



Focus on Social Learning

December: Performance Month

This month our students had their first performance of the school year. Performances can be fun! They offer a chance for us to share the music we love, and show off our skills in public. Performances can also be hard! They are a test of our knowledge, our focus, and all the preparation we have done in private. Before a performance, our students get excited. Some students experience this excitement more positively, smiling and moving more energetically. Others experience more anxiety and stress. During and after the concert students will also experience both positive and negative emotions, as they deal with their mistakes and failures, and the positive feedback they get from their teachers and the audience. Teaching our students to manage their excitement and anxiety, to accept their mistakes, and to learn to recognize their accomplishments, will help them become more competent, confident, and resilient performers and people.

There's no way around it: performances are stressful. Our students feel excitement and anxiety before their concerts because their performance is important to them. Whether they feel more excited or more anxious, they need to learn how to manage their feelings, in order to focus on the performance. Too much stress can be overwhelming, even paralyzing, but Travis Bradbury, author of "Emotional Intelligence 2.0", argues stress can be healthy and positive, even helpful:

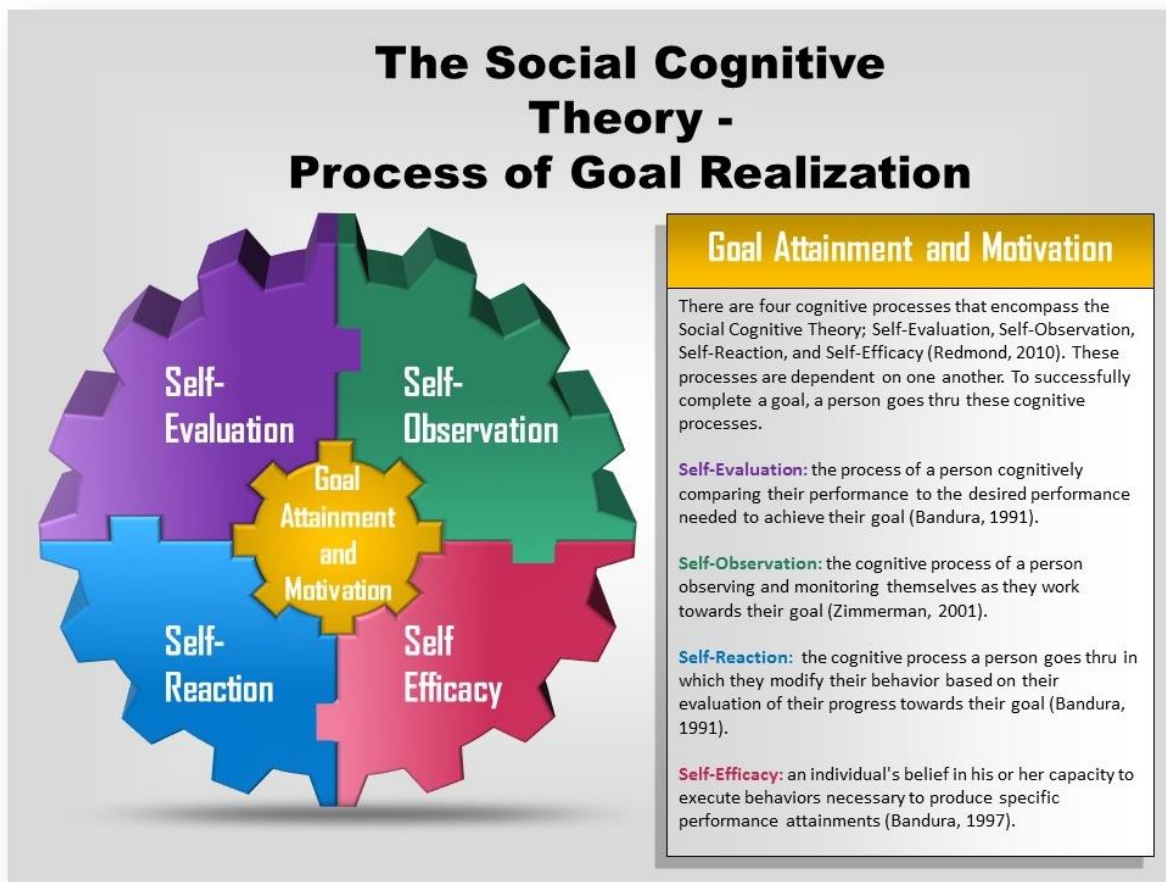
The tricky thing about stress (and the anxiety that comes with it) is that it's an absolutely necessary emotion. Our brains are wired such that it's difficult to take action until we feel at least some level of this emotional state. In fact, performance peaks under the heightened activation that comes with moderate levels of stress. As long as the stress isn't prolonged, it's harmless.

By learning to manage these feelings of stress and excitement, we hope to make our students more focused and confident performers.

At Sistema Toronto we help our students manage their stress in three main ways:

1. Preparation. Practicing each element of the concert, from getting on and off stage to how to bow, gives our students a wealth of experience to draw on during the show. Reminding them that they know exactly what to do helps redirect their attention from feelings of anxiety or excitement to focus on their role in the performance.
2. Building a personal narrative. Working with our students to manage their expectations for a performance and set realistic goals helps them engage with their anxieties and fears. Helping them develop a positive, realistic self-concept can help them replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
3. Drawing on our social and emotional resources. Performing as part of an ensemble means that social support is built right into the performance. By emphasizing that we're all in this together, we can help our students focus on their role in the group, rather than their own anxiety.

Every performance contains the possibility of success and failure. Confronting our mistakes and failures is an important part of becoming more resilient, and feeling successful is an important way to build self-esteem. Although we often process our feelings of success and failure personally, they also have a social aspect. Social Cognitive Theory posits that people learn primarily through observing and imitating other members of the social groups we belong to. This theory reflects the deep ways our identity is formed through our interactions with others, and how we understand our own capacities and abilities through the feedback we get from our peers, families, and communities.



Psychologist Albert Bandura described this phenomenon as “self-efficacy”¹, and experiments have shown that high self-efficacy leads people to set more ambitious goals for themselves, and work harder to accomplish those goals. If our sense of self-efficacy is too far removed from our ability, we are vulnerable to disappointing failures (known as [The Dunning Kruger Effect](#)), but as long as it is not too out

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-efficacy>

of which a high self-efficacy can make us more confident, harder working, and even help us make better health choices².

Performances are a fantastic chance to work with our students on their sense of self-efficacy. The ritual of the concert is designed to recognize and celebrate the musical accomplishment of the performers, and reward them for their hard work, first with an attentive and supportive audience, and then with applause. Even students who struggle with their self-efficacy are often able to get a bit of a boost from a concert because they process their accomplishment through the success of the group as a whole.

Performances are fun! They are hard. They are exciting! They are stressful. Performances are public occasions to celebrate success, and private occasions to confront our mistakes and fear of failure. They are personal, and yet also social. Most of all, they are a chance to share the hard work that we have done with our community, and hopefully to go home with a song or two stuck in our heads.



² Conner, M.; P. Norman, eds. (2005). *Predicting health behaviour (2nd ed. rev. ed.)*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.