

## business issues

# LEVERAGE YOUR NERVOUS ENERGY!

BY ANNE SCARLETT

A myriad of tips for converting anxiety into positive energy.

**HAVE YOU EVER** dreamt of channeling your nervous anxiety into a positive energy that works for instead of against you?

You're not alone. This is the most frequent problem that AEC professionals and college students approach me with.

But I have good news for you: Many professionals have mastered techniques to not only help them overcome anxiety, but also actually capitalize on its benefits.

Do you find it hard to believe that anxiety can be beneficial? Here's a reminder of what many of us already know: 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. Both predators and prey (e.g., lions and zebras) may experience this hormonal push. It's actually beneficial for both, as it sets the body up for necessary functions and suppresses what is not needed (e.g., digestion rate goes down, heart rate goes up). While stress related to meeting with clients might not be on the same level as being chased by lions, it can be channeled into similar positive reactions, such as sharper focus, better concentration and higher energy.

Focus, concentration and energy. Who doesn't want this?

During business interactions, we become challenged, stunted or even downright paralyzed by anxiety. For some of us, it happens when we are required to deliver a sales pitch or a formal presentation. For others, it occurs when we are expected to network among a crowded room of strangers. And for some, anxiety envelops us when we are involved in informal meetings with clients, or even with our internal teammates.

Why not reframe your thinking to believe that nervous en-

ergy is better than no energy at all? Why not embrace those nerves and recognize that there's a fine line between being nervous and being enthusiastic? You can cross that line.

Remember the positive tension you felt when you walked across the platform to accept your university degree? Or the positive tension you felt before you were about to perform in a school play, or about to start a game? With a positive mindset, you can transform your nerves into a vibrant, engaging, energetic persona.

Think back to some of your more stressful work scenarios. When does your anxiety build? What do you do about it, and how can you put it to best use? I've created a master list of tips and techniques. Some will work for you and others may not. Consider using a combination of them and brainstorm with colleagues about what works best for them as well. (You'll find that everyone will have a different combination of what works best.) 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

First off, give visualization a chance. You'll be surprised with how well it can work. 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 of your next presentation (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! Success has a much better chance of happening if you can see it happening.



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## Breathing Exercises

Now 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 you anxiety.

1. Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR): Systematically move through the various muscle groups in your body, tightening and releasing one at a time.
2. Diaphragmatic breathing: Expand your stomach out when inhaling, then draw it in towards your spine when exhaling. Visualize filling your core with air, stomach first, then chest. Lengthen both the exhale and inhale for as many counts as possible.

For more details, there's an abundance of information on controlled breathing on the Internet.

## Practice and Prepare

When it's possible to actually practice (for formal presentations, project interview pitches, etc.), try 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 finish with a big 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 Your Energy Appropriately

Ever see someone jiggle their leg when nervous? How about clench their jaw or hands? Extra energy gives you the chance to really invigorate your gestures, expressions and vocal variety (pace/pause and modulation). It allows you to be dramatic and engaging. Virtually everyone can learn best practices for body language if they really try. Feel free to ask me for my favorites.

## Smile, Really Smile

If needed to produce a sincere smile, then feel free to use a positive trigger to turn your face into a warm, open countenance. My triggers: the sound of a child's giggle; the look on your dog's face when you get home; your next vacation; the project you recently completed. 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 (and hopefully more business).

## Prepare Good Notes

Full preparation for every single situation is not possible; sometimes we must think on our feet. However, when you do have an opportunity to prepare, then "winging it" is not cool. It's just plain dumb. Experienced speakers and networkers know that in order to appear off-the-cuff and relaxed, they actually need to be somewhat clear on their message and their goals. In other words, they actually 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). Networking has its own separate set of preparation methods, but this is best suited for a separate article.

## Squash Your Inner Critic

"What if I bore people?" "What if I'm asked a question that I can't answer?" "What if I lose my train of thought?" "What if no one will talk to me?" "What if I am undermined?" "What if I embarrass myself?" "What if they know more than I know?"

Avoid this downward spiral of negativity... unless you intend to answer every one of those questions with a positive spin. Instead, replace that negative critic with positive build-up.

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-buttering-up is not just a 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 one: "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." "Cahuita Beach, Costa Rica." "It's over in two hours." Get the idea?

In addition to self-building, I'm constantly self-bribing. I choose a "reward" for myself at the conclusion of the presentation, networking event, or meeting. These range from sushi dinners to bubble baths to taking a cab home instead of public transit.

## Look for the Friendliest Face

Whether it's in a meeting, a networking function or a formal presentation, scan the environment for the friendliest face, and keep going back to it if you need a boost. It doesn't matter if you know the person or not, just look for that open, friendly, potentially smiling face. (If it's possible, greet that person in advance with a handshake.) And of course, 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?

Many professionals in the AEC industry lose 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. I look forward to hearing your success stories!

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