Faces of Anxiety

High Performance

Matthew 14:29–30 "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" **When Peter's focus was on Jesus he managed to do the impossible. As soon as he shifted his focus to the waves, his "performance" was affected.** Whether you are a concert pianist, sports enthusiast, or a young professional who needs to give presentations at work, this same pattern often presents itself. **The enemy's strategy is to get us to focus on something else other than God's goodness and presence with us.** This is one of the reasons Jeus instructed His disciples saying, "Abide in me, Remain in me". *Isaiah 26:3 states, "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you."* In the ESV it reads "*You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."* You might be thinking, "Paul, I am not a high performance person." The reality is that many of us have got children who are doing sport or stage performances and we don't know how to support them when they are anxious. This message will help you to see how you can apply your knowledge of God to everyday performance situations. This week we will focus on sport and music and next week we will spend time discussing stage fright, one of the most common manifestations of anxiety. Regardless of the type of anxiety you are experiencing, you can apply the word of God to it. For some of you its trait anxiety where you feel anxious in many aspects of your life, whilst for others it is state anxiety which is temporary and only in specific circumstances.

1. **God's Word can be applied to high performance situations**
   A. **When you are competing against an intimidating opposition**

Deuteronomy 31:6 "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

The key thing is believing this. Do you really believe that God is with you in that situation. **When you are feeling weak physically or recovering from illness or injury.**

2 Corinthians 12:9–10 "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

   B. **Anxiety disappears after we put our trust in God**

Psalm 56:3–4"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

   C. **Fearing your opposition or audience never produces good fruit, instead it traps you.**

Proverbs 29:25 "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."

   D. **We are called to perform for God's glory not our own or the glory of another.**

Colossians 3:23–24 "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

When facing a game, concert, or presentation, these verses remind us that:

- **We don't perform *alone* — God is with us.**

- **Success is not about *audience or spectator approval* but *faithful stewardship*.** We live in a culture where even children want to perform for their friends' parents, let alone their own parents. Last weekend I was watching my son play football and one of his friends who was subbed off, came to me and said, "sorry for the poor performance today." I know he was conscious of my presence because he looked at me during the game. I said to him, you don't have to apologize to me.
- **Our anxiety can be replaced with God's peace, strength, and courage.**

Think of an anxious athlete in basketball, football or any sport. They will overthink every move on the court/field. They will play it safe rather than take necessary risks. They experience physical tension — stiff movements, shallow breathing. Pre-game or mid-game there is loss of confidence after a mistake. Often the drivers behind this are pressure to perform for coaches, teammates, fans. Fear of letting the team down. Obsessive focus on past mistakes instead of the next play. When you take a closer look at each of these drivers you see that they are fuelled by core beliefs that are not based on the truth.

2. Drivers and core beliefs underlying anxiety in sport

1. Overthinking Every Move on the Court/Field

- **Core Belief / Lie:**
  - **"If I don't analyze every detail, I'll fail."**
  - **"I must control everything to avoid mistakes."**
  - **"Spontaneity is dangerous."**
- **Truth: Trust and flow are often the keys to peak performance; overthinking disrupts natural skill.**

2. Playing It Safe Instead of Taking Risks

- **Core Belief / Lie:**
  - **"Failure is worse than not trying."**
  - **"If I take risks and fail, I'll be exposed as not good enough."**
  - **"It's safer to blend in than stand out."**
- **Truth: Growth and success often come through courageous risks; mistakes don't define worth.**

3. Physical Tension — Stiff Movements, Shallow Breathing

- **Core Belief / Lie:**
  - **"If I let go, I'll lose control."**
  - **"Tension equals readiness."**
  - **"Relaxation means weakness."**
- **Truth: Relaxation fuels rhythm, precision, and control — freedom of body enables freedom of play.**

4. Loss of Confidence After a Mistake (Pre-game or Mid-game)

- **Core Belief / Lie:**

- **“One mistake proves I’m a failure.”**
- **“I must be perfect to deserve confidence.”**
- **“Others will judge me harshly for errors.”**

- **Truth: Confidence is built on preparation and resilience, not perfection. Mistakes are part of growth.**

5. Pressure to Perform for Coaches, Teammates, and Fans

- **Core Belief / Lie:**
  - **“My value comes from pleasing others.”**
  - **“I exist to earn approval.”**
  - **“If I disappoint people, I’ll lose love, respect, or belonging.”**
- **Truth: Worth is intrinsic, not contingent on performance. Healthy validation flows from identity, not outcome.**

6. Fear of Letting the Team Down

- **Core Belief / Lie:**
  - **“If I fail, I ruin everything for everyone.”**
  - **“I carry the full responsibility for outcomes.”**
  - **“My mistakes cannot be recovered by the team.”**
- **Truth: Teams succeed or fail collectively. One person’s effort contributes but does not determine everything.**

7. Obsessive Focus on Past Mistakes Instead of the Next Play

- **Core Belief / Lie:**
  - **“The past defines me.”**
  - **“If I replay it enough, I can undo it.”**
  - **“I’m trapped by my last failure.”**
- **Truth: Each play is new. Success is found in staying present; the past cannot be changed but can be learned from.**

Most of these lies cluster around perfectionism, fear of judgment, and conditional self-worth.

2. Faith-Centred Affirmations for a Basketballer

Recently I had a coaching session with a Christian basketballer who was struggling with aspects of anxiety and self-criticism. I shared with him these sport-specific faith-centred affirmations.

1. **"God gave me this gift, and I trust Him to grow it in His time."**
2. **"Mistakes don’t define me—my effort and heart do."**
3. **"I am fearfully and wonderfully made, on and off the court."** *(Psalm 139:14)*

4. **"Missing a shot is not failure—it's part of learning."**
5. **"I play to honour God, not to be perfect."**
6. **"Jesus is my strength when I feel weak or discouraged."**
7. **"Progress, not perfection—God is working in me daily."**
8. **"I breathe, I pray, I trust, I play."**
9. **"Every challenge is a chance to grow in skill and in faith."**
10. **"I am more than a basketball player—I am a child of God."**
11. **"When I fall short, grace lifts me back up."**
12. **"God's plan is bigger than any missed layup or turnover."**
13. **"Pressure doesn't break me—it builds me."**
14. **"I compete with joy, because I'm never alone on the court."**
15. **"Even when I mess up, God still smiles at me."**
16. **"Confidence comes from knowing who I am in Christ."**
17. **"I am enough, just as I am, and I'm growing every day."**
18. **"With God, I can do hard things—on the court and in life."** *(Philippians 4:13)*
19. **"I don't have to be perfect to be powerful."**
20. **"I trust the process. God's timing is always right."**

4. Research Findings Relating to Sport and Anxiety levels

Anxiety itself is not automatically harmful. What matters is how the athlete interprets the symptoms: Do they see nerves as a challenge (helpful, energizing)? Or as a threat (harmful, paralyzing)? "Choking" arises from this stress interpretation. Choking is a significant decline in performance under pressure, despite the athlete having the skills and preparation to succeed. It's not a lack of ability — it's the interference of anxiety, pressure, or overthinking at a critical moment. This happens with a lot of "confidence players", who choke despite being very talented. Tools like breathing, focusing on the present task and racing like you don't care about the outcome all help. It's also been found that there's a difference between cognitive anxiety and somatic anxiety. Cognitive anxiety includes worrying, negative self-talk and fear of failure. All of these result in poor performance. Somatic anxiety involves a racing heart and tension that can enhance performance up to an optimal point but then its detrimental beyond a certain threshold**.** How one interprets it can result in facilitative anxiety or debilitating anxiety.

- **Facilitative Anxiety (Positive Interpretation): Increased heart rate = "I'm ready, my body is primed." Sweaty palms = "Energy is flowing; I'm alive." Outcome: focus, intensity, and sometimes enhanced performance.**
- **Debilitative Anxiety (Negative Interpretation): Increased heart rate = "I'm losing control." Sweaty palms = "I can't handle this." Outcome: overthinking, tension, and performance decline.**

I was explaining this to my wife recently, because as an endurance athlete she experiences facilitative anxiety. Before a race she will often tell me when she is starting to feel butterflies. I sometimes wonder whether it is

positive or negative. I have come to realize that these butterflies she experiences are actually facilitative anxiety that fuels her success. However, when she was doing her music exams for the Cello, she experienced debilitating anxiety characterized by lots of tension. This affected the grace with which she played her instrument. Yuri Hanin, in the 1980s, developed a theory called Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF), which rejects the idea of a single universal optimal level of arousal or anxiety for peak performance. Each athlete has their own level of anxiety and excitement for peak performance. Certain emotional states can be facilitative and energizing or debilitative and hindering. Some athletes need nervousness and a little anger whilst others need to remain calm. It's therefore important for them to develop an IZOF profile so that they know when to adjust (if they are too flat) pre-game and mid-game. I have seen this with my children, where one of them performs really well in a very calm state. When I used to play soccer with him, if he got angry he would underperform and start focusing on how the game is being managed or refereed. This reminds me of how Usain Bolt was always playful before competition, he knew his zone of optimal functioning. On the other hand, one of my other sons needs to have some degree of tension in order to excel. However, if he gets too anxious it hinders him. If he is too calm and relaxed, he underperforms. Over time, patterns emerge that define an athlete's IZOF profile. Example: Player A performs best when moderately nervous, energized, and slightly angry. Player B performs best when calm, happy, and minimally anxious. If you are a Man United fan like me, you will know which of our players need to be in a calm state and which ones actually play better when they are slightly tense. Bruno Fernandes plays well when he is emotionally intense but if he gets too angry he begins to have altercations with the referees and starts playing out of position and running too much. For those of you who are Liverpool fans look how relaxed Virgil Van Dyke often looks when defending the ball in tricky situations. He maintains composure.

Many studies have shown that high levels of sport specific anxiety are consistently linked to low performance with measurable effects. There's also a broader impact of anxiety which results in lower life satisfaction and overall well-being. Of course, positive thinking and mental resilience can mitigate these negative effects. Researchers found that performance anxiety results in sportspeople underperforming relative to their typical abilities. It has also resulted in psychological distress and withdrawal from sport. A study was done on current and retired elite athletes and found that 39% of them feel that performance anxiety is holding them back from reaching greater heights. Sadly, 7% experienced suicidal thoughts related to their performance. **The study noted that high-performance (elite) athletes were more likely to exhibit poor coping behaviours—such as avoidance, substance misuse, and decreased enjoyment—after experiencing choking or under-performing.** Researchers also established that mental fatigue is one of the results of performance anxiety and it results in the decline of performance over time. When one is in an anxious state there's a higher risk of injury and challenges with physical recovery post competition. When one is anxious it affects one's decision making and focus leading to avoidable mistakes in and out of competition.

5. Research Findings for Musicians on Stage

Researchers found that for musicians, identity and perfectionism intensify performance anxiety. For many musicians, music is not just what they do, it is who they are. Their sense of self-worth and identity becomes tightly bound to their ability to perform well. **When performance = identity, mistakes feel like personal failure, not just technical slips.** Researchers describe a phenomenon called **identity fusion: when personal identity and role identity merge.** A musician doesn't just play music — they are a musician. This fusion can be empowering (deep passion, commitment), but it also increases vulnerability: "If I fail on stage, then I am a failure." Anxiety arises because the stakes feel existential: Not just "Will I hit the note?" but "Am I good enough to belong here?" Healing often involves reframing identity: **"I am more than a performer." "My**

worth is not dependent on a flawless recital." "Mistakes do not define my artistry or my humanity." If a musician doesn't deal with this, they will avoid opportunities due to fear of failure.

When it comes to Music Performance Anxiety (MPA), 60 to 80% of professional musicians suffer from debilitating MPA. In one study it was discovered that 95% experience stage anxiety during live performances. 20% of students reported leaving their musical paths due to performance anxiety. This is quite sad considering that these were all good musicians. One in three suffered from MPA in a sample of musicians aged 10 to 54, including teachers and students. Some environments are high risk such as classical music settings, which foster perfectionism as seen in the relentless rehearsals and for many of these musicians this started with early childhood training. MPA is more prevalent amongst women than men. It is also more prevalent amongst younger people than those over 45 years of age. Strong predictors of MPA are Trait anxiety (anxiety that is experienced in general as opposed to state anxiety which is temporary based on a situation), neuroticism (part of the Big five in personality), perfectionism, low self-efficacy and low self-esteem. These tend to be higher amongst adolescents. It has been found that when doing public performances the stress hormones (cortisol and cortisone) are higher in comparison to private singing. **Are we creating and perpetuating a culture that breeds anxiety in our young people?**

Research was carried out on 208 music students from Swiss universities of music (both male and female). These were specifically students preparing for professional music careers. Stage fright had tangible negative impacts: 22% failed exams due to stage fright. 35% failed auditions. 36% received bad marks and 49% received negative critiques linked to stage fright. 25% avoided performance opportunities, and 11% interrupted performances. About one-third of university music students reported experiencing stage fright as a significant problem, with 12% rating it as severe. You can see from this that this is a serious problem. Let's see what prayers someone in this situation can pray.

6. Prayers & Affirmations for Musicians Before Going on Stage

1. Prayer for Presence & Partnership

Affirmation: "I don't step onto this stage alone — God is with me and plays through me."

Prayer: ***Lord, You are my constant companion (Isaiah 41:10). As I step onto this stage, I affirm that I am not performing alone. Let my music be more than sound; let it carry Your presence and touch hearts. Amen.***

2. Prayer for Calm & Steadiness

Affirmation: "My body is steady, my breath is calm, my heart is at peace."

Prayer: ***Father, You give peace that the world cannot give (John 14:27). Calm my hands, steady my breath, and quiet my racing thoughts. Let every note flow with peace rather than fear. Amen.***

3. Prayer for Authentic Expression

Affirmation: "I don't need perfection; I need authenticity. My music is my honest gift."

Prayer: ***Jesus, Your grace is sufficient for me (2 Corinthians 12:9). I release the burden of flawless performance and embrace the beauty of authenticity. May my music reflect truth, not pressure. Amen.***

4. Prayer for Service & Connection

Affirmation: "This is not about impressing — it is about connecting and serving through music."

Prayer: ***Lord, whatever I do, I do it for You (Colossians 3:23). I choose to serve my audience through every phrase and melody. May my playing build connection, joy, and inspiration. Amen.***

5. Prayer of Gratitude & Joy

Affirmation: "I am grateful for this moment. Music is a gift, and I share it with joy."

Prayer: ***Father, thank You for the gift of music and the chance to share it tonight. I step onto this stage not with fear but with gratitude and joy. May my playing overflow with life and bless every listener. Amen.***

Conclusion

Performance anxiety, whether in sport, music, or public speaking, is not simply about the fear of making mistakes—it is about the deeper lies we believe about our worth, identity, and purpose. These anxieties are often rooted in perfectionism, fear of judgment, or the pressure to earn approval from others. Yet God's Word offers a different foundation: our value is secure in Christ, and we are called to serve, not to strive for flawless approval. Psychological research further shows that anxiety does not have to be debilitating; when reframed, it can become energy that fuels performance within each individual's zone of optimal functioning. By combining biblical truth, practical coping tools, and faith-centred affirmations, we can learn to step into high-pressure moments with courage, peace, and authenticity—confident that we do not perform alone, but in the presence and strength of God who has called us.

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