

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR PERFORMANCE “WINDOW OF TOLERANCE”

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Have you ever wondered why you have great run-throughs in rehearsal but encounter problems you never expected in performance? Have you ever been unable to concentrate in the warm up and felt overwhelmed by anxiety just before you entered the gym? Have you ever come off the floor unable to remember what you just did? Ever felt as if you were floating above the scene, or that the performance seemed unreal? Do you come off the floor depressed or mad at yourself—knowing you could have performed better but not knowing what got in your way?

Your ability to perform at your maximum potential depends on both the mastery of your technical skills AND the ability to draw on those skills in the moment, under the pressure of performance.

Performing before an audience is an experience that is very different from all the preparation, study, and rehearsal you put in. Nailing a catch or a crescendo 13-stroke roll when your hands are shaking and your heart is pounding in your throat is very different from when you are in a relatively calm rehearsal mode! Since we rehearse significantly more than we perform, it is critical to notice the changes that take place in our bodies and minds during performance and then to prepare for them. This article will introduce some of these changes and why they happen.

Two branches of our nervous system play an important role in how we react to the pressure of performance:

The first branch could be considered the **ACCELERATOR**, because it accelerates the intensity of experience.

The second branch could be considered the **BRAKES**, because it lowers the intensity of experience.

We all have a “window of tolerance” within which we can perform our best. Inside this “window” all of the qualities of optimal performance are within our reach. The adrenaline rush is enjoyable and our outlook is optimistic. We know we can draw on the skills we have worked so hard to achieve.

Everyone’s “window of tolerance” is sized differently, based on personal history and response patterns. Some people have very wide “windows” and they can accommodate emotional ups and downs without much distress. Other people have very narrow “windows.” For these people, the emotional roller coaster of performance becomes a very scary ride.

In addition, we all have different levels of skill at staying within our “window of tolerance.” Some people just “go with the flow,” while others exceed their limit before they know what’s happening and then can’t get back down into their “window” without overshooting the mark.

Two things happen when our stress level increases:

- 1) The “window” gets narrower
- 2) Our ability to move within it (this is called *self-regulation*) becomes less flexible and less accurate

The stress can be from both internal and external sources, including:

- Increased challenge and/or decreased belief that we can meet the challenge
- Internal criticism and negative self-talk
- Negative feedback from peers and instructors
- The specific pressures of the performance (changes in the show, importance of the contest, important people in the audience)
- The quality of the previous performance (both the good stuff and the bad)
- Frequency of performances
- Unknown aspects of the performance space (lighting, surface, sound, proximity to the audience)
- Injuries or illness
- Inadequate nutrition, sleep or self-care

Also with that increasing stress, adrenaline from the ACCELERATOR intensifies our experience and begins to alter our control of our physical and mental processes. When we get too intense, these changes move us out of our “window of tolerance” and dramatically impact our performance. We over-exert and over-react, lose our ability to orient in time and space, visual information becomes unreliable and access to our memory is inconsistent. Muscles and organs tense up, oxygen doesn't get where it needs to go, and fine motor skills are impaired (meaning we can lift a burning car off of a child but we can't control a sabre or a pair of drum sticks). We also get distracted and consumed by worry, rapid thoughts and negative self-talk.

Each person copes with this over-intensity in a different way. Some people simply cannot control their performance—they literally crash and burn. Others keep pushing and have significant breakdowns during the course of the performance. Others can only regain physical control by disconnecting and numbing out emotionally.

In order to get back into control, our bodies need to *self-regulate*. This is when the BRAKES start to pump calming chemicals into our system. Under good conditions they do the job—we get back in control, calm down and recover the performance. However, for some people—particularly those who have a tendency to react strongly, become alarmed quickly, or have a history of traumatic experience or prolonged stress—the BRAKES can get out of whack and leave the ACCELERATOR running the show.

When the ACCELERATOR and the BRAKES aren't working as a team, a couple of things can happen:

1. Our attempts at self-regulation don't do the job, and we shoot past our “window” every time something goes even slightly wrong (a shaky catch for example). This can happen if the “window” is too narrow and/or the starting point of intensity is too high.
2. Our attempts at self-regulation are exaggerated because the early attempts didn't work. Then we overdose on the calming chemicals (essentially it's our own morphine) and start to disconnect from the scene. This is also known as spacing out, freezing, or numbing. It will get us through the show but we won't remember what we just did! We'll feel and look disconnected, like we're floating above it all and don't care much about what is happening (i.e., “accurate but boring”). In some cases, the body can actually freeze—sometimes just long enough to lose sight of a toss, sometimes for a phrase or more.
3. Following the performance, the BRAKES can't get us down to a normal level in time for the next performance. This is especially true for people who love that “post-performance adrenaline rush” and try to keep it going as long as possible. There is

too much adrenaline in the system for the next performance and each successive performance starts closer and closer to the higher limit of our “window.” This means that we shoot past our “window” sooner and it takes less stress to do so. It also means that it becomes harder and harder to get back down where we want to be.

Under the best of circumstances, the challenge of performance brings us very close to the upper limit of our “window of tolerance.” A show that pushes your technical ability, combined with an intense rehearsal schedule and performances every weekend (not to mention balancing school, job, and life in general) can literally slam your “window” shut! One goal of performance preparation is to open your “window of tolerance” as wide as possible and learn to stay inside of it when you are under pressure. This skill is every bit as important as any other you can learn in this activity!

A professional performance coach can be of great assistance in developing this skill in a short amount of time. Consultations can take place in many formats, from workshops for the entire ensemble to individual sessions by phone or in person.

CONSULTATION WITH A PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE COACH CAN HELP YOU TO:

- Understand and monitor your personal response to stress.**
- Keep your “window” as open as possible.**
- Stay inside your “window” as much as possible.**
- Anticipate the unexpected!**

As you become more aware of your “window of tolerance,” you can begin to take control over the quality of your performance. Here are a few quick, discreet and powerful ways to “put on the BRAKES” when you start to feel overloaded. Give them a try when you need to get back down into your “window of tolerance” under the pressure of performance:

- **Soothe your nerves at a skin level:** Hold one arm securely with the opposite hand, gently squeezing the surface of your skin to stimulate calming chemicals into your bloodstream. Repeat on the other side.
- **Focus on the solidness of your bones and your spine supporting your body.**
- **Think in the PRESENT TENSE, and stay in PRESENT TIME.**
- **BREATHE!!!!**

HAVE A GREAT PERFORMANCE SEASON!

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