

Picture this: You're about to deliver a high-stakes presentation, the kind that could shape your career trajectory or seal a major deal. Your heart's racing, palms are sweaty, and your mind is running through every possible scenario. Sound familiar? If so, you're not alone—and the good news is you can channel the calm, focused energy of an athlete before a big race or event.

Successful athletes don't stumble into their performances hoping for the best. They carefully manage their arousal levels, have fixed pre-session routines, and focus on process goals instead of outcomes. You can do the same when preparing for your presentation, using science-backed strategies including the GOV.UK guidance on managing stress to keep your physiological and mental state optimal.

## The Inverted-U Arousal Curve: Finding Your Performance Band

First, let's talk about the arousal-performance relationship, famously represented by the Inverted-U curve. Imagine arousal (stress, excitement, nervous energy) on the horizontal axis and your performance quality on the vertical. Too little arousal leads to underperformance due to lack of motivation or alertness. Too much, and your performance collapses under pressure.

The sweet spot, or "performance band," sits in the middle where your arousal fuels your focus, precision, and confidence without tipping into overwhelm or panic. Athletes train to hit this zone consistently—so can you.

### What does this mean for your presentation?

- **Recognise your ideal arousal zone:** Are you too flat, too anxious, or just right?
- **Develop strategies to adjust your arousal level:** Routines, breathing, mental cues.
- **Understand that some nerves are helpful:** They're your arousal fuel, not a problem to banish.

## Fixed Routine: Managing Your Working Memory Before Going Live

One of the most overlooked tools athletes use is their fixed pre-performance routine. It's more than superstition or habit—it's a way to manage working memory and reduce distracting thoughts during critical moments.



Working memory, your brain's "sticky note" for information, is limited. If your mind is cluttered with worries about how you'll be perceived or what could go wrong, it can't focus on the process cues you need to [how to calm nerves quickly](#) deliver your presentation smoothly.

## How to build your fixed routine

1. **List concrete actions:** Examples might be reviewing your first slide quietly, adjusting your water bottle, or setting a timer on your watch.
2. **Keep it consistent:** Repeat the same sequence each time you prepare for important talks to create a conditioned mental shift.
3. **Limit duration:** Aim for a routine that takes no more than 2 minutes—the window before you step up matters.
4. **Focus on external cues:** Simple physical gestures or small environmental checks are better than internal pep talks that can spiral.

Remember, your fixed routine is your pre-presentation anchor helping your brain discard anxiety and gear up on process information.

## Extended-Exhale Breathing: Quick Physiological Reset

If you ever notice athletes exhale longer than they inhale during tense moments, that's not accidental. Extended-exhale breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, the "rest and digest" mode that decreases heart rate and calms nerves rapidly.

This technique is a quick, practical way to nudge yourself back into your performance band when nerves creep in too high.

### How to do extended-exhale breathing

1. Inhale gently through your nose for about 3-4 seconds.
2. Exhale slowly and fully through your mouth for 6-8 seconds.
3. Repeat this for 3-5 cycles, focusing only on the breath.

Use this during your fixed routine or just before stepping into the spotlight to signal to your body that you are ready and calm.

## External, Process-Focused Attention vs. Outcome Focus

A common trap is becoming fixated on the outcome: "I must nail this presentation," "Don't mess this up." This outcome focus shifts your attention inward and off the process cues that actually drive performance quality.

Athletes maintain a process focus—attention on what they need to do moment-by-moment (foot placement, breathing rhythm, split timing)—rather than the scoreboard or potential results. You can adopt this mindset for a presentation.

### Examples of process goals to set for yourself

- Speak clearly and with deliberate pauses.
- Make eye contact with at least three people in the room.
- Use your slides as prompts, not scripts.

- Manage your pacing to allow time for key points.

Focus on these controllable elements and let the outcome emerge from executing the process well.

## Putting It All Together: Your Pre-Presentation Checklist

Step Purpose Example Action 1. Fix your pre-presentation routine Anchors your mental state and manages working memory Review opening slide, adjust your notes, set a timer 2. Adjust arousal with extended-exhale breathing Calm your physiological state quickly 3 cycles of inhale (3-4s) and extended exhale (6-8s) 3. Set your process goals Direct your attention outward to controllable actions Clear voice, deliberate pacing, engage audience eye contact 4. Enter the performance band Use arousal fuel constructively Embrace nerves as positive energy helping your focus

## Sharing Your Journey and Tips

High-stakes presentations, like athletic performances, are learning experiences. Share your approach and successes on your favourite social sharing platforms—feedback and connection can reinforce your confidence and prepare you better for next time.

- **Facebook:** Post about your routine and ask friends for tips or experiences.
- **Twitter/X:** Share quick process goals or breathing reminders with relevant hashtags.
- **Reddit:** Join communities like r/presentation or r/selfimprovement to swap strategies.
- **LinkedIn:** Publish a short article or post linking presentation skills to athlete mindsets.
- **Pinterest:** Build boards with infographics on breathing techniques or routine checklists.

## Final Thoughts

Preparation for a high-stakes presentation is less about banishing nerves and more about managing arousal fuel so it sharpens your focus rather than overwhelms you. Use a fixed routine to clear working memory, apply extended-exhale breathing for quick physiological reset, and direct your attention on process goals over outcomes to hit your performance band every time.

With practice and discipline, your presentation skills will benefit not just from what you say, but how you prepare and perform under pressure. So next time you face the spotlight, ask yourself: *What would I do in the 2 minutes before it starts?* The answer might just surprise you.

