

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

TAMING ANXIETY: TECHNIQUES THAT WORK

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes—with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

THE GOAL

Reduce anxiety by adopting two methods that help improve performance and results.

NANO TOOL

No one is immune to anxiety: when you're faced with uncertainty or high demands, or in a situation that's novel, consequential, or public, you're likely to experience it. Today, anxiety can feel like a near-permanent state. And although you might be able to conceal your racing heart rate and sweaty palms, research shows that feeling anxiety can be quite harmful. Anxious negotiators, public speakers, and test takers do worse. And people who feel anxious are less discerning and become more likely to seek and rely upon bad advice.

When we do reveal that we're feeling anxious, we're commonly counseled to "just calm down." But that's an impossible ask. Anxiety causes both high activation (rapid heart rate) and negative feelings (worry about unfavorable outcomes); trying to simply lower our activation and switch to feeling positive by "calming down" doesn't work. Instead, we have discovered two powerful ways to control anxiety and its negative effects, both described in the Action Steps below.

ACTION STEPS

- 1. Reframe anxiety as excitement.** This first action step is quick and easy. Telling participants to state out loud "I'm excited" when they were anxious reduced their negative emotion even though their heart rate remained elevated.¹ Instead of focusing on what could go wrong, they focused on the potential upside and their performance improved. Try it yourself. The next time you feel anxious, smile and state out loud, "I am excited!"
- 2. Use a ritual.** You see them all the time in sports: athletes wear "lucky shirts" (in Tiger Woods' case, it just had to be red), bounce a tennis ball a precise number of times before a serve, or adjust a cap before pitching. There are religious and cultural rituals that comfort us during some of life's most stressful periods, including the death of a loved one. In our research, we found that rituals—even when they're made up—lower blood pressure, reduce anxiety, and improve performance.² In one study, we told participants that they were going to sing in front of others. Before doing that, we told one third of participants to draw a picture of how they were feeling, sprinkle the picture with salt, crinkle up the page, and throw it in the trash. We told another third of participants to calm down, and we gave the last third, the control group, no instructions. The group that performed the made-up ritual before singing performed the best. We replicated the study with other made-up rituals and other performance tasks including public speaking and math tests. We even measured participants' blood pressure. Which group experienced a large drop in blood pressure? Each time, it was the one performing the ritual.



HOW LEADERS USE IT

Leaders inevitably deal with their own stress and anxiety—as well as the anxiety of their team members. Introducing and sticking to rituals can help. Entrepreneur and author Tim Ferriss starts his day by making his bed followed by 10 to 20 minutes of meditation and 30 seconds of light exercise. He ends his ritual, which he says helps him “push the ball forward and feel better throughout the day,” by drinking a strong cup of tea and journaling.

Babette Ten Haken, founder and president of Sales Aerobics for Engineers, takes a cue from Olympic athletes, advising salespeople to “visualize the meeting in your head, rehearse, and have a walk-through. Then breathe, [and] shake your arms and legs to get your circulation going.” Sales coach and consultant Anthony Iannarino suggests a similar pre-sales call ritual: “Get yourself into the physical state where you portray the energy and the passion you need.” That could involve listening to energizing music, pumping your fist in the air, or changing your posture to stand tall and confident.

Tennis great Rafael Nadal has a series of rituals he performs before and during matches, which he credits with keeping him focused by “ordering my surroundings to match the order I seek in my head.” They include putting two water bottles in precise positions near his feet; tucking his hair behind his ear, pulling his nose, and adjusting his shorts while bouncing the ball before serving; and drying off with a towel after every point.

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

- Maurice Schweitzer is academic director of [Effective Decision Making: Thinking Critically and Rationally](#) and teaches in Wharton’s online [Management Development Program: Develop Your Managerial Mindset](#).

REFERENCES

1. <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/research-round-up-overconfident-ceos-how-to-boost-in-store-sales-and-the-role-of-nerves-in-negotiation/>
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ABOUT NANO TOOLS

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. *Nano Tools for Leaders®* is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.