

Transcript for Daniel McGinn | The Science of Mental Preparation (Episode 652)
Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/652/>

DANIEL: If you can get through the first three minutes and feel like you're doing a good job and get some of that feedback from the audience that feels like you're doing a good job, the whole atmosphere changes.

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm. I'm Jordan Harbinger and I'm here with producer Jason DeFillippo. On this episode we're talking with Daniel McGinn. He is a senior editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of [Psyched Up](#), a book that is well titled because it's about getting psyched up, how the science of mental preparation can help you succeed.

On this episode of AoC, we'll discuss how high performing professionals and elite athletes deploy techniques to boost their confidence, reduce their anxiety, and optimize their energy. This is true whether you're pitching a VC, arguing to a jury, making a sales call, going on a job interview, or even going on a first date. We'll also learn why superstition and rituals can actually improve your performance and how we can develop our own pre-performance rituals that work for us, and we'll uncover how to combat pre-performance nerves thanks to some very practical research that comes from the world of music, of all places, and how we can learn to reframe and channel the jitters into the juice that makes us move forward that much faster. Now, let's get psyched up with Daniel McGinn.

Daniel, thanks for being with us today, much appreciated.

DANIEL: Thank you.

JORDAN: [Psyched Up: The Science of Mental Preparation](#), on its face, how can this be scientific? Sure, I jump up and down, I slap myself in the face a couple times, I get stoked, or if I'm a surgeon, there's this sort of image of surgeons that came out of, I don't know, some '90s movies where you're listening to death metal in the surgery room at full volume with your hands up in the air so

you don't touch anything, getting ready to do open heart surgery. There's obviously more to it. You spent time researching this. How do people harness this power or is this just something we've seen in movies?

DANIEL: So you've definitely seen it in sports movies in particular and I got interested in this when I was in high school. I was not a very good athlete but I played in the basketball and the football team and we would do all this stuff in the locker room. We had certain songs we would listen to, there were pep talks, there were rituals -- it never seemed very scientific to me back then, it seemed like the coaches were just sort of making it up and using amateur psychology.

And it was only a few years ago when I started working at Harvard Business Review, every so often, I would see an academic study come across my desk that touched on some of these things, that touched on rituals or touched on how people could get in the right mindset by priming themselves before they performed. So, once you take a deep dive into this, it turns out there is actually a fair bit of science, even if most of the practitioners don't really know about it.

JORDAN: I'm just thinking, all right so I get up, I don't feel like working out, I put on Eye of the Tiger, I feel like working out, I go work out, the end. But there's a lot more to it. There's a lot of mental prep that we can do, there's superstition and ritual, which we've seen, if you're looking at baseball games if you've ever seen those, there's a ton of that stuff.

Pep talks, trash talk, there's all kinds of things you hear about athletes like Michael Jordan walking into the opposing team's locker room and saying hello to some of the players just to sort of get in their head and also to be in their space so he feels like he's able to dominate during the game and on the court when they get out there. There's all kinds of little bits like this and it seems like these psyched up rituals or these psyched up practices or the practices of getting in the zone or getting

stoked for a performance, really are unique to the individual as anything else.

DANIEL: Yeah, no question. There's lots of techniques here, some of them will work for one person and not for the other. So, you really have to sort of customize it. But the main message I wanted to give in writing the book was that we expect Michael Jordan or Tom Brady or Michael Phelps to have a routine that they do before they perform.

Well, you know, you and I are not pro athletes but we have really important days at work, we have to go pitch somebody, we have to go sell something, we have to negotiate, we have to interview somebody -- we should have a routine that puts us in the right mindset too. There's no reason, even if you're not a professional athlete that you shouldn't spend a couple of minutes trying to summon up your A game and getting yourself ready to perform before something important. It's something I've learned to do in my job and especially if you're in sales or if you're an entrepreneur, I think it's really critical.

JORDAN: It seems that this is something -- most of us think this is just something that athletes do. "I'm getting ready for a basketball game, I'm getting ready for a boxing match," for Rocky purposes here with the Eye of the Tiger. That's kind of everyone's intro to getting psyched up is probably that montage, I would imagine. And you're arguing in the book, title of course [*Psyched Up: How the Science of Mental Preparation Can Help You Succeed*](#). Any professional at all, not just pro athletes, can learn to use these techniques that olympians and athletes are using and that they will bring some sort of benefit.

The idea that we're always supposed to be on is more or less false in your research, from the sound of it. It sounds like the goal for most of us is that there's a thin slice where we really have to be at 100 percent, those are the moments that really count. Surgery for a surgeon, right? Which is not maybe what they spend most of their time doing, aside from the professional learning and things like that, or doing a show

which I'm doing right now. This is the time when I need to really be on. This is something that we can use to then get back into the swing of things or to get ready for those moments, those thin slices where we really need to be on.

DANIEL: Yeah, that's exactly it. So I'll tell you. I have a lot of buddies out in the suburb where I live and we play a lot of recreational golf on the weekends together but during the week, a lot of them are sales people and a lot of them are not in the kind of sales where they're making 70 cold calls a day. They're managing big accounts so in any quarter, they'll maybe have four or five key meetings with the big stake holders and those four or five hours out of the entire three months, that's what's going to determine whether they're successful or they're not successful. Maybe they're an extreme example. We're not working on assembly lines anymore. Every hour is not the same as every other hour. Even if you're in a fairly middle management job, there's going to be a meeting every couple of weeks where it's more important than the other hours and these rituals and the psyching up, it doesn't need to be super theatrical, it doesn't need to be something where you're jumping around, everybody in the office thinks you're a crazy person, there are very quiet very internal private thought manipulations that you can do to at the margin, increase your confidence, reduce your anxiety, and get your energy level up. Those are really the three things you're trying to do when you get psyched up.

JORDAN: So we should be deploying these before critical moments. And this is seemingly true whether you're pitching for venture capital, whether you're an attorney like I used to be, arguing to a jury, like you said, key sales meetings or job interviews possibly, first date situations -- do we have to know what we're going to do in advance or is this something where we can just tell ourselves to get psyched up. I know that pep talks was one of the categories that you discussed in the book. It seems like there's a lot of perhaps more effective ways to go about this and I'd love to get down to some of these practicals.

DANIEL: Yeah, there's a lot of different things you can do, starting off with confidence. So, one of the most interesting places I visited when I was reporting the book was I went out to West Point, to the U.S. military academy, and I spent a day in their sports psychology center where they work with their athletes and their cadettes.

So one of the things I watched them do there is they took their lacrosse goalie, they brought him in, they put him in this enclosed chair with these speakers in it and they hit play on this soundtrack and suddenly this music came on. It was all music that he had chosen because he found it really motivational and then his voice started coming through the speakers and it was basically reliving all of his best moments in goal for the team.

It was basically like a highlight reel but it was narrated in audio and he was instructed to listen to this before he went to sleep, when he woke up in the morning, but especially right before games, to put him into that mind where he's just thinking about the times when he's at his best because that's going to increase his confidence and increase the chances he can do it again.

JORDAN: So how do we set something like this up for ourself, it sounds like one of those greatest hits mix tapes or something like that that we can really create based on either some sort of self talk or some sort of other formula. Is there sort of a magic potion for this that you came across in your research?

DANIEL: Sure, well it depends on what your use case is -- what your job function is. I'll use myself as an example here. So the two moments when I'm adding the most value, either for my employer or individually for my career are number one when I'm writing and number two, when I'm speaking publicly about my writing.

So before I write, especially if it's a high stakes assignment or something that I feel under the gun about, the thing I do is I pull out a couple of articles that I wrote years ago that I consider my

best stuff, and I just take two or three minutes and I read it and reflect on it for a couple of minutes and that really primes me and it makes me recall times when I was super successful at this and it increases the odds that I'm going to be able to do it again that day.

For something like this, today, for public speaking with you, I actually go back and listen. So, I've been on NPR which really edits their programs to make you sound super smooth and super articulate. So, before I get on with you today, I'll listen to one of those and it just makes me think, "Wow, you know, I really sounded good in that interview," and that puts me in a mindset where I'm going to be a little bit more focused, a little bit sharper, a little bit able to be better articulate with you.

JORDAN:

That's great. I think that's a great idea and of course I do a vocal warm up but I don't really do any sort of montage of boxing jumping up to the top of the stairs or any sort of greatest hits playlists or anything like this but I do have my articulations and things like that that I have to do each morning before the show. Ostensibly, I think if you got my voice coach some truth serum she'd probably say, "Well, half of this is to warm up your voice and half of it is to get you paying attention to what you're supposed to be doing instead of checking your email before you go on and talk to somebody important, that you're trying to actually guide a conversation."

What about things that we see on television or with celebrities who have these strange rituals. "I've got to spit in my hand, rub it on the bat, kick the dirt under the plate, and then make a cross with my cleat and then tap the plate twice with the bat, and then look up at the far left and then the far right at the posts, in the outfield and then check the time, and then look back at the plate, kick it twice, and then I'm ready to hit the ball." What's going on with that stuff?

DANIEL:

So there's actually a lot of research that shows that that does work and it sounds really weird. Nobody understands exactly why but here's what the theory is. Basically the research shows

that across a wide range of activities, people who do the same thing every time in a very routine way before they do it, generally perform better. And people who don't have a routine but are taught how to do one, they generally see improvement. So they've done it both as interventions and as descriptive studies.

It's impossible to know exactly why but there's two primary theories. Number one, it habituates you and gets your body into the groove and it helps you remember all the practice you did. So, if you are swinging a golf club and you do the same thing as you address the ball every time, when you're doing it in competition, your body is going to remember all that practice. So it's sort of like turning the engine on, getting things going.

The other theory is that it distracts during a time when it would be natural to be nervous. So, if you think about somebody before a concert for instance, a classical concert, if they stand back stage and don't have anything special to do, they're just going to stand there being nervous and that's kind of a destructive thing to do. So, just having a routine that occupies you, it can crowd out that nervousness that's going to detract from your performance.

JORDAN:

This makes sense. It sounds almost like rituals come from patternicity, where humans are like, "Well, last time I hit a homerun, I kicked the plate twice, so I did that right," and then if you do your whole ritual and you don't hit a homerun, you just think, "Oh, well, maybe I did something wrong," and you kind of ignore the failures and you only look at the confirmation bias I guess is at play here, and that seems to of course give your mind something to do or maybe you're in the default mode network, you're relaxed, you're defaulting to autopilot which is great because you've swung that bat 100,000 times or whatever over the course of your career and practice. Also though, it seems like we infer causal relationships, look at patternicity and we can use that to our advantage and use it to distract us and get back into the auto pilot mode where we might actually execute things better because it's relying on our subconscious

mind which is -- the skillset has been hammered in with all practice. Do you have examples of rituals that celebrities and famous people are using that might be illustrative of the kind of craziness we should be engaging in?

DANIEL: Yeah, the two that I use the most -- it's two guys who are in the same profession who have very, very different rituals and it speaks to the idea that some of these things are very flashy and showy and obvious and weird and some of them are just very quiet and if you didn't know better, you wouldn't know there was anything going on.

One of them is Stephen Colbert. If you look at what he does backstage before his TV show, he's got very elaborate rituals. He rings a hotel bell at a certain time, he does special handshakes with his backstage crew, he's chews on a certain kind of pen then puts it back in a box, he's staring at a special spot in this wall, it's this whole sequence of all these very peculiar behaviors.

If you compare with that Jerry Seinfeld and look at what he does backstage before his standup routines, very quiet but still very highly routinized. He sits and looks at his notecards for a couple of minutes then at exactly five minutes the curtain, he has a stagehand come over and alert him and he puts his suit jacket on and he told me that when he puts that suit jacket on, that's his signal to his body that it's time to be ready, it's like putting his armor on for battle, and psychologically that's a very important step for him. Doesn't seem that odd at all but he considers a key part of his backstage ritual to be ready.

JORDAN: That is very bizarre and how do you come up with, "Okay, I need to chew on this kind of pen?" Do you think it comes from the patternicity where it's like, "Man I've been killing that show. Oh, when I was nervous before each of these shows, I chewed the top of this Bic pen and it was kind of comforting. That must be why I did so well. Give me a thousand of those pens?"

DANIEL: Yeah, they call it contiguous relationships. It's the idea that there's no real causation between chewing the pen and crushing it one night but one time it happened to do it so you draw this connection in your mind and forever more that's your lucky habit. Somebody using a certain kind of bat in baseball -- as you know from all the shows you do on subconscious, the mind connections where there might not be any but once it exists, if you think that that helps you, and it makes you more confident, you're going to do better. So it becomes a virtuous circle.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: Actually, did you come across any harmful rituals that people had like, "Well, I really need to smoke a pack of cigarettes before I sing my operas?" I assume that doesn't mix very well but there's got to be a lot of stuff like that that people have that you came across where you were like, "Yeah this might be working for you but you're going to die young," or something along those lines.

DANIEL: Well, people get anxious before they perform and there's lots of different things you can do to deal with anxiety. A lot of people would drink alcohol before they perform to try to squash the nerves down and obviously that's not going to help them perform better and it's not very good for their health either, so that's one. The other thing is what if suddenly Stephen Colbert needs to go on stage one night and the Bic pen is missing? You can get so reliant on these rituals that if something goes wrong and they get fouled up from some logistical reason, that can be a problem. As you construct these rituals, you need to think about the idea that you want to make them simple. We've all seen teams trying to steal the other mascot before the game. You never want to get so invested emotionally in these things, that you're opening yourself up for them to create a problem.

JORDAN: Yeah, it seems like this could be a huge issue. Unless you're Keith Richards, then you can just do whatever you want and outlive everyone somehow. But, when I think of rituals that are

unhealthy, I do think of rockstars and you hear these stories of, "Let's just throw Guns N' Roses under the bus because they seem like the type that would go get super smashed and not necessarily be able to perform some of the time or they might go overboard with it," or, "Hey, they tour's over and you're still drinking a bottle of whiskey every morning at 10am. That's not good for you."

It seems like that kind of thing could go wrong and like you said, yeah, if they can't find that brand of Bic pen or they stop making it, now you've got to have your interns running all over Manhattan slash mail ordering or even having custom made -- "We need 10,000 more of these pens. Where's the injection mode for the plastic?" You're stuck. It might be hard to reprogram yourself at that point. You might not be able to do it at all.

DANIEL:

Yeah, any time you get lucky objects into your ritual, there's at least some element of risk. So I tried to do some of this when I was reporting the book. There are studies that show that if somebody's using a tool or an implement that was once used by somebody famous or a high performer, that they tend to perform better with it themselves. One of the studies was done with golfers -- just amateur golfers -- putting. They told some of the golfers they were using a professional golfer's club and they off the charts putted better with it. So, when I was working on the book, I reached out to [Malcolm Gladwell](#) and I arranged to send him a keyboard and he wrote on the keyboard for three months and then he sent it back to me and it's now my lucky keyboard. So whenever I'm under the gun to write something, I have a keyboard that was Malcolm Gladwell's and I use it. It's not really a crutch for me but it's one of those things I only pull out when I really need a boost and it's a subtle effect knowing that this great writer used the keys, but it does help and it is something that -- it's sort of a signal to my mind and to my body, "Hey this one's important. You need to bring your A game today, let's pull out the lucky keyboard."

JORDAN: That's great. I love it. Why do you think this is working? Is it just because you give the item gravitas, therefore you're more focused? What do you think is going on here?

DANIEL: Yeah, it's all about your internal belief system and your confidence. It's not that much different if you're going to a job interview, you want to wear an outfit that you know you feel very comfortable and confident in. Anything you can do around the margins to dial up that confidence, dial down that anxiety, and get that energy level. That's basically what psyching up is.

If there were some broadcaster that you were a huge admirer of and you had an opportunity to get one of their microphones, why wouldn't you do that? And in work settings, obviously the stuff can get hokey but if there's tools or implements that a fantastically performing team that your has used, that might be saved and passed around. When you walk into companies, there are these talismans of -- you go into Nike, what's one of the first things you see in their lobbies? You see the waffle iron that they used to make the first one of those sneakers back in the '70s, and that's kind of like an iconic historic object for that company. If you can kind of have tools like that or things that people can actually use, it's going to give people a boost.

JORDAN: Almost like a mini ritual when you walk in, where you're just like, "Oh, yeah, we started small," or, "Oh, yeah, this is where we came from and look where we are now," and it just kind of reminds everybody as they walk in that this is the origin of the business and obviously there's some value there for them in that. I'm sure during your orientation at your first day at Nike, they probably tell you something about that so that you notice it and you say that to yourself when you walk in.

DANIEL: I coached a little league team this year and kids were all about the same size and they were using similar sized bats and if one of them great with a bat, that bat would become the hot bat and they'd start passing it around and more of them would start using it. And, you know, is there way to measure whether or not

it was helping the second or third kid in line? Who knows. If they think it does, that's a benefit enough to try it.

JORDAN: Yeah, clearly if you did a blind test it would fail, but it doesn't really matter because it's not a blind test, it's about actual results and if you can get results from everybody kicking the plate, then just do it. It doesn't really cost anything unless you get hooked on the ritual itself, correct?

DANIEL: Right, the placebo effect is very strong in all areas of life and some of what people are doing with these things is really trying to harness it, I think.

JORDAN: How would we go about creating a pre-performance ritual that you think is going to be healthy and not hamstringing us if we forget our lucky pen when we're on the plane and then we can't give a talk? What do you think we should do? Do you have a formula for this as well?

DANIEL: Music is a key tool for a lot of people in this area, more important for some people. Some people are just more musical, some people are less musical, sometimes maybe you're in a setting where if you had headphones on in the final moments it would be kind of odd. But if you're a person that music works for and the setting lends itself towards music, you should think about what kind of playlists or what kinds of songs you want to include. There's a whole science behind that as well.

Generally speaking, songs are motivational great psych up songs, it's either because of what they call the inherent musicality, just the actual rhythm and the tempo and the way the song sounds, even if you've never heard it before, or it's because of the emotional connection, that at some point you heard that song at a key moment in your life. It means something to you, the lyrics. So, some of this is personal, some of it is just the way the song sounds. But the two of those things together combine to make a song something that makes your heartbeat a little quicker, gives you a little bit more adrenaline, and if you're in the right kind of work -- maybe it's in the car on

the way to a big appointment -- that can absolutely be a tool that works for you.

JORDAN:

Nice. If you find yourself that you have a pre-performance ritual that's unhealthy, have you found any or done any research that says, "Hey maybe you can switch." If your pre-performance ritual is smoke five cigarettes before you get up on stage, maybe you can switch that with some other ritual. I think for me and a lot of other performers that I know, we have a lot of negative habits that we have simply because we feel like we have to do something before hand. But, if we're kept busy, like my vocal warm-up for sure, keeps me from drinking too much coffee before a show or drinking too much tea.

There's a lot of other things that I could be doing, sit here chewing my fingernail or something I could be doing instead of doing a vocal warm-up. So, it seems like a really good possible placebo and of course if you can actually mix it with something that is helpful, like a vocal warm-up that gets the vocal cords going, it seems like that's even better.

So if you can blend ritual with something that actually works, like maybe you do a workout in the morning to get ready for your work day or surgeries, that seems like that would be really healthy for you and it seems like these things would blend together pretty well, especially if maybe you do the same workout every morning that you do surgery, you just do heavy squats or something like that. You could maybe put these two things together in a way that makes sense for you, both physically and emotionally.

DANIEL:

Yeah, you also have to know which of these things doesn't work for you so well. So, one of the things that especially in very head-to-head competitive situations that people rely on is anger or trash talk or hostility or focusing on rivalry.

There are people in the world who definitely do better when they know that they're competing and trying to beat somebody else as opposed to just doing their best and riding their own

ride. So, for some people, obsessing about dislike for the opponent can be really effective, for other people it doesn't really work at all. It certainly depends on what kind of a context you're in, how appropriate that is, and whether it's going to really work to fire you up or not but that's something you sort of need to test yourself and see if you're the person that reacts well to that.

JORDAN: What about the old pep talk? Other than of course running up the stairs to Eye of the Tiger? This is the cliché, right? "You can do this, you've got this," or some variation thereof. What does the research show about pep talks? Is this effective? Is it less effective than other things? Is it effective sometimes?

DANIEL: I looked at pep talks in three different settings. There's research on them in athletics, there's research on them in the military, and there's research in business settings -- like especially in sales. At the end of the month, it's pretty typical for a sales manager to have to give a pep talk to the sales force. There's a lot of evidence that they are effective. There's generally three things across those realms. There's three things you're trying to do in a pep talk. You have to actually give the strategy or the information if -- say you're playing a basketball game, the actual strategy of, "I want you to play a 2-3 zone and I want you to move the ball in offense." The actual direction giving of the pep talk, that's the first part.

The second part is what they call empathetic language. The leader is trying to personally show that he or she cares for every person and try to establish a direct link. So, things you say when you're trying to be empathetic is you thank everybody for their hard work, you recognize that they might be a little scared or that this is going to be really hard, what you're asking them to do, you try to use words that make them feel connected with you.

And then the third part of a good pep talk is what they call meaning making, which is where you try to try to draw connection between the task that you're asking them to do and

some larger goal. If it's one game, maybe you're connecting that one game with the arc of the season or with how much the fans have invested in you. If it's a military campaign, you might draw the lens back and talk about why this campaign is important to us. So you try to make the task seem epic and really important. That's meaning making.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: You're adding a little element of importance that may not otherwise be there, like I've been overusing this word in the show earlier, gravitas. You're adding that to it and it helps really get people centered and focused on the task at hand, I can see that. You mentioned in the book as well that there is a professor at Juilliard who uses this with musicians. I'd love to hear some of the techniques that are taught here because obviously you cannot screw up when you're playing with an orchestra or if you're on stage doing a solo singing, playing the cello for example. These are really high pressure moments for anybody, probably no matter how practiced you are, and there's a lot of techniques that you'd mentioned that can help reduce the risks of nervousness and other unpleasant sensations when it really matters.

DANIEL: Yes, so at Juilliard, they have a whole semester course on this and it's for exactly the reasons you say, that if you're a classical musician, you're going into these auditions, it's a high pressure scenario. There will be 200 people competing for a single spot and classical music is the kind of thing where if you're just a little bit nervous, it can detract enough from what you're doing that it's going to be a problem and you're not going to get those jobs, which is why they spend so much time on it.

They teach a lot in this course but my favorite part of it is that at the end, they do what they call an adversity audition and they keep it quiet enough so the students don't know what's coming. They're told that their final exam, they're going to need to go up and just do an audition and they're taught to expect all these things to be in place, that there's going to be a very quiet

practice room, that they're going to go in and they judges will be behind a screen because that's how a lot of these auditions are done to prevent bias. But once they actually get into that environment, everything goes wrong.

The practice room, there's an AM radio on static at high volume so they can't really hear anything. They go into the audition room and if they're a pianist they sit down and it turns out there's ping pong balls in the piano so some of the keys don't really play very well. The seats are the wrong kind of seats, the judges are not behind a screen, they basically just throw one problem after another at these students to see how they handle it and it's sort of an extreme kind of test. If you can get through that kind of thing and maintain some of your composure, it shows that you're ready for the normal ups and downs of an audition. So it's sort of an extreme tactic but it really does work.

JORDAN:

Yeah we did a lot of this in a speaking class that I took that was 20 days long. It was essentially speaking for performers. It was taught by my friend Michael port who's a really, really good speaker. One of the things that we did towards the end of the class, the final three days or so, was go up and deliver the beginning part of our key note and everybody was instructed. You weren't there for the instructions either and you didn't know when it was going to happen. It was just like, "All right, we're going to give you some feedback," and we were doing this to everybody at different times.

So you'd go up there and you'd go like, "All right, I guess I'll do this again." You think, "I've got this already. We've done this 100 times." You go up there and everybody as soon as you start, busts out their phone, people are calling each other, people are talking to each other, standing up and trying to take pictures way too close to you, getting up and going outside or just any kind of distraction or being like, "Boring!" a little bit loud enough so that you could hear it, to their friend.

And these are all things that would happen to a lesser extent at any sort of engagement, probably not the entire group but

certainly once or twice you might have someone's phone go off or somebody leave or somebody speaking loudly that can't hear their conversation partner very well. It really flustered me and I thought, "This is not going to be a big deal," and it really got to me. I could not pay attention and I messed up a couple of times and it was a real eye opener because I'm used to things happening on the fly, especially now. But at that time, I thought I could handle it and I really could not.

And of course I immediately stole that exercise from Michael Port and we use it at our Art of Charm live programs in L.A. where we throw monkey wrenches into all kinds of social situations to make sure that people can react appropriately. And you really find that -- I think you phrased this really well in your book. "Anxiety is like a tax that takes away from our performance despite all the practice we have put into preparation in expectation of that performance."

DANIEL:

Yeah, that's why those adversity kinds of situations work so well. One of the most effective tactics I came across to try to prevent it is I ran into a lot of people who talked about the power of autopilot as another piece of getting psyched up. The idea that especially if you're doing speaking, if you can get through the first three minutes and feel like you're doing a good job and get some of that feedback from the audience that feels like you're doing a good job, the whole atmosphere changes.

It's like the first time you tell a joke and people laugh, the temperature just seems to change in the room a little bit, everybody relaxes, you feel like they're on your side all of a sudden. And the way to do that is to make sure that if you're giving a speech, the first three, four, five minutes that you just have that cold, and you've practiced that more than you have the rest of it.

I actually ran into a guy when I was reporting the book who gives a ton of speeches. He's on the road all the time. All different topics depending on the audience, but for every speech he keeps the first three minutes the same, he just finds

a way to pivot out of that moment. The reason he does it is because of this idea that if he can stay on autopilot and not really have to use his brain for the first three minutes, he knows it's going to be a better engagement for him.

JORDAN: What about the concept of reappraisal. This is an interesting tactic that you had as well, framing the anxiety in a different way if we can't avoid it all together.

DANIEL: Sure, this is based on research that's done at Harvard. Reappraisal is based on the idea -- so if somebody's about to go onto a stage and they're super nervous, overwhelmingly the advice everybody will give them is, "Calm down. Try to calm down. Don't be nervous." The reality is you can't do that. Our bodies are programmed biologically to interpret threats and to react with adrenaline, we go into fight or flight mode, and there's nothing we can do to completely turn that off.

So what reappraisal is it recognizes that if we're super nervous, we're not going to suddenly be able to flip a switch and be calm and it's better if we can try to shift that nervousness into excitement, which is a more positive form of the anxiety. It's basically a similar emotion. It's not turning the volume all the way down to calm. It's just sort of shifting it over in the direction.

So the actual studies that have been done, they'll have people doing singing contests or taking math exams or giving pitches in a VC like setting, and they'll have one group of people say, "I'm so nervous," before they do it, they'll have another group of people say, "I'm so excited," and just that little shift, the people who say they're excited tend to do a lot better.

JORDAN: That's interesting. So we just frame the anxiety as excitement in our head, maybe even just by repeating it as such. Of course, it might be an easier said than done kind of situation, but I guess if we consistently label anxiety in this particular situation as excitement, then even if we don't fully believe it, we can at least gradually come around to the idea that, "Maybe I'm

feeling this way because I'm just so glad to be here. This is going to be so great." I do that when I go speak. I do that all the time. I just taught a CreativeLive course with AJ and Johnny about the art of networking and it was phenomenal. And one of the things that the audience member had said right before I went on, before we started filming, is she goes, "Are you nervous at all?" and I said, "Yeah. Yeah I am." And she laughed because she thought like, "What? You've done this so many times. You speak all the time and there's only 20 people in this room," granted there were like 9,000 people watching online at that point.

But, I do get nervous but I frame it, I harness it as, "And this is going to be so great. That's why I'm up here almost shaking because I get a chance to deliver this to the audience." And there's of course a part of me that's like, "No, I'm shaking because if I trip over my own feet, a lot of people are going to see that," but I also just try as best I can to frame it as excitement, and honestly after maybe 10 seconds, I've forgotten all about it anyway. It really is only the jitters right in the beginning and right before I go on. I've found that reframing it does help, even if it's just a different kind of self talk in those last few moments before I go up there.

DANIEL: You talk a lot in the show about optimism and positivity. This is an idea that comes naturally to you. You don't need to read the research to know that it's working for you. But what's funny is I think for a lot of people, the natural instinct is the opposite of that.

A lot of people engage in what they call defensive pessimism, which is before they go do something, they say to themselves, "What's the worst thing that could happen today if it doesn't go well?" That feels like a natural sort of soothing thing to say, "If this interview with Jordan doesn't go very well today, well you know, everything will still be okay in the long term." That's really the wrong thing to do. That's sort of like standing at the golf tee when you've got a lake on your right and saying, "Don't

hit it in the lake," because you're just sort of priming yourself to hit it in the lake.

Instead you should say, "I'm going to hit it 300 yards down the center." So what you do, you're thinking about the opportunity. You're thinking about how great this could be today. That's what you want to do before you're performing. You want to sort of get rid of the negative thoughts and reappraisal is a very specific way you can try to do that.

JORDAN: What about harnessing negative emotions? This is a very sort of bro way of getting psyched up, I've found. You see this in movies about football and sports and things like that and you see it at gyms where memberships are cheap and you get 21 year old kids in there and they're like, "Yeah, get in there!" or they're trash talking and they're going hard. And you're just thinking like, "What's the point of this?"

And looking at your research, the point is get psyched up for the work out or get psyched up for the sporting event. It seems like it's not really for me. I've got to throw that out there. It's not really something where I like to do it. I think I outgrew it, because I definitely remember when I was younger, I certainly did it. Now I'm like, "Eh, nah." I do it in different ways that I think are more positive. Did you research this at all and did you find any results linked to that?

DANIEL: Yeah, I think you're right. That's basically variations of anger and anger is a really complicated emotion for people. The research on it is pretty mixed. If you're doing an explosive sport like if you're powerlifting, for instance, there is some research evidence that getting angry will help you be more powerful and more explosive, but let's think about it, most of the things that most of us do in our day to day lives, are not like powerlifting. So, if you're trying to be a good speaker or a good salesman, it's a lot more complicated.

There are ways you can use rivalry, like focusing on the party you're trying to beat -- the opponent. Sometimes in the right

setting, that can be useful. Trash talk is a technique that people use to try to set the opponent -- distract them, set them off their game a little bit, make them angry perhaps. These things don't work at all for me. I'm self aware enough to know that I'm not the kind of person that that's going to get me going.

But you're right that for certain people maybe who are younger, certain people who have come out of a more competitive mindset than I do, this can be effective, but again, it's sort of like knowing yourself, you need to know if this stuff works for you or doesn't.

JORDAN: Are there any drawbacks to that? It seems like anytime you're doing something that's inherently dependent on you trashing someone else or harnessing negative emotion, that it could become something that you can no longer control.

DANIEL: Yeah, so there's at least two potential drawbacks to it. Number one is, it's sort of like if you're a comedian and somebody is heckling you or if you're deciding to heckle a comedian. You have to realize that they're going to come back at you with something and if what they come back at is better than what you gave in the first place, you could end up feeling like the loser in the transaction. Apart from the verbal part of it, there's actually research that shows that if you trash talk at someone, it could increase their motivation and serve to increase their performance. And, you know, again if we think of sort of cliched sports movies, we could probably think of examples where that happens as well. So it's definitely -- you can kind of be poking the bear with this stuff and it's definitely something you use with caution.

JORDAN: Sounds like a rap battle gone bad. Something like straight out of 8 Mile, right? Like, "I got all this great stuff," and then it's like well -- in fact there was this scene where Eminem takes the other guy's ammo, right? He's got this tons of trash talk lined up and then Eminem is like, "Yeah, you slept with my girlfriend, I barfed on myself," and then the other guy just had nothing left to say. And of course, you're right, I can imagine somebody

getting themselves psyched up by getting in someone else's face and then the other guy just trounces them because they're like, "You know I was coming in a little unfocused but now I'm just pissed off."

DANIEL: Yeah, it's funny. You know, when we think about trash talk, we certainly think mostly about sports. You know, you have great imagery there from rap scenario, but this does happen in business as well. One of the people I spent time with while reporting the book was the CEO of T-Mobile, John Legere. And his primary business strategy is to trash Verizon and AT&T. He's got millions and millions of Twitter followers and pretty much every day he's on Twitter talking about how terrible his competitors are.

And he does that for a few reasons. Partly he's trying to sway consumers over to his brand but it also fires up his workforce. He's using it as a motivational technique in his own organization. This is not just something that two boxers are going to do at the weigh-in, this is actually a thing that in big business, people are using because they think it's a powerful tool.

JORDAN: Great, well there's a lot here for people to harness and work on, the idea that you can use your own greatest hits to increase confidence, replay some victories, superstition, rituals, creating your own pre-performance ritual of course, pep talks, trash talk, and just combating those nerves. I think some combination of these different discrete skills or techniques can really go a long way, so thanks for sharing your research for us here. And of course the book title, [*Psyched Up: How the Science of Mental Preparation Can Help You Succeed*](#). The benefits here not lost on me and from the sound of it, from our chat before the show, not lost on a lot of pro athletes as well.

DANIEL: Thank you, this was fun.

JORDAN: Great big thank you to Daniel McGinn. The book title is [Psyched Up: How the Science of Mental Preparation Can Help You](#)

[Succeed](#). Of course that will be linked up in the show notes for this episode and if you enjoyed this episode, thank Daniel on Twitter. We'll have that linked up in the show notes as well. I'm also on Twitter @theartofcharm, and if you tweet at me your number one takeaway, I'm always grateful for that. Of course if you have feedback and questions for this, we'll be attacking that on Fan Mail Friday.

Remember, if you're looking for the show notes, just tap your phone screen. Of course you can find the show notes for any episode at theartofcharm.com/podcast. I also want to encourage you to join our AoC challenge. That's at theartofcharm.com/challenge or text 'AOC' to 38470. That's A-O-C to 38470. The challenge is about improving your networking and connection skills, inspiring those around you to develop a relationship with you, becoming a higher performer by developing allstar habits. Of course it's free, a lot of people may not know that. It's free, that's the idea. It's a fun way to get the ball rolling and get some forward momentum.

We'll also send you our fundamentals toolbox that I mentioned earlier on the show. That includes great practical stuff. It's always ready to go right out of the box. We're talking reading body language, charismatic nonverbal communication, attraction science, negotiation techniques, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. This will make you a better networker, it'll make you a better connector, and it will make you a better thinker. That's what we're all about here. That's at theartofcharm.com/challenge or text 'AOC' to 38480.

This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo, Jason Sanderson is our audio engineer and editor, and the show notes on the website are Robert Fogarty. Theme music by Little People, transcription by TranscriptionOutsourcing.net -- I'm your host Jordan Harbinger. If you can think of anyone who might benefit from the episode you've just heard, please pay AoC the highest compliment and pay it forward by sharing this episode with that person. It only takes moment and great ideas

are meant to be shared. So, share the show with your friends and enemies, stay charming, and leave everything and everyone better than you found them.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

