

PERFORM UNDER PRESSURE

The brain's four shortcuts to thinking clearly, communicating sharply and building connection when the stakes are high.

1 · PAUSE

The foundation for everything. Act your way to calm.

2 · DISTANCE

Zoom out and see your value objectively.

3 · PRIME

See it before it happens.

4 · CONNECT

More than facts: stories and trust.

How to use the toolkit: Start with Pause, because it makes the other techniques possible. Then choose one technique that fits your next situation, and make your plan on the sheet. Test, reflect and adjust. Repetition is what turns it into a habit.

PAUSE

The foundation for everything

THE SITUATION

You're about to perform: an important pitch, a difficult conversation with an employee or a critical question from senior management. Your heart is pounding, and your mind goes blank.

THE KEY INSIGHT

You can't always think your way to calm. But you can act your way there.

Under pressure, the brain's alarm system takes over. It reacts in about 80 milliseconds, even to a social threat such as a difficult conversation or a sceptical look from senior management. Meanwhile the "CEO", the part of the brain responsible for overview and nuance, is pushed aside. Working memory can drop from about 90% to about 30%. You still know it. You just can't reach it.

DO IT

Breathe: 2 in, 4 out

In through your nose, longer and slower out through your mouth. It lowers your heart rate and stress hormones and gives your body the signal "I'm okay".

Take the strategic pause

Before you answer a difficult question: breathe out slowly and count to three. You come across as calm and have time to retrieve what you prepared.

Bring the CEO back

Going blank? Notice the colours in the room one by one, or count backwards from 150. It moves your focus from the alarm back to thinking.

COMMIT · YOUR PLAN

Choose one technique, and use it within the next 48 hours.

If _____

then _____

1 · TEST

Use the technique in a real situation.

2 · REFLECT

What worked? What did you notice?

3 · ADJUST

Adapt it, and test again.

Repetition is what turns it into a habit.

DISTANCE

Zoom out and see your value objectively

THE SITUATION

You're about to perform: a negotiation, a presentation to senior management or a decision with a lot at stake. You get far too close to yourself and become your own harshest critic.

THE KEY INSIGHT

When you look at yourself from the outside, stress drops and clarity returns.

Research on self-distancing shows that when you prepare in the third person, you get lower stress, better performance and less rumination afterwards. It also becomes easier to see your own value, instead of being your own harshest critic.

DO IT

Write your intro in the third person

"[Your name] has ...": three short sentences about your experience, your choices and your skills. Then say it in the first person.

Shift your focus to what you can control

In your control: preparation, routines, focus, what you communicate and how. **Not in your control:** the other people, the chemistry, the decision.

Shift perspective

When you prepare in the third person, you force yourself to look at the situation objectively, from the outside. You step out of the emotions and into the overview.

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Source: Kross et al. (2014), Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

PRIME

See it before it happens

THE SITUATION

You're about to perform: a sales meeting, a conference talk or a difficult meeting with a client. You've got the content under control, but not how it will feel to stand there.

THE KEY INSIGHT

Preparation gives you the content. Visualisation lets you rehearse the experience.

The brain trains even when you only imagine an action. In one study, mental training alone increased little-finger strength by about 35%, while physical training gave about 53%. When you play a situation through in advance, you're not meeting it for the first time when the stakes are high.

DO IT

5-10 minutes before it counts

Close your eyes and see the situation going well: the room, the people, your first sentences, a difficult question you answer calmly.

Write it down in the present tense

"I take the floor calmly ...", "I solve ...". The present tense tells the brain it is already true.

Choose one word for your attitude

For example "calm", "curious" or "sharp". Let the word guide how you walk through the door and how you answer.

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Source: Ranganathan et al. (2004), Cleveland Clinic, Neuropsychologia.

CONNECT

More than facts

THE SITUATION

You're about to perform: a pitch to an investor, a first meeting with a new partner or a change message to your team. You have the arguments, but they also need to be remembered.

THE KEY INSIGHT

People remember stories and trust those they feel connected to.

Stories are remembered far better than facts and data, because they give the brain a person, a sequence and a feeling to hang the information on. And mirroring, meeting the other person in language, energy and pace, is a shortcut to trust.

DO IT

Wrap one skill in a story

A specific situation, what you did, and what it achieved. Link it to exactly what they need. Let data be the proof, not the message.

Mirror them

Use their words and their language, match their energy and pace, and mirror their body language discreetly.

Ask one curious question

"What matters most to you right now?" A genuine question shifts the focus from your nerves to the other person, and gives you something to connect your story to.

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