

Stage fright – the last taboo?

Human Givens, a new form of therapy which triggers the brain to ‘heal itself’ of problems of anxiety and trauma, is taking the therapy world by storm. **Andrew Richardson HG. Dip.P** explains

In comparison to musicians and singers, sportsmen and -women are far ahead of the game when it comes to dealing with performance anxiety and nerves. Sports psychologists will be on hand as a matter of course and the subject is discussed and out in the open. But I was very surprised as a therapist to hear from stage performers that the subject of stage fright and performance anxiety is hardly ever mentioned in depth in drama and music courses at college or when studying privately. In fact some performers report that too many teachers still tell their students that nervousness is down to lack of preparation, which is frustrating for those who are superbly prepared but still suffer palpitations, shaky hands and knees, upset stomachs and those distracting mental voices telling them how awful they are! And so it would seem that too many performers (perhaps even the majority) struggle on alone, dabbling perhaps in self-help manuals, beta blockers and hypnosis until, sadly, they decide the strain simply isn't worth it and they give up. Fortunately, a fast, permanent and cost-effective solution to stage fright and performance anxiety is now available through the Human Givens Institute. One typical example of a performer's struggle with stage fright which resolved itself permanently and quickly through therapy with Human Givens is Lena, a professionally trained and experienced singer.

Lena came to me as a talented singer in her late thirties who felt that she could get no further in her career due to stage fright. The odd thing about this stage fright was that it only occurred in certain situations – during some but not all auditions, for example – and it seemed to be randomly occurring before or during certain performances. Indeed the stage fright sometimes happened before or during really small unimportant concerts but not in big prestigious ones, and vice versa. Whatever Lena did, she could not figure out why this was. The ‘panic attacks’ would sometimes hap-

pen before she went onstage, sometimes as she walked on and turned to face the audience and sometimes an attack would hit her half way through a song! As there did not seem to be any rhyme or reason for the ‘panicky’ performances, the fear of not knowing whether a panic attack would occur or not had eventually stopped Lena risking any kind of performance at all. She hadn't sung in public for over two years, and felt she had hit a brick wall.

Lena told me that discussing stage fright is almost taboo in some circles, with performers afraid to discuss it among themselves for fear of appearing weak or unreliable, and this had made it hard for her to seek help. She had, of course, tried everything – beta blockers which had made her dizzy and forgetful, as well as self-hypnosis tapes and deep-breathing techniques which had little reliable effect. She followed the long lists of performance advice found in singers' books and tried in depth the techniques found in the well-known book *The Inner Game of Music*. She had many sessions with a qualified hypnotherapist but found that hypnotherapy merely ‘papered over the cracks’ and didn't clear out the root of the problem. Nothing actually stopped the black cloud of dread engulfing her just as she stepped onstage, or the palpitations or dizziness, or silenced the ‘demon on her shoulder’ telling her she was a fraud and would fail.

Really fearing that she would have to turn her back on her dreams after a lifetime of practice and thousands of pounds spent on top quality voice training, Lena came to me at the advice of her teacher to see if I could help. We quickly established that the underlying problem was that Lena's essential need for meaning, purpose and direction – as a singer in her case – was not being met. This lack was manifesting understandably in depression, insomnia and lack of self-esteem. She felt socially isolated, as she wasn't performing and mixing with other singers. As we progressed she was very shocked to discover that all her stage fright patterns could be traced back to a ‘black-out’ she had experienced onstage while still in her late teens. She hadn't thought that this event could still affect her after nearly 20 years, as it had happened during a quite unimportant ‘workshop’ concert at college and nobody had minded at that time that she had stopped singing and forgotten the words.

She was surprised to hear that the primitive part of the brain called the amygdale, which is responsible for the ‘fight or flight’ response, was still storing the emotion of this memory, and that whenever the amygdale (not the sharpest tool in the box) considered a performance or audition to be similar to the blackout event she'd had so many years ago, it was triggering a rerun of the original blackout response. Normally, our brains can process ‘bad memories’ by sending them to the more advanced ‘prefrontal cortex’ area of the brain, where they are rationalised, processed and filed away safely without any residual bad feelings. However, sometimes the emotions stay unprocessed in the amygdale which has no notion of time or context or subtle differentiation.

Lena was very relieved to hear that there was a real physical reason for her blackouts, and that Human Givens could help. I explained the ‘Rewind’ to Lena. This method for resolving trauma involves visualising a traumatic event while in a very relaxed



Therapist Andrew Richardson:
‘What really sets Human Givens apart is an easy to understand yet infinitely versatile organising Idea and access to the very latest neurobiological understanding of brain function’

Steven Davidson

state, in a dissociated way. This is typically achieved by 'rewinding' the experience back and forwards as if on a TV screen. The effect of the Rewind is to shift the emotional memory out of the amygdale and into the prefrontal cortex, where it becomes an ordinary narrative memory and so in effect is 'let go'.

After rewinding the traumatic blackout of 20 years earlier, Lena felt a great weight lifted from her shoulders. We had three more sessions, to rewind other similar experiences and also to deal with incidents from her personal life which were intruding on her thoughts. The great thing about Rewinds is that you don't actually have to tell the therapist what it is you are rewinding, so traumatic events can stay private to you!

We did not just do Rewinds, but used other Human Givens methods and insights to build up emotional strength and rehearse future change. Human Givens has a number of tools in the locker and of course their use is tailored to each person. What really sets Human Givens apart, though, is an easy to understand yet infinitely versatile Organising Idea (see below) and access to the very latest neurobiological understanding of brain function.

Also, as Lena appreciated, Human Givens therapy usually only takes a few sessions to effect real change and so is cost-effective – great for cash-strapped musicians and students! Lena really took to the Rewind technique and found it easy and helpful. In fact she was so inspired by our work together that she continued on her own, writing out a list of over 120 personal and musical events in her life that had been traumatic – ranging from minor ones like an embarrassing sports day aged eight, through to other stage events that had not gone to plan, right through to much more serious events like relationship break-ups and bereavements. After working through these events alone for a few months using the techniques we had worked on together she was thrilled to find that she still kept the memories and the life experience gained from them, but she could experience the memories themselves without cringing or feeling a shudder of horror run through her.

Now I am pleased to say that Lena is performing and auditioning again at a professional level, that she experiences no stage fright symptoms in any situation and actually relishes auditions! Her social life has picked up, she is relaxed and chatty rather than reserved and shy, and feels she can look forward to the future, rather than being stuck in the past. She says it is like being 18 again, but with all the worldly knowledge of a woman of 38 – minus all the emotional baggage. Surely a great place to be.

What are the Human Givens and why is the approach so effective?

Human Givens is home grown in the UK and though only 10 years old, is becoming known and used in many areas – including in the

NHS, education and business. From the Human Givens perspective most forms of mental distress and disorders can be alleviated quickly while the performance and well-being of all individuals can be enhanced. There are now around 120 fully qualified practitioners nationwide – all of whom are accredited by the Human Givens Institute.

The Organising Idea

Just as a plant has essential needs (for water, nutritious soil and sunshine), so all humans also have their essential *needs*. And if these are not met in a balanced way, then there will be emotional distress. We know that adequate food, shelter and security are needs that all humans have. But the Human Givens approach asks us to look at the other 'needs' that are essential to our well-being. And nature has endowed us with the *resources* to ensure we can get these needs met.

Using the research of neuro-scientists we now know much more about how the brain works – notably why we dream, how emotions arise and why, and the nature of memory and addictions. And consequently, Human Givens-trained therapists can heal, repair and use the innate *resources* of clients to help them get their essential *needs* better met.

This new scientific Human Givens approach to relieving emotional disorders is revolutionising the old 'talking therapy' approaches. And already there is hard evidence of effectiveness – following the completion of a nationwide project involving 25 therapists and over 500 clients.

No longer do we need to relive and analyse old memories, no need to blame past hurts or rejections. Instead, the therapist will show the client how to relax deeply, break the old patterns and let go of their anxieties and worries. In this relaxed state, the therapist will help the client to see more clearly the range of options open to them. The therapist will draw on the successes the client has achieved (and everybody has achieved something), helping them to remember and re-harness the strengths they have. They help clients to use the very powerful tool of the imagination to see themselves successfully achieving the goals they have set for themselves.

The result is a therapy that is quick, effective and flexible enough to deal with an enormous range of presenting problems. ■

Andrew Richardson is a member of the Human Givens Institute and a director of the London Human Givens Centre (LHGC)

For more information call the LHGC on +44 (0)20 7467 8521 or visit www.londonhumangivens.com

Needs and Resources - How the HG Organising Idea works

1: Our Essential Human Needs

- Feeling safe
- Having people who are important to you and to whom you are important
- Having wider connections beyond your family and close friends
- A sense of autonomy and control
- Being comfortable with your status in society and with your peers
- A sense of competence and achievement
- Being able to experience fun and pleasure
- Getting your attention needs met – both giving and receiving
- A place for privacy and reflection
- Being stretched by how you live or the work that you do

2: Our Innate Resources – to get needs met

- Complex long-term memory, which enables us to add to our innate knowledge and learn the ability to build rapport, empathise and connect with others
- Imagination, which enables us to focus our attention away from our emotions and so solve problems that get our needs met
- A conscious, rational mind that can question, analyse and plan
- The ability to 'know' — that is, understand the world intuitively through metaphorical pattern matching
- An observing self — that part of us that can step back and be aware of itself as a unique centre of awareness
- A dreaming brain that preserves the integrity of our emotional inheritance by metaphorically defusing expectations every night that were not acted out the previous day.