



Judy Ringer

When Stage Fright Happens: Use It and Lose It

As a professional singer and speaker, I'm often asked if I still get nervous in front of an audience. I do. But I've learned to use my nervous energy – and minimize its impact.

I practice aikido, a martial art based on aligning with the attacker and redirecting the attack. Instead of seeing an attack, the aikidoist sees energy. If I see what's coming as attack, I defend against it. If I see energy, I expand my options. When I suspend my belief that the event is negative, I can direct its energy purposefully toward my goal.

Let's apply this concept to an attack of stage fright. If you're like most people, you consider stage fright a negative event. What if you suspend this belief for a moment and imagine your anxiety as energy you can direct toward your goal of a great performance? The purpose of this article is to help you use the energy we call stage fright to increase your power and presence in front of an audience.

Consider professional athletes storied for their ability to excel under pressure: Michael Jordan, ball in hand, with two seconds to make the basket and win the game; or Tiger Woods on the eighteenth hole of the Masters, preparing to sink a ten-foot birdie putt to capture the title. The greater the pressure, the more focused the athlete. Michael and Tiger know how to use the pressure of performance to increase power and presence.

Similarly, you can manage your relationship with stage fright by working with it instead of running from it, and allow it to shift you into "the zone" of optimal performance described by professionals the world over. What follows are mental and physical strategies to transform your nervous energy into directed energy before and during your presentation, plus additional tips on how to enjoy your moments in the limelight.

Getting Ready: Your Body Prepares Just Like You Do

The anxiety associated with performance usually spikes shortly before show time. But symptoms can begin days or even weeks in advance and range from dry mouth and shortness of breath to shaking, shivering, and complete inability to perform.

1. **Change your perspective.** While it may seem that your body is attacking you, consider that what you call nerves or anxiety may actually be your body's way of getting ready for the event. Rename the "attack" and call it excitement, preparation, and purposeful design. In addition, focus your awareness on the symptoms. Notice how they show up, grow, subside, grow again, and subside again. Don't resist them. Ride the wave. *Be* there. By this I mean stay present, breathe, and increase your kinesthetic awareness. Measure the symptoms (*That was a 7 on the Richter scale!*). Be curious about them (*Wow, look how my body is shaking. Amazing!*). Even try amplifying them.

For example, when I'm really nervous, I shiver. In the past, the shivers could grow strong enough to prevent me from speaking or performing. Before a concert some years ago, instead of resisting, I tried to amplify the symptom and shiver more. At first, I just went with the shivering motion, then gradually increased it until I was shaking like crazy, the difference being that now I was intentionally shivering. I was the driver instead of the passenger. By mimicking the nervous shaking and intensifying it, I was gradually able to slow it down and stop it. I think I also used up the nervous energy. As in aikido, I blended with the energy of the attack and redirected it. It was a fun learning.

2. **Transform the inner mugger:** Prior to the presentation, notice your internal dialogue. Is it friendly or hostile? If it's friendly, great. Keep it. If not, blend and redirect. Acknowledge the voice and work with it.

For instance, when I'm feeling intimidated by a workshop group, my inner mugger will say things like: *They won't like this presentation. They'll see right through you. You're not good enough for this group.* Right? You know the words. Not terribly useful. I used to try to ignore this attacking voice, but aikido teaches that it's not safe to ignore the attack. The more I ignore, fight, or otherwise resist my nervousness, the worse it gets.

Instead, I pay attention. I notice the voice, listen, and maybe even ask my inner mugger a few questions, like: *So why won't they like it? See through what? What would be good enough? How are these folks different from our other groups?* I regularly receive illuminating answers. In any case, I do have fun and—guess what? Listening to the attacking voice tends to quiet it. What about your inner mugger? What critical messages does it send? Write them down.

Attacking voice:

- _____
- _____
- _____

By acknowledging the attacking voice, I can replace it with a more supportive one: *I'm ready. I can handle this. I have a worthwhile message, and these people are interested in hearing it. This is going to be fun.* What inner support can you give yourself before a performance?

Supportive voice:

- _____
- _____
- _____

3. **Visualize the ideal:** Another inspiring method of preparation is to visualize your presentation beforehand. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and see in your mind's eye your highest imagining of what you're about to do. Start a week or more before the performance date. Spend ten minutes each day watching yourself give a great presentation. Imagine feeling calm and confident. Hear your message. Sense your excellent connection with the audience. Picture the conclusion, the group's praise and applause ringing in your ears, feeling happiness, and knowing you did your best.

You're On: Maintaining Connection

I usually find that once I'm in front of the audience, my nervous energy has an outlet. As I begin to sing or speak, the energy moves into vocal form and physical action. As I connect verbally and visually with the people in front of me, I lose my self-absorbed state and link up with my purpose. Events can occur, however, to interrupt that connection. I may get lost in a thought tangent, forget the song lyrics, or just "go up" as actors call it. *Hmmm, where was I?* Or a question throws me, and I lose my balance. Experience has shown me three powerful ways to get back into the flow.

1. **Remember your purpose for the presentation.** What are you here to do? What's important about your message? Stop, breathe, and sink to a deeper level of awareness. Find your voice. It helps to be able to describe your presentation's purpose in a word or phrase that goes right to its heart. For example, I am often

teaching about conflict, communication, or managing difficult people and situations, but the purpose of all my work is self-management and connection. When I get lost, these words help me find my way back.

2. **Get comfortable with silence.** Great presenters, singers, actors, and performance artists of all forms are at home with silence. They don't have to talk, because they love *being*. They enjoy the ability to hold an audience with their presence. If they lose their place, they can stand there as long as it takes to find it again—forever if needed.

You can practice this important skill by taking short breaks between sentences. Or by waiting a second or two just before or just after making an important point. Stand very still, keep breathing, and watch your audience take in the message. Or when you put a question out to the audience, don't let your discomfort with silence rush you into answering it yourself. Wait an appropriate period of time and then wait just a little longer. Let the question sit there, waiting for a response, while you watch yourself learning to be comfortable with silence. Someone will usually speak up and if not, it won't matter because you're enjoying the moment.

3. **Look into their eyes.** Don't be afraid. The audience is your ally. If you don't think so, you are doing them and yourself a great disservice and you will eventually force them into being a judge. They want you to be good. Believing this will help you fulfill their hopes.

When you have lost your connection with the audience, make eye contact with one person at a time for about three to five seconds each, or as long as it takes to recognize that you've seen each other. Don't make a big deal of it, just rest your eyes on someone for three seconds, move to another and do the same thing. You will tap their energy and they will receive yours, creating a reinforcing loop of support. When you begin to "lose it," making eye contact with a few individuals is one of the fastest ways to re-connect.

Tips and Suggestions:

As you begin to enjoy being in front of an audience, here are a few more suggestions to keep in mind.

- **A successful presentation will depend on two things: *delivery* and *content*.** So often we spend our time perfecting the content of our presentation, with very little left over for practicing the delivery. Don't forget to practice! Practice for peers, friends, relatives, or anyone who will listen. Take a course, watch a video, or read some of the marvelous books on this topic (see below for some titles). Join a local branch of Toastmasters International or other networking group where you can gain confidence and perfect your personal style.

- **Center and extend *ki*.** In aikido, as the attack comes, we center ourselves and extend our life energy (*ki*) to greet the attack, align with it, and redirect it with intention and purpose. You can do this in any difficult situation. Breathe low into your chest and abdomen, focus on your center of gravity (about two inches below the navel), and imagine your energy extending outward from center and encompassing your audience. Make eye contact and invite them into your sphere.
- **Don't take questions personally.** Even difficult questions show interest on the part of the audience. Smile and thank the questioner. Relate the question to something in your presentation if possible. If you can't answer, perhaps the group can. There are often people in the audience who can help, and I find it refreshing to let someone else be the teacher. I also learn a lot!
- **Don't assume the audience knows anything about your topic (even if they do).** Educate, go slowly, and check in from time to time. Use phrases like: "Does this make sense?" and "Are there any questions, comments, or insights at this point?"
- **Arrive in time to greet the attendees** and learn some of their names. Audiences tell me that this meeting and greeting action makes them feel acknowledged and that they're in good hands. It also helps *me* feel comfortable.
- **Change your perspective from "presentation" to "conversation."** Treating your presentation as if it were a conversation with each person in the audience will help you relax and increase your connection with them.

Acknowledge your nervous energy and appreciate what's behind it—the desire to do your best. Before long, your nervous symptoms will be like old friends you wave to on your way to a powerful performance.

Good luck! Let me know if this article has been useful by contacting me at <http://www.JudyRinger.com>

Resources

Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict, by Judy Ringer

How To Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less, by Milo O. Frank

You Are The Message, by Roger Ailes

Your Voice at its Best, by David Blair McClosky

Toastmasters International (<http://www.toastmasters.org/>)

FAQs about Conflict, by Judy Ringer <http://www.JudyRinger.com>

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About the Author: Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, containing stories and practices on the connection between aikido, conflict, and living a purposeful life. She is also a professional singer and public speaker. As the founder of

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