

When you're moments away from stepping into the spotlight—whether it's a race, a presentation, or a crucial meeting—what's the best thing you can do in just 90 seconds? The answer lies in a short routine that balances your arousal, manages your focus, and primes your brain for action. Let's break down why this matters and how to build a quick, science-backed process you can rely on every time.

The Science Behind Performance: The Inverted-U Arousal Curve

Sports scientists and psychologists often refer to the *Inverted-U arousal curve* (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908) to describe the relationship between arousal (or stress) and performance. Simply put, too little arousal means you're under-stimulated and likely unfocused; too much, and anxiety overwhelms you. The sweet spot in the middle, your performance band, is where you're alert but calm enough to think clearly.



Most people instinctively try to “psych themselves up” or, conversely, “calm down,” but miss that target zone. The question becomes: How do you adjust your arousal level **quickly** and consistently, especially when you have only around 90 seconds before you need to perform?

Why a Pre-Session Routine Is More Than Ritual

Far from being mere superstition, pre-performance routines serve as a way to manage your working memory and focus. Working memory can be overloaded by anxious thoughts or distracting worries—“What if I mess up?” or “Did I prepare enough?” A short, consistent routine diverts your mind from outcome-focused anxiety toward manageable process cues.

Think of your working memory like a browser tab manager: When it's cluttered, the 'system' slows down. A routine helps you close unnecessary tabs and keep only the essential information accessible.

The Difference Between Process and Outcome Focus

- **Outcome focus:** Thinking about winning, failing, or how others perceive you.
- **Process focus:** Concentrating on the steps, the immediate task, and the external environment.

Decades of research, including pointers summarised by GOV.UK guidance, show that process focus reduces performance anxiety and improves execution. A well-designed 90-second routine should steer your attention outward, not inward.

Constructing Your 90-Second Pre-Performance Routine

Let's build a practical and repeatable routine, grounded in actionable techniques:

1. **Extended-exhale breathing** (30 seconds)
2. **External cue checklist** (30 seconds)
3. **Focused sensory awareness** (30 seconds)

1. Extended-Exhale Breathing for Rapid Physiological Shift

Breathing is your simplest tool to shift your autonomic nervous system balance—moving from hyper-arousal (sympathetic dominance) to a calmer state that still retains alertness. The trick is to breathe with a longer exhale phase, which stimulates the parasympathetic system and reduces heart rate.

Try this:

- Inhale gently through your nose for a count of 3.
- Exhale smoothly through your mouth for a count of 5.
- Repeat this cycle 5-6 times over about 30 seconds.

Avoid deep, jerky breaths; keep the pattern smooth [4 8 breathing exercise](#) and controlled.

2. External Process-Focused Attention: Your Cue List

Next, direct your attention to external items relevant to your task. This might be your equipment, the environment, a checklist, or sensory info you can note down or visualise. The aim is to keep your brain busy with manageable cues rather than looping on worries.

Examples for various contexts:

Scenario External Cue List
Racing Driver Grip of steering wheel, gear selector feel, track breeze on face, instrument cluster glance
Public Speaker Podium texture, room lighting, audience faces at the front, microphone position
Office Presentation Slide order, clicker weight, water glass temperature, laptop keyboard keys

3. Focused Sensory Awareness

Finally, spend the last 30 seconds heightening your immediate sensory awareness to anchor your brain in the present moment without drifting into "what ifs." This isn't fluffy mindfulness—it's a deliberate, quick grounding exercise:

- Feel your feet firmly on the ground or pedals.
- Notice the temperature and sounds around you without judgement.
- Mentally name 3 distinct sensory inputs: smell, sound, sight.

This closes the routine with a strong, outward-facing focus that prepares your brain for performance.

Why Not "Just Breathe" or Miracle Fixes?

Let's be clear: "Just breathe" advice is rarely enough in intense moments. Vague suggestions to "visualise success" or "think positive" are outcome-based mental twists that can worsen performance pressure. Instead, the key is a scientifically-supported physiological and attentional reset combined with a reliable, external process-focus.

Remember that overpromising "mental tricks" often ignores the step-by-step nature of performance preparation. Your 90-second routine is not a magic pill but a carefully designed tool to manage your state and set you into the right working zone.



Sharing Your Routine – How Social Platforms Can Help You Commit

Building a habit needs accountability and repetition. Share your practice on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, Reddit, LinkedIn, or Pinterest:

- **Facebook:** Post a short video explaining your routine. Ask friends for feedback or tips.
- **Twitter/X:** Tweet your breathing counts or key external cues as a reminder to yourself and others.
- **Reddit:** Join relevant communities (e.g., r/performance, r/sportpsychology) and discuss your 90-second technique.
- **LinkedIn:** Share a thoughtful post about pre-performance routines and their impact on professional presentations or leadership moments.
- **Pinterest:** Create a visual step-by-step infographic to pin and revisit regularly.

These platforms not only help you embed your routine but also connect you with others seeking real, practical advice—not hype.

Wrapping Up: What Would You Do in the 2 Minutes Before It Starts?

When the clock ticks down to "go time," ask yourself:

- Have I done a short routine that targets my physiological state?
- Am I focusing on process cues I can control rather than outcomes I cannot?
- Is my working memory clear enough to handle the task ahead?

Use the 90 seconds wisely to breathe, scan external cues, and ground your senses. This isn't about eliminating nerves—those will always be there—but about converting them into effective, focused energy.

For practical support and official tips on mental wellbeing under pressure, GOV.UK's mental health and wellbeing guidance page is a solid resource that cuts through jargon and offers clear advice.

Your Next Step

Try this routine today or tomorrow, timing yourself with a stopwatch. Tweak your breathing counts or cue list for your particular context. Share your experience on your favourite social platform and invite others to develop their own.

Because success isn't about miracles—it's about process, preparation, and consistency. And yes, you CAN do that in 90 seconds.