

We've all been there: that jittery sensation minutes before a race start, a presentation, or even stepping onto the stage. Anxiety spikes and thoughts race, threatening to derail your focus. The good news? Establishing a **routine** before the event is a proven way to ease that anxiety, harness your arousal levels, and get into your optimal performance zone.

Drawing on practical insights from the GOV.UK guidance on managing stress and anxiety, combined with principles from performance psychology and cognitive science, this article explores why routines really help. We'll break down how a *rehearsed sequence* can manage your mental load, create a *physiological association* that signals readiness, and keep you in a *predictable state* — all crucial for showing up your best when it counts.

The Science of Arousal and Performance: The Inverted-U Curve

To understand how routines help, we first need to talk about the relationship between arousal (think: stress or excitement) and performance. The classic model here is the **Inverted-U arousal curve**.

In this model, your performance improves as arousal rises from low to moderate levels, but once arousal gets too high—beyond your “performance band”—your performance begins to suffer. For a big event, anxiety can push you past the sweet spot into a zone of overwhelm where errors creep in and focus suffers.



Arousal Level	Performance	Effect Description
Low	Poor performance	Under-stimulated, low focus, sluggish response
Optimal (Moderate)	Peak performance	Heightened alertness, clear and accurate focus
High	Poor performance	Over-arousal, stress responses take over, tunnel vision or distraction

Routines help regulate arousal, nudging you into your “performance band” and holding you there until the event kicks off.

Rehearsed Sequences as Working-Memory Management

Before a big event, your brain faces a huge mental load. You’re juggling multiple thoughts: How will this go? What if I mess up? What do I have to do next? This overload can scramble working memory, which is vital for processing immediate information and decision-making.

Here's where a **rehearsed sequence** — a pre-event routine you've practiced many times — is a game changer. Because it's automatic, your brain offloads effort away from stressful problem-solving towards a mentally effortless flow. Instead of juggling thoughts, you're performing a familiar series of actions that gradually quiets your mental chatter.

Think of it like this: a good routine works as a "cognitive scaffold," creating structure that protects working memory from intrusive anxious thoughts. Your mental capacity frees up for focus on the task itself.

Example: Motorsport Pre-Race Routine

- Arrive at your grid box
- Run through a checklist: equipment, settings, pit signals
- Perform a set of breathing exercises
- Mentally rehearse the first few corners
- Focus attention outside yourself — to the environment and controls

Every step is habit and practice, giving your working memory a clear and predictable script just before the flag drops.



Physiological Association: Conditioning Your Body and Mind

Here's what kills me: routines also create physiological associations. When you repeat the same sequence before each important effort, your body develops conditioned responses that tell your nervous system: "It's time to shift gears."

This means the same actions can automatically evoke a state of readiness. Your heart rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, and mind-state begin to align in a way that supports optimal performance. It's a form of subtle self-conditioning that can be more effective than trying to will yourself into calm or confidence.

One of the simplest, yet most powerful components incorporated into routines is extended-exhale breathing. Extending the out-breath triggers the parasympathetic nervous system — the part that calms your heart rate and reduces tension quickly. Just 3 to 5 deep, slow exhales in a row can shift your physiology within seconds.

How to do extended-exhale breathing:

1. Breathe in steadily through your nose for 3 seconds
2. Exhale slowly through your mouth for 5-6 seconds
3. Repeat 3 to 5 times, focusing on the length of the out-breath

This simple self-regulation tool is a core part of many pro athletes' routines — it's reliable, controllable, and immediate.

External, Process-Focused Attention vs Outcome Focus

A common rookie mistake is obsessing over what the outcome could be. Anxiety often spirals from focusing on "what if I fail?" or "I need to win." **Visit this page** This internal and outcome-focused attention ramps up stress and breaks concentration.

Routines help redirect your focus: **the focus is on the process, not the result.** When you're locked into your pre-event sequence, your attention is outward and task-focused — on what you *can control* right now. This focus shift is a critical psychological strategy.

For example, instead of worrying about the crowd or final score, a driver's attention is on the tactile feel of the steering wheel, the smoothness of the gearshift, or the rhythm of their breathing. This process orientation keeps you in the present moment and avoids distracting "what-if" thinking.

Summary: How Routines Reduce Anxiety and Boost Performance

Routine	Effect	Benefit	How It Helps
Rehearsed Sequence	Reduces mental load by automating actions	Frees working memory from intrusive worries	Physiological Association
Signals readiness and creates calm body state	Shifts nervous system away from stress response	Extended-Exhale Breathing	Quickly regulates heart rate and tension
Rapid physiological calming before event start	External, Process-Focused Attention	Maintains present moment focus on controllables	Prevents outcome-based anxiety spirals
Predictable State	Establishes reliable, familiar mental space	Builds confidence and reduces performance uncertainty	

Putting It Into Practice: What Would You Do In The 2 Minutes Before Your Big Event?

Here's a quick checklist inspired by these principles that you can tailor and rehearse in advance:

1. Have a clear, step-by-step pre-event routine written or memorised (e.g. check kit, review plan, breathing rituals)
2. Perform extended-exhale breathing (3-5 cycles)
3. Visualise executing the first actions of your event with calm focus
4. Consciously shift focus outward to your environment and task cues
5. Trust the routine and avoid second-guessing the outcome

With practice, this rehearsed sequence becomes your anchor — your "reset button" to bring you into a predictable, low-anxiety state before you even start.

Why This Matters Beyond Elite Sports

While the examples come from motorsport and high-stakes competition, routines are just as relevant for anyone facing a big moment — public speakers, students, performers, or just someone tackling a nerve-wracking meeting. The GOV.UK guidance recognises that structured self-help approaches are an accessible way to manage anxiety without jumping directly to medications or therapy.

Sharing This Insight

If you found this helpful, consider sharing it on your favourite social platforms to help others manage their pre-event nerves:

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Final Thoughts

Routines aren't magic cures. They won't erase anxiety overnight. But what they do — grounded in clear neuroscience and psychological principles — is give you a reliable tool to manage your arousal, reduce mental clutter, and enter that golden zone of performance. By building and practising your own rehearsed sequence, you create a predictable mental and physiological state that allies with you, rather than fights against anxiety, in those crucial moments before the start.

So next time you feel those nerves rising, ask yourself: *What would I do in the two minutes before it's go time?* Your routine is waiting to bring you there calm, focused, and ready.