

USE A RATIONAL APPROACH TO CALM INTERVIEW JITTERS

BY EUGENE RAUDSEPP

It's normal to be nervous before job interviews, but some job seekers go to extremes. They're so fearful and apprehensive that they become tongue-tied, talk too much or say the wrong things.

Most experts agree that a manageable level of stress can actually improve interview performance. "It quickens our mind, sharpens our conversation and pumps more adrenaline into our system," says Ray DiGiuseppe, Ph.D., director of the Institute of Rational Emotive Therapy in New York. "At a zero level of tension, there's no concern, no arousal and you aren't keyed up to perform well."

But if your blood pressure rises too much and your palms become too clammy, you need to control your reactions. The key to calmness is learning not to exaggerate an interview's importance. Lowering the stakes can reduce your stress level considerably.

In contrast, if you believe that you must succeed at all costs; your tension level will soar. You'll be a self-conscious spectator of your behavior, watching and judging every word during the meeting. Not only does this make you less convincing and more anxious, it also divides your attention.

Excessive self-consciousness is most common among perfectionists who feel they can't afford to fail. Any real or imaginary deviation from their self-imposed, often unrealistic, standards triggers more nervousness and self-critical ruminations.

"The self-imposed pressure of trying to ace an interview can make someone focus too much on how he looks and acts," says Steven Berglas, Ph.D., an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "Research has shown that this self-consciousness not only can prevent individuals from responding to questions with confidence, it can actually cause them to perform at levels below their demonstrated capabilities."





REDUCING INTERVIEW TENSION

Even preparing your responses in advance can hurt if you're too anxious. You'll tend to be over-prepared, which chokes your spontaneity and your ability to field unexpected questions.

H. Anthony Medley, author of "Sweaty Palms: The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed" (1992, Ten Speed Press), offers the following four reasons why you have nothing to fear but fear itself during interviews:

1. Interviews center on the subject you know best: yourself.
2. If you've done your homework, you have an advantage: You know more about the interviewer and his company than he or she knows about you.
3. Interviewers expect you to be nervous.
4. You have nothing to lose. You didn't have a job offer before the interview. If you don't have one after it, you're no worse off than before.

Remind yourself that whatever happens, you're sure to survive another day. And the less you worry about making mistakes, the less anxious you'll be. Worrying about an experience is always more unpleasant than the experience itself.

Try to generate several interviews so you won't place all your hopes on one of them. "With back-ups in mind, you'll feel more relaxed going in, and you'll actually stand a better chance of landing the job," says Miriam Mennin, a career counselor in Hartsdale, N.Y. "Potential employers are quick to spot desperation and are turned off by it."

Never confront interviewers, regardless of how tense you're feeling. Instead of making them the butt of your misdirected anxiety, tell yourself that they're only human and treat them as good friends.

Another way to reduce stress is to visualize how you want to come across, then separate yourself from your performance, says Laura Darius, president of Corporate Communication Skills Inc., a New York executive-training firm. Develop an image of an ideal executive or perfect candidate for the job, and then model your behavior after this image. "Just as an actor or actress creates the character in his script, you must try to create a character for the position you're seeking," she says.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

To reduce stress, some candidates practice relaxation exercises before interviews. Daralee Schulman, a New York City-based career counselor, teaches candidates the following technique: Visualize a serene and beautiful scene, such as a moonlit beach, while becoming aware of your breathing rhythm. As you inhale, think "I am." When you exhale, think "calm." Breathe at least 10 times, and then recall a successful interview experience.



Doe Lang, who runs stress-reduction workshops in New York for actors, politicians and other public speakers, offers a more advanced breathing technique. Relax and exhale completely. Next, close your mouth and place your thumb of your right hand on your right nostril so that it's completely closed. Then slowly and deeply inhale and exhale through your left nostril at least 25 to 30 times.

This allows you to tap into the right hemisphere of your brain, particularly the limbic part that governs emotions. You'll experience an immediate reduction of your anxiety level and feel more relaxed and controlled during the meeting.

POWER OF VISUALIZATION

Many top athletes use visualization techniques to reduce anxiety, improve concentration and enhance athletic performance. Chris Evert, for example, tried to visualize opponents' shots, form and strategy before championship matches. She then pictured how she would counter their maneuvers.

Jack Nicklaus gives the following description of how he programs his internal "bio-computer" before golf tournaments: "I never hit a shot, even in practice, without having a sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head. It's like a color movie. First, I 'see' the ball where I want it to finish...I 'see' the ball going there: its path, trajectory and shape...the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous image into reality."

As in sporting events, when interviewing for a job, a high level of performance is required for a short period. Thus, using visualization techniques can help build confidence and reduce anxiety. The trick is to create a memory of a successful meeting. When interviewing, you'll feel a sense of *deja vu*, as though you had the experience before. The following steps are helpful when starting to visualize:

Find a tranquil, quiet place where you'll be totally undisturbed.

Purge your mind of ordinary concerns, worries and preoccupations. Eliminate thoughts that aren't directly pertinent to your visualization and find a quiet mental space.

Lie down with your legs uncrossed and your arms at your sides. Close your eyes and inhale slowly, expanding your chest and lower abdomen. Pause for a moment. Then exhale slowly and relax your chest and abdomen. Inhale and exhale until you feel deeply relaxed. As you become more tranquil, breathe more slowly and evenly.

Relax your feet and legs and imagine that they're becoming heavy. Say to yourself, "My feet and legs are becoming more and more relaxed. They're now deeply relaxed." Pause, and then repeat this on your ankles, thighs, pelvis, stomach, back and chest. Rest a moment. Then repeat it with your hands, forearms, upper arms and shoulders. Pause, and then relax the muscles of your neck and jaw. Allow your jaw to drop. Relax your tongue, cheeks, eyes and forehead. Rest and enjoy a totally relaxed feeling.



To relax more deeply, imagine that you're alone in an elevator. Visualize the doors closing, then the numbers showing the floor level. Imagine that you're on the tenth floor and going to the first. Feel the descending motion as the elevator drops. As the elevator passes each floor, you'll enter a deeper, calmer mental state. When you reach the first floor, your mind will be open and tranquil.

When the elevator doors open, imagine that you're sitting in a comfortable chair in a dimly lit room. Picture a large screen on a wall. You're now ready to begin visualizing, as follows:

With your eyes closed, create at least four distinct images of an interview situation. In the first, imagine meeting and introducing yourself to the interviewer. In the second, picture yourself calmly and confidently answering the interviewer's questions. In the third, see yourself sitting and talking to an interviewer convincingly and with self-assurance. Now visualize the interview ending positively.

Make sure that each scene is sharp, clear and detailed. Concentrate on the details. If your mind wanders, return to the images and scenes you're creating. Experience all the feelings of having successfully accomplished each scene.

Next, believe that the interview's positive ending has actually occurred. Focus your will and energy on this visualization. See it clearly enough to believe it's real. Picture and describe yourself after completing the interview. What would you be doing? Feeling? Saying? Use all of your senses to experience the consequences of successfully completing the interview.

Finally, believe that you deserve to have a successful interview. Talk positively to yourself about your value to an employer and why you should be hired.

Repeat the sessions at least three times before the actual interview, visualizing for as long as you like. With repeated visualizations you can enrich the scenes with more detail and perfect the outcome. When you want to resume normal consciousness, mentally return to the elevator and ascend to the tenth floor. When the door opens, open your eyes. Chances are you'll feel rested, strong and determined.

Interviews are experiences that improve with practice. As your fear subsides, you'll perform better. You'll gain confidence in your interviewing skills and, ultimately, you'll be performing as well as the person you visualized.