Nerves before a big moment

Interviews, presentations, exams and other times when it counts.

Nerves before something important are your body getting ready to perform. The pounding heart and the butterflies are the same adrenaline that sharpens your focus and gives you energy. The aim is to do the thing well while nervous. You do not need to feel calm first.

Three useful facts

- **You look calmer than you feel.** Nobody can see your heart rate. Most signs of nerves that feel huge from the inside are barely visible from the outside.
- **The audience is on your side.** Interviewers want to find a good candidate. Listeners want the talk to go well. Nobody is hoping you fail.
- **Nerves peak early.** The first two minutes are the hardest. After that, they nearly always ease.

In the run-up

Preparation that helps

- Practising out loud, not only in your head
- Knowing your opening lines well
- Preparing answers to the questions you dread most
- Checking the practical things: time, place, technology
- Keeping sleep, food and movement steady

Preparation that backfires

- Learning every word by heart
- Rehearsing late into the night
- Planning for every possible disaster
- Asking for reassurance again and again
- Cancelling or calling in sick

On the day

1. Arrive early enough not to rush.
2. Before you start: feet on the floor, and one slow breath out, longer than the breath in.
3. Put your attention on the task and the people, not on yourself. What are they asking? What do they need to hear?
4. If your mind goes blank, pause. Take a sip of water. Look at your notes. Say "Let me come back to that." A pause feels far longer to you than to anyone else.
5. Slow down. Nerves speed everyone up.

Afterwards

- Skip the post-mortem. Going over every moment makes the next time harder.
- Write down three things that went well enough, and one thing you would do differently.
- Give yourself credit for turning up.

> **Note**
> You do not have to get rid of the nerves. You can be nervous and still do it well.

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My plan for a big moment

For an interview, a presentation, an exam or any event that matters.

Name _____ Date _____

The event, and when it is

What I am afraid will happen

How likely does that feel right now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Certain

What a calm, fair friend would say about that

Getting ready

What I will practise, and when

Out loud, with a timer or with a friend

My opening

The first thing I will say or do

If my mind goes blank or I stumble, I will...

The night before

- [ ] Early night
- [ ] Things packed
- [ ] Alarm set

Just before

- [ ] Arrive early
- [ ] Breathe out
- [ ] Look outwards

Afterwards

What actually happened, and how did that compare with what I feared?

What went well enough

What I would do differently next time

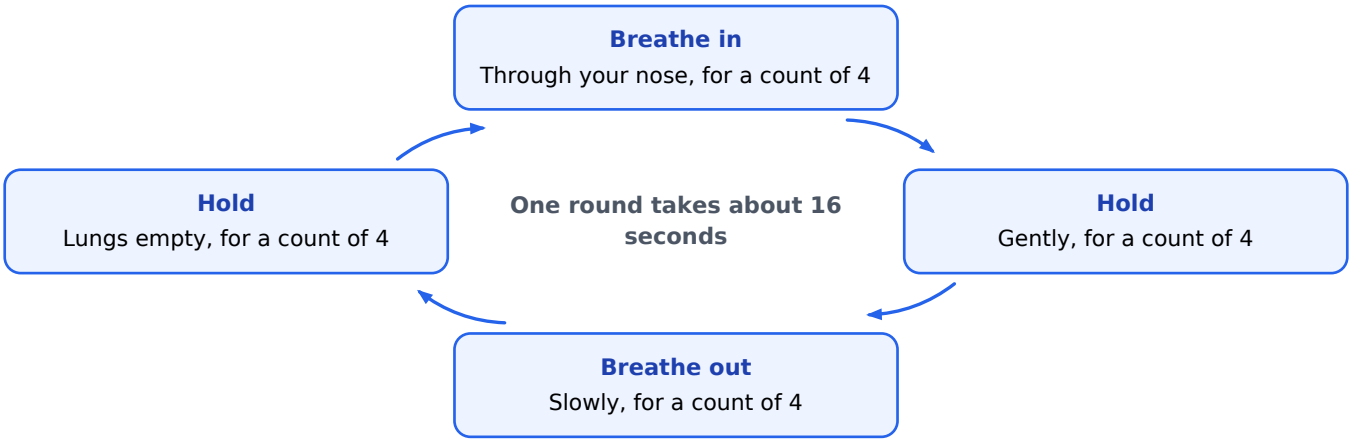
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Box breathing

Four equal sides: in, hold, out, hold.

Box breathing slows your breath into four equal parts. Counting gives your mind one simple job, and the slower rhythm tells your body that it can stand down. Most people feel a difference within a minute or two.



How to do it

1. Sit with your feet on the floor, or stand. Let your shoulders drop.
2. Breathe in through your nose for a slow count of 4. Let your belly move, not your chest.
3. Hold for 4, with your throat and jaw loose.
4. Breathe out for 4. Then hold for 4 with your lungs empty.
5. Go round four to six times. Then let your breathing go back to normal.

Tips

- **Picture the box.** Trace a square with a finger: up, across, down, across.
- **Shrink the box if you need to.** Count to 3, or shorten the holds.
- **Practise when calm,** twice a day, so that it is there when you need it.

Day	When I practised	Rounds	How I felt after
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Go gently

Holding your breath does not suit everyone. If you feel dizzy or panicky, stop and breathe normally. If you are pregnant or have a heart or lung condition, leave out the holds, or check with your GP first.

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The spotlight effect

People notice and remember far less about us than we think.

When we feel self-conscious, it seems as if a spotlight is following us around. Every stumble, blush or awkward pause feels lit up for all to see.

Psychologists have tested this. In one well-known set of studies, students were asked to walk into a room wearing an embarrassing T-shirt. They guessed that about half the people there would notice it. In fact only around a quarter did.

Why we get it wrong

- **We assume our feelings show.** We know every detail of how we feel, and assume other people can see it.
- **Nerves are hard to see.** Nerves that feel obvious from the inside are mostly invisible from the outside.
- **Other people are thinking about themselves.** Most people in the room are busy wondering how they are coming across.
- **People forget.** Even when something is noticed, it is rarely remembered for long.

Check it against your own experience

Think of the last gathering you were at. What can you remember about what other people wore, said wrong, or did awkwardly?

When someone else blushes or loses their words, what do you think of them?

An experiment

This week, deliberately do one small thing you fear would draw attention. Wear something slightly different, ask a question in a meeting, or pause mid-sentence. Count how many people react.

What I found

The T-shirt studies were carried out by Thomas Gilovich and colleagues (2000).

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Shifting your attention outwards

Practice in moving your attention from yourself to what is around you.

When you are anxious, attention turns inwards: to your heartbeat, your thoughts, how you are coming across. The more you watch yourself, the worse you feel and the less you take in of what is really happening around you.

Attention is like a torch. You can learn to point it where you choose.

Practice 1: sounds (5 minutes, at home)

1. Sit quietly. Pick one sound and give it your full attention for a minute.
2. Switch to another sound, perhaps further away. Stay with it for a minute.
3. Move between three or four sounds, one at a time.
4. Finally, open your attention wide and take in all the sounds at once.

Practice 2: everyday tasks

Choose something ordinary: washing up, a shower, a walk. Put your attention fully on the task. What can you see, hear, feel and smell? Each time your attention slides back to yourself or your worries, notice it and return to the task.

Practice 3: with people

In a conversation, focus on the other person. What exactly are they saying? What colour are their eyes? What is their mood? When you catch yourself checking how you are doing, turn the torch back to them.

When	What I practised	Where my attention went	How well could I bring it back? (0 to 10)

Your mind will wander back to you many times. That is expected. Noticing and returning is the exercise.

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After the event: stopping the replay

Why going over it again and again makes it look worse than it was.

After a social situation, the anxious mind runs a post-mortem. It replays the event, searches for mistakes, and usually finds some. By the end, an ordinary conversation has become a disaster in memory.

Why the replay cannot be trusted

- It is based on how you felt, not on what happened. Feeling awkward gets remembered as looking awkward.
- It picks out the worst moments. The parts that went fine are left out.
- You were watching yourself at the time, so you have very little information about how others reacted.
- Each replay adds detail that was never there.

Stepping out of it

1. **Notice the replay has started.** "I am doing a post-mortem."
2. **Ask what it is for.** Is it helping me solve anything, or just making me feel worse?
3. **Do one fair review, in writing, then stop.** Use the boxes below.
4. **Move your attention.** Do something that takes concentration. When the replay returns, label it and come back.

Facts	What went fine, or even well
What a camera would have recorded	

If a friend described this evening to me, what would I say to them?

What I will take from it. One line, then leave it.

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Getting through exams

Studying and sitting exams without burning out.

Some pressure before exams is useful. It gets you to the desk. Too much, and your mind goes round in circles instead of taking anything in. The aim is to keep the pressure in the useful range.

Studying

- **Plan in blocks.** 25 to 45 minutes on one topic, then a real break. Three or four good blocks beat a whole day at the desk.
- **Start with a small, easy task.** Starting is the hardest part.
- **Test yourself.** Closing the book and writing down what you remember works better than reading your notes over and over.
- **Decide when you stop.** A fixed finishing time protects your evening and your sleep.
- **Compare less.** Other people's hours are not a measure of yours. Step back from group chats that wind you up.

Looking after yourself

- **Sleep.** Memories are filed during sleep. Staying up to cram usually costs more marks than it gains.
- **Food, water, movement, daylight.** Twenty minutes outside clears more fog than another coffee.
- **People.** Keep some contact that has nothing to do with exams.

The thoughts that pile on pressure

The thought	A fairer way to see it
"If I fail this, my life is ruined."	"It would be a setback. There are repeats and other routes, and people recover from worse."
"Everyone else is ahead of me."	"I see their best moments. I do not see their panic."
"I know nothing."	"That is a feeling, not a fact. Let me test myself on one topic."
"Top marks, or it is not worth it."	"My best on the day is the only thing I control."

On the day

1. Pack the night before. Arrive early, and stay away from people comparing notes at the door.
2. Read the whole paper. Start with a question you can do.
3. If your mind goes blank: pen down, feet on the floor, three slow breaths out. Move to another question and come back.
4. Afterwards, do not go through the paper with others. It is done.

> **Talk to someone**
> If the pressure is making you feel hopeless, or you are not sleeping or eating, tell someone: family, a tutor, the college counselling service or your GP.

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