

COLLABORATING WITH BUSINESS

by academics in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The research managing anxiety through music and movement

Dr Xenia Pestova Bennett is using her performance expertise to help Midlands workers and school children deal with stress and anxiety

From an early age, most of us have felt the pressure to fit in at school and achieve good grades. As we reach adulthood, these pressures give way to stresses and anxieties about aspects of our lives such as relationships, work and finances. Stress and anxiety are natural. As key drivers in our motivation, they're often healthy too. However, when these emotions start to consume too much of our thoughts, they can become debilitating medical disorders.

According to a recent survey, more than 80 per cent of teachers believe school pupil's mental health in England has deteriorated during the past two years. Meanwhile, more than 15 million working days were lost to work-related stress in Great Britain between 2017 and 2018.

Dr Xenia Pestova Bennett, Director of Performance at The University of Nottingham's Department of Music, is no stranger to stress and anxiety. As well as balancing the pressures of a successful academic career with a parallel life as an internationally acclaimed pianist, Xenia also experiences performance anxiety.

"Stress and anxiety are an evolutionary response, but when they become too much, we can be left feeling overwhelmed", she says. "The



good news is there are several techniques we can employ to manage these feelings".

Xenia is always looking for opportunities to connect with new audiences. When The University of Nottingham's Ingenuity network team asked her to share her work with the Midlands business community, she was keen to seize the opportunity. Her only question was how to make her work relatable to local companies.

"We brainstormed a few ideas and soon realised the music and business worlds have more in common than you might think", Xenia explains. "Interviews, meetings and appraisals can all trigger the same stress and anxiety as playing to a live audience. I thought 'I use routines and coping techniques to manage my performance anxiety - why not share them with people who can use them in the workplace?'"

After the success of a breakfast talk and one-day workshop with Midlands SMEs, Staffordshire-based Leek United Building Society asked Xenia to create a bespoke workshop for its branch managers. The



company was keen to help its team manage anxiety around performance reviews and build confidence in interacting with customers.

Xenia used her performance expertise to deliver an interactive session incorporating breathing exercises, meditation, movement and music designed to reduce anxiety and improve focus. She introduced participants to performance and improvisation techniques to enhance their problem-solving skills and workplace relationships.

"We did not talk about stress and anxiety in performance in our Branch Network", says Leek United Learning and Development Adviser, Kelly Heath. "Xenia's involvement helped break the stigma around these topics. Several of our branch managers have since implemented practices from the session with their teams."

Xenia has since begun a partnership with Freedom Foundation. The local social enterprise uses performance to help Nottingham's school children and young people deal with issues such as negative body image, social media safety and online bullying. "We created a movement sequence to help children and young people cope with anxiety and stress particularly around exam time", explains Freedom Foundation Director Laura Grant. Xenia has now helped the organisation develop an anxiety toolkit for schools throughout Nottinghamshire.

Xenia admits she was initially apprehensive about working with children. However, she says "It turned out to be an eye-opening experience. They were very engaged and happy to speak openly about the anxiety they've experienced."

Managing these projects on top of a busy academic and performance schedule was a stretch for Xenia at times. Nevertheless, she feels they were worth the effort. "It's common to want to stay in your comfort zone and avoid committing to new things. However, sometimes taking risks can be a lot more fun and take your work in completely new directions. By teaching others how to manage their anxiety, I've picked up new skills to manage my own. I do yoga every day now to relax", she reflects. "These projects have also helped me to be a better teacher and made me think differently about my research."



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