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HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

INTRODUCTION TO PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

- Research study by Lydia Fehm and Katia Schmidt: 86% of adolescent musicians surveyed called for more help with performance anxiety. Even young children can suffer from performance anxiety (Boyett, 2019).
- It is our responsibility as teachers to adequately prepare our students to have positive/healthy performance experiences.



SYMPTOMS

Symptoms can include:

- Racing pulse and rapid breathing
- Dry mouth and tight throat
- Shakiness
- Sweaty and cold hands
- Stomachaches
- Nausea
- Vision changes

“Anxiety is the body’s natural response to perceived threats, whether real or imagined.” (Clara Boyett)

3 categories of symptoms: physiological, cognitive, and behavioral.

Symptoms are the result of anxiety - not the underlying cause.

CAUSES

Causes of performance anxiety (Boyett, 2019):

- Overly challenging repertoire
- Lack of preparation
- Trait anxiety (an individual's baseline anxiety level)
- Gender (women have higher trait anxiety and are more emotionally invested than men. Internalize personal failure.)
- Introversion
- Social phobia/fear of negative evaluation
- Competition
- Perfectionism
- Low self-esteem

SOLUTIONS

9 Self-treatment strategies (Boyett, 2019):

- Systematic desensitization
- Cognitive restructuring
- Flow
- Improvisation
- Imagery/mental rehearsal
- Performance preparation
- Deep, slow, abdominal breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Practice

SOLUTIONS

I. Systematic desensitization

- Build upon the premise that anxiety is a “learned response that can be unlearned.” Replace the **fear** response with a different, more positive response.
- Introduce the student to increasingly stressful performance situations and help them cope with their reactions to each one. Make sure the student is comfortable with their current stage before moving on to the next one



SOLUTIONS

II. Cognitive restructuring

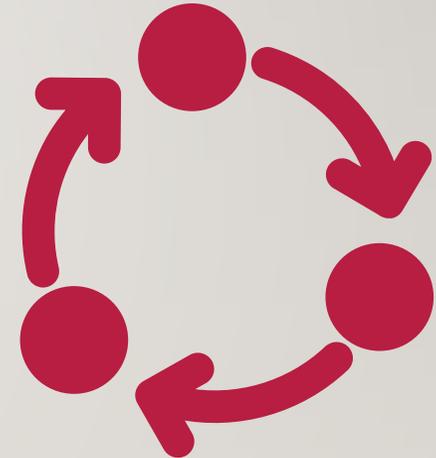
- Changing the negative or unproductive thought patterns. Point out to the student when a negative thought is unrealistic or self-defeating, then draw out of them a reasonable restatement of the facts.
 - 1) Discover your automatic thoughts
 - 2) Recognize the consequences of those thoughts
 - 3) Substitute more adaptive thoughts for dysfunctional ones.
- Hold a studio group class performance and have every student say something positive about each performance. This helps students picture a supportive audience (rather than a cruel and judgmental one) and helps them associate positive feelings with performing.



SOLUTIONS

III. Flow

- “In a state of flow, an individual’s attention is completely absorbed by the task at hand, with no room left for irrelevant thoughts...” - Joann Marie Kirchner
- Set specific short-term and long-term goals. “Clear goals facilitate the flow experience since it is difficult to become immersed in an activity which one does not know needs to be done, or how well one is doing.” – Kirchner
- Pick pieces appropriate for the student’s ability



SOLUTIONS

IV. Improvisation

- One factor that contributes to performance anxiety is the idea that the score's interpretation is predetermined, and that there is only one correct way to perform it.
- Free improvisation allows students to break away from that mindset and enjoy playing music without feeling like the audience is judging their interpretation of a score



SOLUTIONS

V. Imagery/mental rehearsal

- Can be both a contributor to performance anxiety, and a treatment. Must be positive imagery.
- The “virtual recital” (Nagel, 2017)



SOLUTIONS

The “virtual recital” format

What would you say if your student was scheduled to give an important recital in 3 weeks?

Student responds with worries

- “I won’t be adequately prepared, I won’t make a good impression. People won’t like me. My friends will make fun of me. I need more time to practice.”

Teacher response: How to HANDLE anxiety

- “Use your time wisely and practice mindfully. You have worked hard already - now is time to fine-tune. Think positively about yourself and focus on the music rather than your friends. You cannot control what other people think, but good friends will not make fun of you.”

Teacher response: How to UNDERSTAND anxiety

- “Your anxiety may reflect old fears about how the audience and your friends - who in some respects represent your parents in a displaced way - can love or leave you based solely on how you perform. You want to please your family - that is natural. How you perform in a recital does not determine the love people have for you.”



SOLUTIONS

VI: Performance preparation

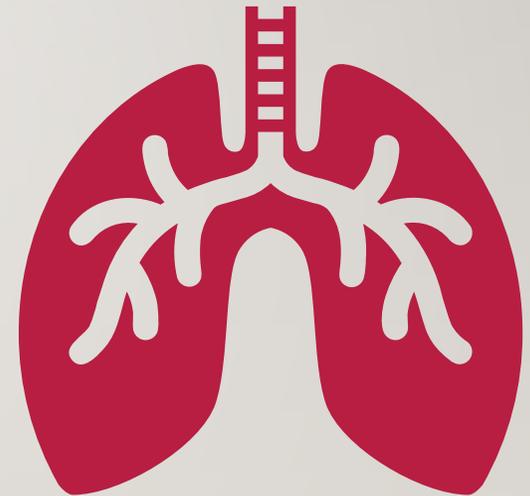
- Quality practice and study of the music, internalization.
- Chunking practice (practice small sections thoroughly)
- Analysis of the piece



SOLUTIONS

VII: Deep, slow, abdominal breathing

- When a person practices deep, slow breathing and relaxation, the brain sends a message to the fingers to become warmer.” (Nagel, 2017)
- Abdominal breathing helps students to feel more relaxed and calm (vs. chest breathing, which can increase anxiety).
- Practice regularly, in non-performance situations
- Add relaxing images in your mind, and picture your performance being successful as you do this exercise



SOLUTIONS

VIII: Progressive muscle relaxation

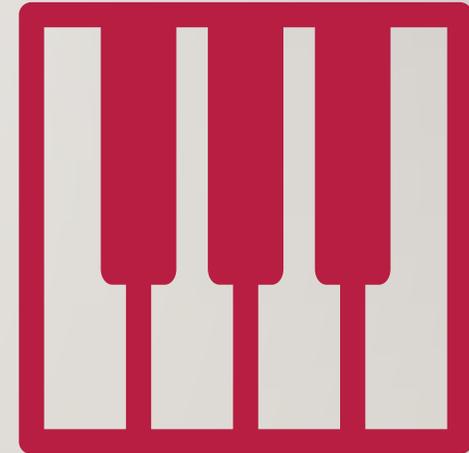
- Tense one muscle at a time and then release it, starting with your feet and working up. Hold each muscle for a count of 4, and then release all at once.
- “Notice if your hands begin to feel warmer by the end of the exercise” (Nagel, 2017).
- Practice regularly in non-performance situations



SOLUTIONS

IX. Practice, practice, practice!

- Musicians spend more time practicing than performing. “We should therefore try to understand practicing as an activity in and of itself.” - John Minahan
- Deliberate practice and mental/psychological coping skills lead to good performances. We need psychological performance skills training programs in the piano world! (Jordan-Miller, 2011)
- Rebekah Jordan-Miller developed a 12-week curriculum for pianists to gain psychological skills for performing (Jordan-Miller, 2011).



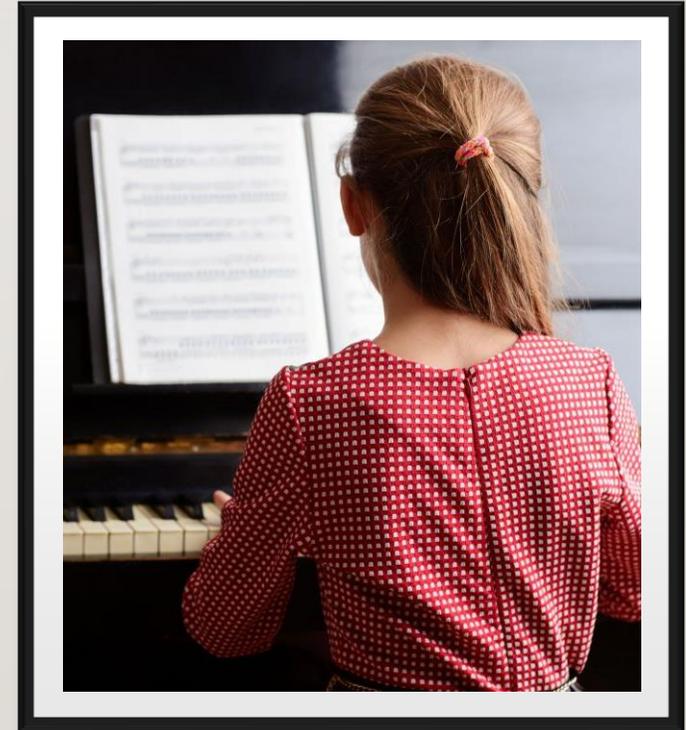
THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN ANXIETY MANAGEMENT

- Normalize performance anxiety!
- If a student tells you they are scared before a recital, listen to the student, and don't try to rationalize or diminish their feelings. Don't reassure the student - the student is scared, everything is not fine.
- Ask the student to describe how they feel when they are scared, and how they have dealt with their nerves in the past.
- Help the student identify feelings and transform them into words
- Never force students to talk about their anxiety

(Nagel, pgs. 11-18)

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN ANXIETY MANAGEMENT

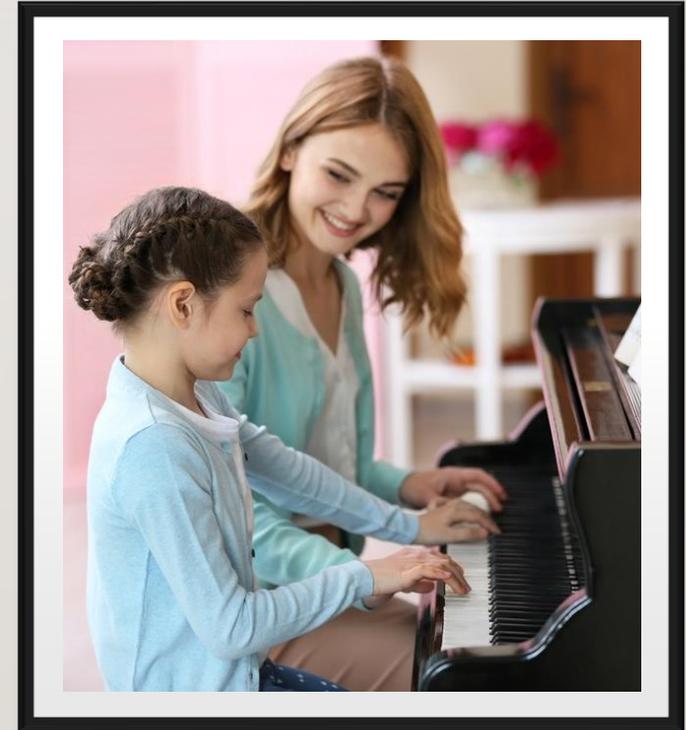
- “What is most important is to listen, keep communication open, and convey that no thought or feeling is forbidden or bad” (Nagel, 2017).
- “Pick repertoire that is not beyond the student’s technical and emotional capacity. The recital music should be ready long before the recital” (Nagel, 2017).
- Let the anxious student play first in the recital so that they don’t have time to sit and stew



THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN ANXIETY MANAGEMENT

- Learn which triggers are associated with each student's performance anxiety (Ex: seeing the audience, waiting backstage, walking onstage)
- Pair the anxiety-producing image with a stress-reducing mental image (Ex: a favorite pet, a warm beach, etc.)
- Students should be encouraged to practice mental exercises daily, away from the stress of performing
- Show genuine interest in the student as a whole, unique person
- Encourage and reward with complements
- Encourage excellence and discourage perfectionism
- Don't use sarcasm or harsh critiques when students are struggling
- Help students learn how to find pleasure within themselves and not feel good only from external praise and applause

(Nagel, pg. 105)



CONCLUSION

There are solutions for managing performance anxiety! 😊

We as teachers have an extremely important responsibility to normalize performance anxiety for our students. We need to be empathetic and proactive in helping them combat performance anxiety by giving them positive performance opportunities, being a good role model in performance situations, and teaching them coping methods to practice regularly.



SOURCES

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