

Performance Anxiety & Coping Mechanisms

Celebrity Scenario #1 Simone Biles, gymnast

Two months after withdrawing from the women's gymnastics team competition at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, Simone Biles shared new details about the scary experience that forced her to make that tough decision—and the anxious headspace she was in at the time. The gymnast explained more about what it was like to get the “twisties” in Tokyo, and her mental health.

Biles was feeling pretty strong and confident going into the Tokyo Games, having gained some coping mechanisms from attending therapy during Olympics training. But she started experiencing anxiety once she got to Tokyo.



Photo credit: Ezra Shaw/Getty

Stepping into the world of this particular Olympics was an unfamiliar experience compared to previous years because of COVID-19 safety protocols. And Biles just couldn't shake the feeling that something else was off: “*Everything will be okay*, [Biles] thought, but she had a nagging feeling that things were not *right*.” Even the usual team pep talks from her coaches didn't restore her confidence. “Leading up to it, I got more and more nervous,” Biles said. “I didn't feel as confident as I should have been with as much training as we had.” “I was not physically capable,” Biles said. “Every avenue we tried, my body was like, *Simone, chill. Sit down.*”

The “twisties” are a phenomenon, sometimes triggered by stress, in which an athlete's mind and body experience disconnect while in the air, resulting in a dangerous loss of muscle memory and spatial awareness midair.

The gymnast knew immediately what she had to do. “My perspective has never changed so quickly from wanting to be on an Olympic podium to wanting to be able to go home, by myself, without any crutches,” recalled Biles, who says she's incredibly fortunate she escaped without suffering any life-threatening injuries. As she struggled to focus on her routine, eventually leaving the team final competition, Biles said she felt “like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders at times”.

Psychiatrist Dr Leela R. Magavi said that elite athletes can feel that “every single step that they take will be significantly scrutinised, and this kind of pressure is so severe” that it can affect their day-to-day activities. Such athletes who are “essentially symbolising and representing a country”, can be exposed to stress in a way that “they lose that passion for the game.”

And while her decision in Tokyo was heartbreaking—some days she's “perfectly okay” with it, and others she will “just start crying”—Biles knows she absolutely made the right choice and has grown from the experience. “Everybody asks, ‘If you could go back, would you?’” Biles said. “No. I wouldn't change anything because everything happens for a reason. And I learned a lot about myself—courage, resilience, how to say no and speak up for yourself.”

-Modified from [Self Magazine](#) & [News 18](#).



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Celebrity Scenario #2 Selena Gomez, singer

In 2016, pop star Selena Gomez took a career break because of panic attacks, depression, and anxiety connected to her lupus, according to *People* magazine. Then in October 2018, *People* reported that she sought treatment for her mental health after suffering a panic attack while in the hospital for a low white blood cell count — a complication that's often associated with kidney transplant and lupus patients.

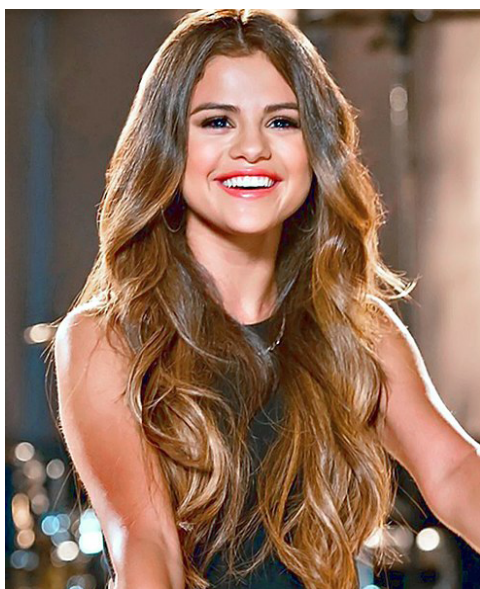


Photo credit: Lunchbox LP via Flickr

Gomez learned a lot about maintaining her mental health during her 90-day stay at a psychiatric center in Tennessee. “I’ve discovered that anxiety, panic attacks and depression can be side effects of lupus,” she explained in a statement when she pulled out of the tour in August 2016.

Later she spoke with *Vogue* magazine about her symptoms while on tour: loneliness, low self-esteem, panic attacks before or after her performances, feeling like she was giving weak shows and her fans knew it—“which, I think, was a complete distortion,” she said in retrospect.

The intensive psychotherapy was a game changer for Gomez. And she’s not shy about promoting its benefits, such as nurturing “a good inner dialogue.”

“I think [therapy] sounds a lot scarier to people than it actually is,” she mused. “Honestly, what I think it’s like is holding a mirror to yourself and acknowledging the things you don’t really want to acknowledge about yourself, about the situations you put yourself in.”

In addition to regular therapy sessions, Gomez takes the occasional inpatient retreat as needed. In January 2018, after a few months of media focus and interviews about her kidney surgery and recovery, Gomez checked into a New York City facility for two weeks of counseling, meditation, Pilates, and healthy meals.

Since then she’s kept a relatively low profile for a world-famous entertainer and fashion entrepreneur.

“I’ve stepped back a bit,” she explained. “I’m enjoying my life and I don’t think about anything that causes me stress anymore, which is really nice.”

She went on: “I don’t pay to attention to trying to get people to like me so much anymore.

“When you feel more secure about yourself, it carries over into everything you do. You don’t give in to your doubts or anxieties as much and that frees you to be true to yourself ... and that’s a pretty liberating feeling.”

-Modified from [USA Today](#) & [Hope to Cope](#)



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Celebrity Scenario #3

Stephen Colbert, comedian and TV personality

Stephen Colbert is a very successful late night talk show host and comedian but his TV personality doesn't show everything. Stephen suffers from Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

You're just going about your business when suddenly, your chest gets tight, your heart starts pounding and you can't breathe. That's the terrifying experience felt by someone suffering a panic attack. "It was like there was a weight on my chest and I was suffocating. The more I fixated on it, the tighter my chest felt."



Photo credit: Scott Kowalchyk/CBS

His panic attacks were misdiagnosed for a while. "The more I started thinking about all of it ... the more the anxiety built up. And I just couldn't function." Panic attacks are becoming more recognizable as people like Stephen come forward with their experiences. Stephen Colbert opened up about his life-long struggle with anxiety in a new Rolling Stone cover story.

"I had a bit of a nervous breakdown after I got married — kind of panic attacks," shared the 54-year-old comedian. "My wife would go off to work and she'd come home — because I worked at night — and I'd be walking around the couch. And she's like, 'How was your day?' And I'd say, 'You're looking at it.' Just tight circles around the couch."

The Emmy winner disclosed that he used to take medication for his anxiety, but has found performing as a comedian puts him the most at ease. "Creating something is what helped me from just spinning apart like an unweighted flywheel," he said. "And I haven't stopped since."

He would wake in the middle of the night in his 20s "paralyzed by anxiety, agonizing about his future," according to the report. Now he uses medication and meditates, and uses humor to help him manage his anxiety.

-Modified from [MarketWatch](#) & [Rolling Stone](#)

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Celebrity Scenario #4

Kendall Jenner, model and TV personality

Jenner has opened up about her symptoms of anxiety in the past. In a video interview with *Vogue* last year, she told clinical psychologist Ramani Durvasula, PhD, that she experienced the physical symptoms of anxiety from an early age. “I remember being really young—I’d say 8, 9, 10—and having shortness of breath and going to my mom and telling her that,” Jenner said. As she got older, she continued to struggle with a sense of panic and fear. “I’ve had times where I feel like I need to be rushed to the hospital because I think my heart’s failing and I can’t breathe and I need someone to help me,” she said at the time of last year’s interview.



Photo credit: Ben Gabbe/Getty Images

According to the Cleveland Clinic, the symptoms of anxiety are broken down into three main categories: physical, mental, and behavioral. Physical symptoms of anxiety can include nausea, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, muscle tension, numbness or tingling in hands or feet, cold or sweaty hands, and dry mouth. Mental symptoms can include intrusive thoughts of traumatic experiences, obsessive thoughts, nightmares, panic, and fear. Behavioral symptoms can include difficulties sleeping, ritualistic behaviors (like repeatedly washing your hands), or an inability to remain still.

Jenner went on to add that she manages her feelings of anxiety by cultivating “a calmer, more positive mindset” at the beginning of her day, and by acknowledging her need for personal space and “alone time.”

Jenner shared how she started her day: taking time to journal, writing down all the aspects of her day that she is most excited about, and expressing gratitude for all her “blessings.” She also says she “took in the sun,” while enjoying tea and practicing deep breathing. Jenner says she tries to perform “10 deep inhales/exhales” before using her phone in the morning.

Research has found that everyone can benefit from controlled, slow breathing. A review that investigated the psychophysiological mechanisms behind controlled breathing found that breathing techniques enhance “autonomic, cerebral, and psychological flexibility.” This is because breathing can lead to changes in the nervous system, including increasing heart rate variability (the fluctuation in time intervals between heartbeats) and increased activity in the cerebral cortex (the largest part of the brain that controls higher functions), all of which can lead to heightened feelings of comfort, relaxation, vigor, and alertness, while also help manage feelings of anxiety.

-Modified from [Self Magazine](#)



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Celebrity Scenario #5 Shawn Mendes, singer

Shawn Mendes, is a Canadian singer who has released three studio albums, headlined three world tours and received numerous awards. However, behind his accolades and success lies a person struggling with a mental condition which millions can relate to.

“My personal wellness journey started a couple years ago when I was going through a really dark time,” he said. “I had so much anxiety that I actually couldn’t sing anymore. It was all in my throat, which a lot of men experience. We often experience those emotions as tension in our back, neck, and as pain in our bodies. I couldn’t sing anymore, and I always had a thing about quitting. I didn’t want to quit.”



Photo credit: Joel C Ryan/
Invasion/AP

“This was two Grammys ago,” he says. “And I was in this dark place, and I had to do something. And I was taking it out on other people, like in my relationships. I didn’t want to be that person. So, I started reading. I started meditating and journaling. I worked with a coach.” The Mayo Clinic listed the symptoms of anxiety which include:

- Feeling nervous, restless or tense
- Having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom
- Having an increased heart rate
- Breathing rapidly (hyperventilation)
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Feeling weak or tired
- Trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry
- Having trouble sleeping
- Experiencing gastrointestinal (GI) problems
- Having difficulty controlling worry

Shawn settled on a routine of practices that worked for him, starting with morning meditation and breathing exercises and a strict rule of no social media until 11 a.m. “My goal is to achieve feeling calm and good,” he says. “I do something called the Wim Hof method, which has really changed my life in a lot of ways. It takes over your parasympathetic nervous system and calms you down and allows you to kind of start from scratch and think straight. And it’s meditation, it’s setting boundaries, and it’s holding myself accountable for my own mindset and mental health, and making sure I stick to these things daily.”

His personal journey has now morphed into various partnerships. In January, Apple launched a program called “Time to Walk” encouraging Fitness+ users to go for a walk as a mindfulness practice, by with stories, photos, and music from Mendes, Dolly Parton, Golden State Warrior Draymond Green. Mendes also launched a collaboration with the meditation app Calm, a 24-session series called “Breathe Into It,” where he talks about managing anxiety.

-Modified from [GQ Magazine](#) & [Express UK](#)



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Celebrity Scenario #6

Emma Stone, actress

Emma Stone has always been very open about her anxiety. Way back in 2011, when she was first becoming known for her work as an actress and long before she became an Academy Award winner, she told *Glamour* about her mental health journey. “I had massive anxiety as a child,” she said at the time. “I was in therapy. From eight to 10, I was borderline agoraphobic (fear of situations where escape might be difficult or that help wouldn’t be available if things go wrong). I could not leave my mom’s side. I don’t really have panic attacks anymore, but I had really bad anxiety.”

Stone described the moment she had her first panic attack at seven years old. “Before I went into second grade, I had my first panic attack,” she said. “It was really, really terrifying and overwhelming; I was over at a friend’s house and all of a sudden I was absolutely convinced the house was on fire and it was going to burn down. I was just sitting in her bedroom, and obviously the house wasn’t on fire—but there was nothing in me that didn’t think we weren’t going to die.”



Photo credit: Jeff Kravitz/FilmMagic

She was suffering from what she and her mother later learned was a panic attack, and Stone explained that these feelings of anxiousness continued for the next two years. “I couldn’t go to friends’ houses, I had deep separation anxiety with my mom.... I was so paranoid about everything,” she said. “We truly thought I wasn’t going to be able to move out of the house and move away ever. How would I go to college? How would I do any of this if I couldn’t be at a friend’s house for five minutes?”

As she grew older Stone was able to better manage her anxiety, a skill she attributes to her supportive family and years of “transformative” therapy. It helped her realize that while the disorder was a part of her life, it did not define her. “It’s so normal,” she said. “Everyone experiences a version of anxiety or worry in their lives, and maybe we go through it in a different or more intense way for longer periods of time, but there’s nothing wrong with you.”

In fact, the actress said anxiety can be viewed in a positive light. “To be a sensitive person that cares a lot, that takes things in a deep way is actually part of what makes you unique,” she said. “You think a lot, you feel a lot, you feel deeply.”

When asked how she continues to manage her anxiety every day in the midst of her hectic work schedule, Stone explained that she sticks to a routine that works for her. “I go to a therapist, I meditate, and I talk to people—instead of isolating, I reach out.” Most of all, Stone said, pushing herself outside of her comfort zone proves to be restorative, especially if it means she’s able to help others. “[It’s] healing to just talk about it and own it and realize that this is something that is part of me, but it is not who I am,” she said. “And if that can help anybody...if I can do anything to say, ‘Hey, I get it, and I’m there with you, and you can still get out there and achieve dreams and form really great relationships and connections,’ then I hope I’m able to do that.”

-Edited and modified from [Glamour Magazine](#)



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Celebrity Scenario #7

Chris Evans, actor

It isn't easy being Captain America. This has been particularly true for Chris Evans, a well-known actor who played Captain America in several movies, and who has also battled anxiety.

For Evans, being an actor was something he wanted to do, but walking the red carpet and remaining in the spotlight wasn't what he signed up for. The role of Captain America came with a lot more than acting in movies. For Chris Evans, anxiety is a real, ongoing fact. Calming his mind is an important part of living his life and acting.



Photo credit: Dave J Hogan/Getty Images

For some, overcoming anxious situations is challenging. Getting out of your mind and realizing what's truly present is difficult, especially if you feel out of control. Seeking help to gain clarity about what's really happening, not what's imagined and creating the panic, is the best first step.

Evans often states how overwhelming the press can be for him. From red carpet walks to press interviews, he feels pressure and anxiety. It's not uncommon for individuals to feel anxious about things they don't like to do. Mental health disorders, including panic attacks and anxiety, can manifest when a person overthinks something or creates imagined situations that lead to a sense of fear.

Anxiety often develops when a person ends up in analysis paralysis, a state in which they analyze something so much that the outcome (what they imagine) is often far worse than reality. This compounds stress and worsens those concerns, turning worry into a high-level stress event and even a panic attack.

Evans often speaks about his noisy brain. He says, in an interview, that he wishes he could tell a younger version of himself to "shhh." He states, "Shhh, has been a big thing for me. Everyone's brain is noisy, and the root of suffering is following that brain noise and listening to that brain noise (telling yourself stories that aren't based in reality), and identifying with it as if it's who you are."

Evans is speaking out about mental illness and how he struggles with anxiety, even when auditioning for roles after starring in 11 films as Captain America, helps to show the reality of anxiety. If this can happen to an accomplished, well-respected actor, it can happen to anyone. When Chris Evans speaks openly about mental illness in any form, even if he hasn't been diagnosed with one, he enables other people to relate to what's happening.

A key aspect of Evans' ability to manage his anxiety is to try to remain in the moment. He states in the Motivation Madness interview, "The hunt for the moment, the hunt to be present, that's the goal. Acting is a temporary, artificial substance. It's great. My goal in life is to find that, to be present like that, in life. It's hard."

-Modified from [FHE Health](#)



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Celebrity Scenario #8 Oprah, TV personality

It's hard to imagine someone as successful as Oprah experiencing fears, doubts, or worry but like many people who experience an anxiety disorder, Oprah knows those feelings all too well.

"In the beginning, it was just sort of speeding and a kind of numbness and going from one thing to the next thing to the next thing. I will tell you when I realized that I thought, 'All right, if I don't calm down I'm gonna be in serious trouble.' I was in the middle of doing voiceovers and acting work, you know? And I remember closing my eyes in between each page because looking at the page and the words at the same time was too much stimulation for my brain."



Photo credit: Richard Shotwell/Invision/AP

Oprah went on to say, "In my early years of television, I was often overwhelmed by people's view of me." She added, "I lost touch with what I had a genuine desire to do."

"The reason why you're always stressed is because you want this moment to be something that it's not," she said. "You just stop and you accept this moment for what it is. Just breathe right into that moment and it takes the anxiety and the pressure away of wanting this moment to be something it's not. Just this moment, one moment at a time."

We all get overwhelmed from time to time when life's obligations stack up, and that sort of mounting stress is something Oprah Winfrey knows a thing or two about.

When Oprah is feeling overwhelmed by her anxiety she tries different techniques, including taking a moment to breathe or even find a quiet space where she can be alone. "I close the door, wherever I am — at my old office in Chicago, I'd literally go in the closet — and just sit and breathe," she explained.

-Modified from [Today.com](https://www.today.com)

