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New Treatment For Stage Fright

Traditionally, the most successful methods used to combat stage fright have been prescribed medications (beta blockers) and aerobic exercise. In the most recent issue of Biofeedback, researchers studied another technique: the effect of biofeedback training on Musical Performance Anxiety (MPA). MPA is a severe form of stage fright marked by high anxiety levels and impaired performance.

Up to 72% of all musicians may suffer from MPA. Like other forms of stage fright, MPA is a complex experience that has mental, emotional, physiological, and psychological components.

In this study, university student-musicians performed in front of an audience and were assessed. Later, they participated in four 30- to 50-minute sessions during which they were taught techniques to control their heart rhythm patterns and focus their thoughts and emotions. A heart rate biofeedback device provided feedback, so participants could tell when the techniques were working. At the end of the training, they were asked to perform for an audience again.

The results showed a 71% decrease in performance anxiety and a 62% improvement in performance. Once the techniques were learned, participants were also able to use them in other areas of their lives and reported an increased sense of calmness, improved anger management, better sleep and generally more relaxed feelings. Previous studies have shown that biofeedback training also increases test-taking ability, decreases stress and relieves depression.

Biofeedback training is easy, inexpensive, fast-acting, and noninvasive and there are no side effects or potentially harmful drug interactions.

The techniques work by sending signals between parts of the brain-heart-body system through the heart rhythm patterns (heartbeat), nerves, hormones and electrical impulses. When there is better communication or synchronicity between these systems, people often feel a sense of wellbeing, calmness and mental clarity. This is known as psychophysiological coherence, and it can enhance efficiency, promote health and emotional stability and increase brain function and performance.

Full text of the article, "Effects of Heart Rate Variability Coherence Biofeedback Training and Emotional Management Techniques to Decrease Music Performance Anxiety."

Biofeedback is published four times per year and distributed by the Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback. AAPB's mission is to advance the development, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge about applied psychophysiology and biofeedback to improve health and the quality of life through research, education, and practice. For more information about the association, see aapb.org.

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