



Leverage your nervous energy!

Tips and techniques for converting anxiety into positive energy.

By Anne Scarlett, Printed in RainToday; PSMJ's AE Marketing Journal;
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Have you ever dreamt of channeling your nervous anxiety into a positive energy? You're not alone. This is the most frequent question I am asked by A/E/C professionals and college students. I have good news for you all! Many people have mastered techniques to not just help them overcome anxiety, but to actually *capitalize* on its benefits.

Stress is the activation of a hormonal release (adrenaline). In nature, stress is a useful physiological reaction to environmental challenges. Stress actually enhances survival rates. Predators and prey experience this hormonal push. For both, it sets the body up for necessary functions and suppresses what is not needed (digestion down / heart rate up). In humans, stress can also be positive, resulting in sharper focus, concentration, and energy. Who doesn't want this?

At times during business interactions, we become challenged, stunted, or even paralyzed by anxiety. For some, it happens when we are required to deliver a sales pitch or a formal presentation, or when we are expected to network among a crowded room of strangers. For still others, anxiety envelops us when we are involved in meetings with clients, or even with teammates.

Why not reframe your thinking to believe that nervous energy is better than no energy at all? With a positive mindset, you can transform your nerves into a vibrant, engaging, energetic persona. Below is a list of tips and techniques for making the most out of this energy. Some will work for you, and others may not. Consider using a combination of techniques, and brainstorm with colleagues about what works best for them. Most important, select a few, and give them a chance ---*a real, fighting chance*---to work for you by testing the techniques in multiple scenarios.

- **VISUALIZE SUCCESS.** Call me hokey, but I guarantee that if you give visualization a chance, you'll never go without again! Athletes do it (think about that invisible string between your golf ball and the hole). Visualize your scenario from two perspectives: you as you, and you watching you. For example, if it's a presentation, then envision:
 1. The specific room environment (if you know it)
 2. People nodding and engaged with you
 3. Your energetic, irresistible, charming persona
 4. Mutual listening (don't forget to envision yourself as a listener!) and exchange of ideas and information
 5. All the details, ranging from operating technical equipment; fielding questions during Q&A; laughter; and people giving you kudos afterwards

Whether it's a presentation, a meeting, a networking function, or any other situation where you'll feel put on the spot, take your visualization to the highest possible level of detail. Don't give up; be relentless in your positivity. And remember, it's your visualization to create for yourself so make it powerful!

- **BREATHING EXERCISES.** Again, before you dismiss this tip as something that only works for yogis and singers, give it a chance. These are the two breathing techniques that I use most frequently. They will work whether you are alone in a quiet room, or whether you are just about to enter a situation that is causing your anxiety.

1. **Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR):** Systematically move through various muscle groups, tightening and releasing one at a time.
2. **Diaphragmatic breathing:** Expand the belly out when inhaling, and draw the belly in towards the spine when exhaling. Ensure that the air enters deep into the belly, not into the shallow chest area. Lengthen both the exhale and inhale for as many counts as possible.

For more details, there's an abundance of resources around controlled breathing available on the internet.

- **PRACTICE AND PREPARE (LIKE THERE'S NO TOMORROW).** When it's possible to actually practice (eg formal presentations, project interview pitches), then do this:
 1. Practice the presentation from beginning to end at least three times.
 2. Practice the first few minutes (along with the concluding remarks) at least three additional times. This way, you're guaranteed to get off to a great start, and to conclude with impact.
 3. Practice in small segments. Don't wait until the visual presentation is perfect before starting to practice the language you'll be using. In particular, if your presentation is longer than 50 minutes, feel free to practice in segments. Otherwise, you run the risk of waiting until the very last minute to actually put your mouth around the words to see how they will sound during delivery.
 4. Accept that it will come out differently each time. There's no need for the actual presentation to be word-for-word! Acknowledge that it will be terrific because you'll know your content so well.
 5. Remember that you are the only one who knows what you are intending to say. It's your little secret. The audience has only a cursory expectation of the content. So don't apologize, or fret about forgetting something. It's likely that they'll never know you made a 'mistake'.
- **FUNNEL ENERGY INTO GESTURES AND EXPRESSIONS.** Ever see someone jiggle their leg when nervous? How about clench their jaw or hands? Extra energy gives you the chance to positively invigorate your gestures, expressions, and vocal variety (pace/pause and modulation). It allows you to be dramatic and engaging. Everyone can learn best practices for body language if they really try. The internet has abundant resources on the topic, and I'd be glad to share my favorites.
- **SMILE. REALLY SMILE.** If needed to produce a sincere smile, use a positive trigger. My triggers: the sound of a child's giggle; the look on your dog's face when you get home; your next vacation. Smiling works wonders to make you feel good, and you're going to get them back from others. It's a wonderful cycle. A returned smile leads to warmth, warmth leads to connection, and connection leads to...converted tension!
- **PREPARE FOR SPONTANEITY.** Experienced speakers and networkers know that in order to appear off-the-cuff and relaxed, they need to be clear on their message and goals. In other words, they prepare to appear spontaneous! Whether you are participating in a meeting, or delivering a presentation, make sure you have prepared readable notes (using key phrases for easy reference).
- **REPLACE YOUR NEGATIVE CRITIC WITH POSITIVE SELF-TALK.** Oh sure, it sounds cheesy. You've seen it in the movies, those stereotypical sales people or those new age hippies who look at themselves in the mirror and say things like: 'You are brilliant.' 'Today you will shine.' 'You are a magnet of positive energy.' 'People will respect you.' 'You will teach others.' This self-talk stuff is not just some fleeting fad. When done as part of a system of other techniques, it can really work. Because let's face it. Sometimes you have to be your own coach, and give yourself your own positive reinforcement. How about this: 'Today, I will transform my nervous energy into positive enthusiasm!' If playfulness gives you an extra boost, you can say these things in a silly voice. I often do.

You can also write notes to self-soothe. Here are some of mine: "Relax." "Chill out." "Breathe." "Tomorrow." "Success." "Wind-in-trees." "It's over in two hours." Get the idea?

In addition to self-talk, I'm constantly self-bribing. I choose a 'reward' to give myself at the conclusion of the presentation, networking event, or meeting. My rewards range from sushi dinners to bubble baths to a cab ride home.

- **LOOK FOR THE FRIENDLIEST FACE.** Whether in a meeting, networking function, or formal presentation, scan the environment for the friendliest face, and keep going back to it for a boost. If possible, greet that person in advance. Make sure you've got your own friendly face on! The best test: If you could see yourself and your expression right in that moment, would you want to meet you?

Some professionals in the A/E/C industry become 'low energy' when in public scenarios. Believe it or not, experienced communicators actually embrace a bit of nervous energy, because they fully trust that the energy will keep them from being flat. You can do the same! Re-shape your thinking, and give some of these tips a try.