



FIVE TIPS TO HANDLE PERFORMANCE ANXIETY FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

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In the high-stakes environment of law enforcement, managing performance anxiety is crucial for peak mental performance. As a mental performance specialist embedded within the Phoenix Police Department, my role is to help officers optimize their cognitive and emotional resilience. Drawing from evidence-based practices within the field of sport and performance psychology, here are five tips to help law enforcement professionals navigate and conquer performance anxiety.

1. Mindful breathing techniques

In moments of heightened stress, the breath becomes an anchor to the present moment. When an officer experiences stress during a high-pressure situation, it is common for their breathing to be affected in one of two ways: either holding their breath or breathing very rapidly and shallowly from the chest. Breathing properly is relaxing and facilitates performance by, for example, increasing the amount of oxygen in the blood and carrying more energy to the muscles.¹ Implementing mindful breathing techniques can regulate the nervous system, promote calmness and enhance focus. It is important to encourage officers to practice deep diaphragmatic breathing — inhaling slowly through the nose, holding for a moment and exhaling through pursed lips. With a complete breath, the diaphragm pulls down, causing the belly to expand and a vacuum to occur in the lungs, filling the lungs up from the bottom.² This is a simple yet powerful technique that can be practiced discreetly, even amid high-pressure situations.

2. Practice mental imagery

Thorough preparation, both mentally and physically, is the antidote to anxiety. A lot of emphasis is put on the physical aspect of training as it relates to high-pressure situations, but officers also can prepare with the skill of imagery. Research indicates that when individuals engage in vivid imagery, their brains interpret these images as identical to the actual stimulus situation.³

Imagery comprises three core components, which are controllability, vividness and perspective. *Controllability* refers to imagining exactly what you want to imagine, being able to manipulate features, processes and outcomes. *Vividness* refers to the level of detail you are imaging, which includes the five senses of sight, sound, taste, smell and touch. According to Williams & Krane,⁴ vividness involves such features as whether the image is in color, how many senses are being used, and the emotion or physical sensations experienced when engaging in imagery. Lastly, *perspective* refers to the process of how you imagine that experience in your mind, from an external or internal vantage point. External view is a third-party perspective, where you see yourself performing as if you were the bystander. Internal perspective is when you see the image or experience from within your body, performing the tasks.

Our minds are intricately connected to our body, with neurons running through every facet of it. When you imagine very vivid experiences, you can activate those neurons, firing them off and engaging every aspect of the physiological experience. This is what makes imagery such a powerful tool to utilize. It allows officers to mentally rehearse scenarios, reinforcing positive neural pathways.

It also is important to encourage officers to visualize themselves handling challenging situations with composure, making optimal decisions and executing their tasks flawlessly. This mental rehearsal can enhance confidence and reduce anxiety by familiarizing the mind with success.

3. Focus on process, not outcome

Shifting the focus from the end result to the process can alleviate performance anxiety. Thinking about the outcome of a situation can create self-induced pressure, which can heighten one's stress and lead to increased mistakes during performance. Keeping a task-focused mind during the performance will help you stay in the present moment and continually ready to handle the stress.

Officers must remember that it is important to concentrate on the controllable aspects of their performance, such as following established protocols, maintaining situational awareness and executing their training. By emphasizing the process rather than fixating on the outcome, officers can channel their energy into actions within their control, fostering a sense of empowerment and confidence.

4. Positive self-talk

The internal dialogue officers have with themselves significantly influences their effort, self-efficacy, attention, emotional state and behaviors. Encourage the development of positive self-talk habits by replacing negative/counterproductive thoughts with positive/constructive statements or affirmations. According to Hatzigeorgiadis et al., interventions that include self-talk enhance self-confidence.⁵

Officers also can take the time to challenge and reframe self-doubt into statements that reinforce their capabilities. This rewrites the foundation and helps to cultivate a positive internal narrative that enhances one's resilience and fortifies mental strength during challenging situations. Not only did Hatzigeorgiadis et al find that self-talk enhanced self-confidence, they found evidence that this effect may be a mechanism that explains the facilitating effects of self-talk on performance.⁶

5. Post-event evaluation

After high-pressure situations, it is highly recommended that officers take the time to facilitate a structured debrief that will encourage reflection and learning. Experience, one often hears, is the best teacher, but that is only true if you

reflect on it and extract its lessons.⁷ Analyzing the event objectively allows officers to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Frame these experiences as opportunities for growth rather than as sources of anxiety. By adopting a growth mindset, officers can transform performance anxiety into a catalyst for continuous improvement.

Performance anxiety is an inherent aspect of law enforcement, but with the right mental tools, officers can navigate these challenges and perform at their best. By incorporating mindful breathing, imagery, process-focused thinking, positive self-talk and post-event evaluation into their routine, officers can enhance their mental resilience, optimize performance and cultivate a mindset that thrives in the face of adversity.

Endnotes

1. Williams, J. M., & Krane, V. (2015). *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
2. *ibid*
3. Jeannerod, M. (1994). The representing brain: Neural correlates of motor intention and imagery. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 17, 187-202.
4. Williams & Krane (2015)
5. Hatzigeorgiadis, A., Zourbanos, N., Goltsios, C., & Theodorakis, Y. (2009). Mechanisms underlying the self-talk-performance relationship: The effects of motivational self-talk on self-confidence and anxiety. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10, 186-192.
6. *ibid*
7. Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: artistry, choice, and leadership* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

About the author

Dr. Gabe Farias is a Mental Performance Specialist and On-Site Human Performance Specialist for O2X dedicated to optimizing performance with tactical populations. Leveraging his extensive educational background and experience, Farias addresses the intricate psychological aspects that influence performance for tactical athletes. In his previous role with the U.S. Army, he engaged with thousands of soldiers, enhancing mental resilience and imparting invaluable mental skills for personal and professional applications. Driven by the belief that mental skills are indispensable for high performance, Farias applies his expertise in sport and performance psychology to empower tactical athletes and teams. His focus is on cultivating critical mental skills that provide a decisive advantage over the competitors. He earned his master's in performance psychology from National University in La Jolla, California, in 2020, setting the foundation for his impactful career. He achieved his Ed.D. in sport and performance psychology from the University of Western States in Portland, Oregon, in 2023. He is currently working on his second doctorate in organizational leadership.



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