the fearful symptoms you experience during your performance before an audience. These symptoms may include physical sensations such as labored breathing, sweating, racing heart and dizziness, as well as numerous fearful thoughts about how poorly you are doing and how the audience is repelled by your nervousness and incompetence.
- \* **Appraisal:** the period after a performance, when you come to some conclusions about how you did.

## II. Why Does "It" Happen?

1. In the first place, you should know that stagefright, like most anxiety disorders, is believed to stem from a **genetic predisposition**. This simply means that some people are good candidates to develop stagefright, by virtue of their physiology, and others are very unlikely to ever experience it.

2. But for those who do have such a predisposition, stagefright is the **product of a particular way of thinking about the performance situation, and a particular way of trying to handle it as well.**

3. It's the product of **thinking of the performance situation as a threat, rather than a challenge.** Thinking of it as a threat sets off primitive 'fight or flight' responses which would ordinarily help you fight off a predator, such as a rush of adrenaline, diversion of blood to your major muscles, faster heartbeat, and so on.. If you really were getting into a fight, all those changes would be helpful. But if you're trying to perform, they tend to get in your way!

4. Stagefright is also the **product of focusing on yourself, and your anxiety, rather than on your presentation or performance.** When you're focused on yourself to an excessive degree, you're unable to immerse yourself in the role of the performer. Instead, you **worry about how you look and sound; you imagine all the most critical thoughts,** and attribute them to the audience; and then you try to control your anxiety by a variety of means..

5. The unfortunate aspect of these efforts is that they usually **make the stagefright worse.** They make the performance less interesting, and **create a barrier between the performer and the audience.** They lead the singer to feel more alone, and therefore more self-conscious and fearful.

6. If instead, the singer could **turn her focus to the task at hand** and get fully immersed in that, the process of communication with the audience would flow more smoothly. Why don't people do that? Why don't they just turn their focus to their performance?

7. It's because they have the idea that it's not okay to feel anxious up there, and they think they have to get rid of that anxiety. They think that, if they could get rid of the anxiety, then they could perform.

a. For a lot of people, it's because they tend to think that the anxiety they have beforehand, the anticipatory anxiety, is only the start of the problem. They're plagued by this thought: "If I'm this nervous now, how much worse will it be when I start singing?" **They assume that their anticipation is the low point of the anxiety, and that it will increase terribly once they get on stage.**

b. The truth is, for most people, it's exactly the reverse. **The anticipation is the worst part of the anxiety. Once they get involved in the performance, they start to feel better, not worse.**

8. But just hearing that isn't usually enough to allow someone to manage the fear. A person with stagefright is driven to struggle against their fear.

### **That's the problem.**

9. A successful treatment for stagefright will help a performer to accept, and work with, the fear, while they give their main focus to the performance.

# TIPS FOR COPING WITH STAGEFRIGHT

1. **Preparation!** Be sure you know the music well. That is, know the plan and be prepared to present the songs intuitively on the day, rather than from memorizing. The knowledge that you are well prepared helps diminish nervousness.

2: **Expectation!** Imagine some of the things that might go wrong and know the strategies you will use to deal with the problem. Remember that most of the things which are not right will probably only be noticed by you. If things do go wrong, that's great, because it's an opportunity to learn.

3. **Responsibility!** Establish **the right focus for your task**. What do I mean by focus? I mean what you pay attention to as you engage in your performance. As a member of your chorus or quartet **your focus should be your musical performance and the audience reaction to it**, your task is to inform, awaken, persuade, and entertain them. You therefore want to be aware of how your songs will enhance their lives so that you can connect with them in various ways.

**Loosen up.** Walk out there briskly, confidently. No cringing, no slouching, no wringing of hands. Just present yourself with confidence.. Are your knees locked? Bend them a little. Is your throat frozen? Hum very softly to clear it. Unclench your fists and teeth.

Release worry about singing the songs well. You know how to do that! Expect, and accept, that you will feel anxious, especially at first. That's OK. **If you allow yourself to work WITH the anxiety, not against it, you'll be able to calm down and proceed.** If you resist the anxiety, you'll make more trouble for yourself.

If you sing from your heart, if you sing for your listeners, it will be well received. More than that, they will love it. And they'll love you for sharing it with them.

4: **Breath!** Breathing is the most important thing for performance life. If you are nervous, if you are scared, if you feel like crying, or feel anyway you don't want to feel, then think about your breath and control it. Deep breaths - in through your nose for a count of 4, exhale through your mouth for a count of 6. Repeat. Once you have your breath under control, you can do anything. Slowing down the breathing will help to control nervousness.

If you want to perform, sing, act, etc., you have to **breathe**. And if you want to do these things calmly, you'll need to breathe diaphragmatically, just the way you've been taught at your chorus rehearsals! This won't always come naturally, and you'll need to practice.

You want to perform for the audience's enjoyment. Breathe. Anticipate your first words, notes and moves. Remember what you love about the songs, and ENJOY!! During the actual singing, ignore the audience, and turn your focus to your music, your character, and leave the audience to enjoy your performance on their own.

**5: Remember: You Are in Charge of Your Performance!** As you learn to harness your nerves, you can make them work for you. That adrenalin rush can help you to focus, stay sharp, and really respond to the audience. To perform well you need to be as fully 'present' as possible, seeking a balance between the moment-to-moment three way interchange between yourself, the songs and the audience and a slight detachment that allows you to monitor and adjust your responses. ....the buzz is tremendous, for both you and the audience.

**6. It's Not all about YOU.** Remind yourself that the folks in the audience (even the judges) aren't there to see or hear just you, unless you're a very famous person (or your mom is in the audience). They're just here to see the person who's singing on this stage. Today that happens to be you.

**Establish contact with the audience through eye contact** with the audience before, between and after your songs are sung. Gaze around the audience looking into their eyes. Identify friendly faces. Identify good listeners and present your performance to THEM. While your natural instinct will probably be to avoid the audience as much as possible, **you will actually feel LESS anxiety once you hear the applause and know that the audience is involved with you.**

## Yes, but...what if....

Making mistakes is a natural part of performing. You can sing a song note and word perfectly a hundred times in a row and then on the hundred and first make mistakes you've ever made before. The most important thing to keep in mind is to stay calm and keep going. Most of the audience doesn't know you've made a mistake unless you tell them so. Resist broadcasting it facially or physically!

**That nervousness you feel before going on is actually good.** That's your performance energy. That's what will get you up on stage and into your performance. If you don't feel it, if you don't have some energy inside you, your performance can fall flat. That energy is an instinctive reaction to stress. The body knows something is about to happen and is preparing for action. However, the emotional content (fear vs. excitement vs. joy) is entirely conscious.

Research shows that physiologically, fear, anger, excitement are all identical. Your mind determines how you react to those stimuli. You can say, "My stomach is tense, my heart is pounding, my palms are sweating...I must be scared. This is scary. I don't want to do it!" Or "my stomach is tense, my heart is pounding, my palms are sweating...I must be excited. I'm psyched. I'm excited. I want to be on that stage right now. Here I go!" Your emotions are under your control. With some practice, you can control whether it is fear or excitement running through your head before going on.

Most important--don't give in to the fear. How you reacted last time will have a great impact on how you react in the future. If you say "I'm scared. I can't do this. Forget it, maybe next time," then next time, in the back of your mind, you'll be saying, "This is really scary. I can't do it. I know I can't do it, because last time I tried, I couldn't do it. So it must be scary." And the fear grows with every attempt. Or, if you push through the fear, it grows less, because you make the same calculations "Last time I could do it, so this time I can do it."

Think of your performance as **a gift** you're giving the audience, and **“package it”** accordingly!