

Defeating Anxiety in Interviews

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Early in my career I remember an interview with a director for a position I really wanted. He had a reputation for giving difficult questions in an interview to try to trick you and to see how smart you were. As the interview drew closer my anxiety increased, as did the butterflies in my stomach. The day of the interview came and I walked into the interview with heart pounding, foggy brain and sweaty palms. Instead of butterflies in my stomach, I swore there were bats! The interviewer asked some logic questions that weren't difficult, but in the haze of my anxious mind, I struggled to solve them. After the interview, when the adrenaline and cortisol cleared, the answers were obvious. What I'd experienced was a minor fight or flight response, similar to what I'd get if I was facing a man-eating tiger in the jungle. My brain was treating the interviewer as the tiger, even though there was no real threat to my life. I've since learned about how that fight or flight response works, and come up with strategies for dealing with it. Do I still get nervous in interviews? Sure. But now I know what you can do to keep your wits about you. Here are 5 tips that you can try next time your interviewer starts looking like a man-eating tiger.

1. Power Body Language

Next time you're at a sporting event, look at the body language of the winners and notice what they do, compared to the losers. When we're victorious, confident and proud, we show this with power body language. We take up more space with our posture, arms and legs. When we win, we'll often reach our arms to the sky with a big grin on our face. When we lose, we do just the opposite. Our heads go down, shoulders come forward and we shrink. Interestingly, this happens even with congenitally blind athletes from around the world, showing that this kind of body language is innate in who we are as human beings. There's even some research that suggests our posture and expressions affects our moods. Want to feel like a winner going into your interview? Then show it in your posture, gestures and expressions. You'll not only come across as more confident and competent, but you'll feel it too.

When I'm about to interview now, I try to find some time in my car to be very expansive with my body language and hype myself up. Maybe even listen to some music that gets me feeling excited. Then as I go into the building, I dial back the power a bit, so as not to come across as too aggressive. If you end up waiting awhile for your interviewer, resist the temptation to hunch over your phone. With your head down and shoulders rolled forward, you're now in a low power position that will have the opposite effect on you and how you're perceived. Keep your head high, shoulders back and show your confidence with good eye contact. Do this enough, and you'll feel more ready for those tough questions..

2. Tactical Breathing

Unlike the fight or flight response we get when going into an interview, military soldiers can find themselves in real life threatening situations. When our primitive brain takes control to help keep us safe, it can make higher level cognitive thinking difficult. This is a problem if you're in a fire fight, trying to think strategy and tactics. To help make sure they can keep their wits about them in life threatening moments, some soldiers use a technique called 'combative tactical breathing'. It's a way to help calm the fight or flight response enough to allow for the higher thinking part of our brain to stay engaged. While we aren't really in any danger in an interview, the physiological response is similar. Try this breathing technique to help keep the fight or flight brain from completely taking over. Inhale for 4 seconds, exhale for 4 seconds and then repeat. Focusing on your breathing switches to the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps counteract the effects of being nervous.

3. Killing the ANTs

You know that little voice in your head that's always talking? If you just asked yourself, 'What voice?' that's the voice I'm talking about. When you're about to go into an interview, or some other high stakes situation, is that voice generally helpful or harmful? Dr. Daniel Amen, a psychiatrist and a brain disorder specialist, coined the mnemonic A.N.T., or Automatic Negative Thoughts. The negative self-talk that seems so common when we're under stress has a direct impact on what chemicals our body produces, which dictates what we feel. What does he suggest you do about negative thoughts that pop into your head? He has 3 steps to get rid of the A.N.T's, and lessen the negative feelings. First, **write down your thoughts** that are running through your head. This will get the thoughts out of your head where they may sound reasonable and believable. This gives you a chance to more objectively assess if the thoughts are true or helpful. Second, go through your list and ask yourself if these thoughts are true. After you've listed the thoughts and assessed them, the third step is to TALK BACK to your thoughts like a teenager might talk back to his/her parents. Challenging these toxic ideas with a bit of attitude and righteous indignation helps lesson the fight or flight reaction.

4. Re-framing

The Internet is full of memes with variations of the slogan "Keep Calm AND Carry On". How often do we tell ourselves to calm down before our interviews? Does that usually work? Alison Brooks at Harvard Business School decided to see if that's really the best approach when your stomach is full of butterflies before an anxious moment. When anxious, your body is in a heightened physiological state. Your heart rate goes up and your body prepares you for action. When you're excited, there's a similar heightened response. Through a series of experiments, Alison found that instead of trying to calm that racing heart, it may be more effective to just reframe/re-label the anxiety as excitement. Your heart might still be beating like it's going to jump out of your chest, but telling yourself that it's because you're excited can 'trick' your brain and help you perform. As you start to feel your heart beating, tell yourself it's because you're excited and your body is getting you prepared to perform at your best. This not only helps you feel better during the interview, but the interviewer will see and appreciate your positive passion and excitement about the opportunity.



5. Finding common ground

After reframing your own feelings, another trick that can help is to also reframe how you view those interviewing you. Fight or flight response is because we're viewing the interviewer as a threat. Of course that will make us more nervous. Would you feel more at ease if you were talking to a friend instead? What if you could change the dynamic of the interview so it was friendlier? This can be tricky as you also want to maintain a professional interaction. What I often do to try to make a friend without making the interview too casual is to simply find some common ground. Is there something in their office, on their laptop or some other artifact that you could bring up to share a common interest in? We tend to like people that are like us and like the things we do. Find that common ground and you'll not only feel more at ease, but the interviewer will have more positive and friendly feelings towards you, influencing their hiring decision.

So, the next time you have a big interview and you feel your hands getting sweaty and the butterflies start to flutter, try these 5 tricks. It will help you to keep your wits about you, so you can highlight your skills and strengths and show what an awesome employee you'd make! And remember, the more you practice, the easier this all gets and the better you'll be at interviewing.