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Nerves before a big moment—a race start, a qualifying lap, or a test session—are as common as the roar of the engine. Many drivers, athletes, and performers try to push down that nervous energy, hoping they can “just calm down” and perform better. But paradoxically, the more you try to suppress those nerves, the worse you often feel. Why is that?

Understanding the science behind this reaction and learning how to manage nerves without fighting them can be a game-changer. Let’s unpack this puzzle by exploring concepts like the **inverted-U arousal curve**, the importance of a **pre-session routine** as working-memory management, the role of **extended-exhale breathing** for rapid physiological shifts, and why **external process-focused attention** is so much more effective than obsessive outcome focus.

The Paradox of Suppressing Nerves

Try to stop feeling nervous and what usually happens? You feel even more on edge. It’s a frustrating feedback loop that trips up more people than we realise. This isn’t because you’re weak or failing—it’s because our brains and bodies are wired to react in specific ways when we consciously try to hide or push away strong emotions like nerves.

First, suppression requires conscious mental effort. When you try to “not be nervous,” you feed your brain with the very signal it’s trying to filter out, making the feeling louder in your internal dialogue. This is what psychologists call *ironic process theory*, where the act of trying not to think about something makes you think about it more.

Instead, modern guidance, like the GOV.UK well-being advice page, suggests a different route: **acceptance** rather than suppression. Accept the nervous energy as normal, then reframe it—treat it as fuel, not a threat.

The Inverted-U Arousal Curve: Sweet Spot of Performance

Ever heard of the “inverted-U curve”? It’s a simple graph that explains how arousal (or activation of your nervous system) impacts performance. Too little arousal, and you’re lethargic, unfocused, and underwhelming. Too much, and you panic, overthink, or tense up excessively.

Level of Arousal	Performance Level	Typical Experience
Low	Poor	Drowsy, distracted, unmotivated
Medium	Optimal	Focused, confident, alert
High	Poor	Anxious, tense, overwhelmed

Your goal isn’t to eliminate nerves—that’s impossible—but rather to keep your arousal within your individual **performance band**. This band is your “sweet spot” where that nervous energy sharpens your senses and reaction times without breaking your rhythm.

Trying to suppress or ignore your nerves typically pushes you out of this window, triggering the “high” side of the curve where performance can nosedive.



Pre-Session Routine as Working-Memory Management

So if suppression backfires, what's the practical alternative? Most pro drivers and coaches swear by a well-rehearsed pre-session routine. This isn't just superstition or "just breathe" laziness—it's a scientifically backed toolbox for managing your working memory and cognitive load.

Working memory is your brain's scratchpad. If it's cluttered with worries ("Don't mess up!", "What if I stall?", "This is really important!"), you disrupt the smooth mental flow that skilled performance depends on.

- **Establish a sequence:** Know exactly what you're doing, step-by-step, before the session starts. Check gear, set up mental cues, visualise the track or course.
- **External focus:** Anchor your attention on sensory inputs or physical tasks, rather than internal fear or what the outcome might be.
- **Consistency breeds calm:** The same routine acts like a mental filter, keeping distracting noise out and letting you slot into your performance zone faster.

This pre-session routine acts like a shield and a launchpad—helping you **reframe arousal** and channel it productively rather than waste time battling it.

Using Extended-Exhale Breathing for Quick Physiological Shift

Breathing is one of the fastest levers to dial your nervous system up or down. But contrary to vague advice such as "just breathe," the magic lies in lengthening your exhale.

Why? Because extended exhalation stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, your body's natural brake pedal. This counters the "fight or flight" signals flooding your body when you're nervous.

1. Inhale slowly for about 3 seconds through your nose.
2. Exhale gently but steadily for 5-6 seconds, longer than the inhale.
3. Repeat for a minute or two, focusing your attention solely on the flow of air out of your lungs.

This method creates a real, measurable physiological shift — lowering heart rate and muscle tension. When your body feels calmer, your mind follows. Crucially, because the mind stays focused on the process of breathing rather

than trying to “stop being nervous,” it avoids the trap of suppression.

External Process-Focused Attention vs Outcome Focus

Perhaps the biggest mental trap is fixating on the **outcome**—winning, making a perfect lap, or avoiding mistakes. This outcome obsession is like putting all your eggs on a moving conveyor belt: the harder you grip, the more likely you drop them.

Top performers reframe nerves by shifting attention outward, towards their process cues:

- Feel of the steering wheel or throttle
- Visual flow of the track or racing line
- Sequencing of your shifts and braking points

By concentrating on these controllable actions, you keep working memory free of rumination, reduce the emotional charge of the situation, and allow the “muscle memory” to kick in.

Remember: You can’t control the race outcome, but you can absolutely control your focus. That’s the power of acceptance and process over suppression and obsession.

Reframe Arousal: Don’t Fight, Use It as Fuel

The key takeaway you’ll hear from driver coaches and sports psychologists alike is this: nerves and arousal aren’t your enemy. They’re natural resources you’ve been given—tools to harness, not shackles to break free from.

When you **accept** nervous energy and **reframe arousal** as excitement, readiness, or simply “fuel,” you invite a fundamental shift in your mindset. Instead of collapsing under <https://www.motorsportweek.com/2026/08/10/nerves-at-200mph-how-racing-drivers-manage-anxiety-and-focus/> pressure or spiralling into self-doubt, you channel that same energy into sharper reactions, better decisions, and smoother performances.

It’s a subtle art, but it’s built on solid science, verifiable breathing techniques, and mental framing—none of which depend on miracle claims or vague “just calm down” slogans.

Sharing the Knowledge: Why It Matters

This is not just dry theory but practical help for anyone who faces a performance moment. Whether you’re a track day warrior, a club-level racer, a budding prosumer content creator, or someone stepping into their first big presentation, the same principles apply.

If you found this post useful, you can share these insights across your social networks to help friends and followers manage pre-performance nerves better. Here’s how you could spread the word:

- **Facebook:** Post your own “What helped me reframe nervous energy” experience and tag friends who get pre-session jitters.
- **Twitter/X:** Share a quick thread summarising the inverted-U curve and why suppression backfires, using hashtags like *#PerformBetter* *#MentalMath*.
- **Reddit:** Join motorsport or performance psychology communities and start a discussion around process vs outcome focus.

- **LinkedIn:** Write a short post tying this to workplace performance or leadership “stress” and how acceptance breeds resilience.
- **Pinterest:** Pin simple infographics of the inverted-U curve or extended exhale breathing guides to your wellness or motivation boards.

Summary: What Would You Do In The 2 Minutes Before It Starts?

To wrap up with a question I always ask my students: What would you do in the 2 minutes before your session starts?

If you’re still trying to suppress nerves and tell yourself “don’t be nervous,” it’s time to rethink that strategy. Instead, breathe deeply to calm your body, run through your consistent pre-session checklist, focus completely on getting ready rather than what the outcome might be, and tell yourself: *“This nervous energy is fuel—I’m ready for this.”*



Nerves aren’t your enemy. They’re the engine revving before the green light. Don’t slam the brakes by fighting them—channel that power and let it drive you forward.

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