

## WORK & FAMILY

# Find Your Zen, Then Crush Your Job Interview

Discovering offbeat ways to center yourself can put you in the perfect frame of mind when meeting a prospective employer

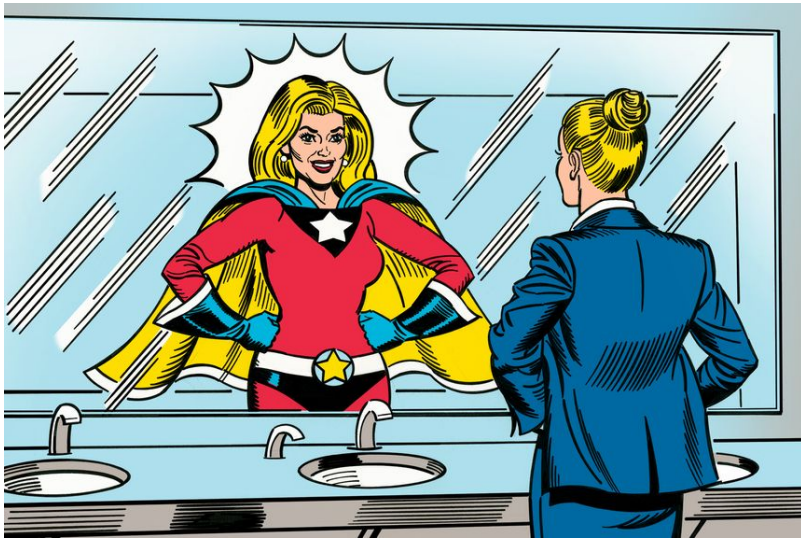


PHOTO: MITCH O'CONNELL

*By Sue Shellenbarger*

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The hours before a job interview can feel like torture. How can you spend that time in a way that enables you to arrive calm and centered?

The need for pre-interview stress relievers is rising, as more college students and recent grads apply for serial internships, and more employees interview for internal transfers amid corporate restructuring.

Many of them are finding offbeat ways to apply some proven stress-relief tactics. Here's a sampling:

## Embrace empowering rituals

Emma Valentiner lays the groundwork for tough interviews by donning what she calls ridiculous underwear. Wearing comfortable briefs adorned with pugs or cactuses makes an invisible fashion statement, lending her a sense of presence and confidence. “It’s like that Mona Lisa smile—a sign that I’m bringing something special to the table,” says Ms. Valentiner, a 40-year-old content manager and search-engine optimization specialist in Houston.

At the interview site, she stops by the restroom, steps into a stall and strikes a Superwoman pose. Feet firmly planted, hands on her hips and shoulders back, she breathes deeply for a couple of minutes to fortify her confidence. “I see these as tiny little vibrational reminders that I can do these things, I’ve got this,” she says. “They’re like rituals to prepare yourself.”

Warming up your voice is another helpful habit, equipping people to speak in warmer, richer tones during an interview, says Julian Treasure, author of “How to Be Heard.” In one exercise, the speaker imitates a siren by wailing aloud, ranging between high-pitched and low-pitched tones.

Giovanni Gallo uses Mr. Treasure’s siren exercise in private before interviews, alternating between what he calls squeals and bellows. “It has the added benefit of making you feel pretty silly, which can work wonders in calming your nerves,” says Mr. Gallo, 34, co-CEO of ComplianceLine, a Charlotte, N.C., provider of compliance software and services.

## **Change your mood**

Sam White wants to avoid going into an interview in a negative frame of mind, thinking, “I’m so nervous. What if this happens? What if that happens?” he says. He evokes a contemplative state of mind instead by arriving early and finding a coffee shop to do breathing exercises and write a gratitude list. “Before asking for more, I think it’s important to remember what’s already great in your life,” says Mr. White, 34, a marketing executive from Solana Beach, Calif.

Then he downs a quarter-shot of tequila and chases it with breath mints and seltzer water. It’s just a sip—too small to get him buzzed. But “it’s a little shock of excitement,” sparking invigorating memories of past trips to Mexico, Mr. White says. He also gets fired up with Wu-Tang Clan or other hip-hop artists. He says they get him flowing “with the right amount of swag and introspection.”

Physical exercise can also change the way you feel, but building it into interview prep can be tricky. Krystal Covington runs the stairs or does push-ups at home before interviews. “This helps me get some of the jitters out,” says Ms. Covington, 34, founder of Women of Denver, a networking group.

She arrives early, parks a ways from the office and takes a walk, repeating to herself, “You’re a great candidate,” she says. If possible, she takes the stairs rather than the elevator—but only for a maximum of three or four flights. She once ran up six flights for an interview and had to explain why she arrived breathing heavily and a bit winded, Ms. Covington says.



Sam White arrives a half-hour early for job interviews and uses meditation, writing and music to spark an upbeat, energetic mood. PHOTO: SAM WHITE

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SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

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*What's your best tip for relaxing before a job interview? Join the conversation below.*

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questions, wearing closed-toe shoes so she can squeeze her toes together during anxious moments—such as if a senior executive joins the interview. “Anything to release energy,” she says.

Some researchers say reading fiction can also quiet the mind and improve awareness. Thomas McFeeley brings a book to interviews and arrives early enough to find a place to read. Immersing himself in a few pages of fiction helps him to escape and get into a creative, storytelling state of



Taking walks, climbing stairs and listening to musician Janelle Monae help Krystal Covington prepare for job interviews.  
PHOTO: LYNN CLARK

mind.

Early in his career, the reading calmed him. “I wasn’t so caught up in, am I wearing the right tie? Am I well-dressed? I was less self-conscious,” says Mr. McFeeley, a 47-year-old media-relations director in Chicago.

### **Prepare, prepare, prepare**

Quizzing yourself before an exam can improve performance, research shows. Before interviewing for a job as an actor at Disney World in Florida, Michael Tessler recorded some likely interview questions so he could practice his answers—with a twist. He recorded the questions imitating the voices of Disney characters Mickey Mouse and Kermit the Frog, throwing in a few queries in the voice of Richard Nixon for good measure.



When the Disney interviewer asked him some of the same questions, he suppressed a chuckle. “I couldn’t shake the sound of Kermit’s voice,” says Mr. Tessler, 26, chief executive of Multihouse Entertainment, a Los Angeles startup. “They said after the interview my constant smile was the reason I got the job. Little did they know that was because I saw Richard Milhous Nixon sitting in the interviewer’s chair.”



Roxana Colorado researches companies carefully before interviewing, then talks with friends and binge-watches TV to clear her mind. PHOTO: ANGIE VASQUEZ

Another confidence-builder is to study the company and the job thoroughly, then clear your mind, Roxana Colorado says.

She makes lists of her skills and examples of what she could offer, to assure herself that she’s a good fit. When her research is done, she clears her mind by binge-watching “Game of Thrones” or another favorite TV series. “I get to think about nothing while enjoying a great show” for a while, says Ms. Colorado, founder of Kandula International, a strategic-planning consultant in Miami.

But she avoids the deadly all-nighter. She sets an alarm so she doesn’t lose track of the time. “If not, I’ll stay up all night,” she says.

### **To Stay Calm Before a Job Interview**

- \* Thoroughly research the company, the people you’ll be meeting and the role you want.
- \* Make a list of your relevant strengths and accomplishments, showing you’re a good fit.
- \* Talk before the interview with a friend who relaxes you or brings out your best.

- \* Envision yourself in a challenging, invigorating setting, then imagine feeling the same emotions in the interview.
- \* Prepare a playlist of songs you find empowering to play before the interview.
- \* Scope out the location in advance if it's unfamiliar.
- \* Plan to arrive early and find a quiet place to meditate, do deep breathing or write down your anxieties.

## **Work & Family Mailbox**

**Q:** *I'm trying to return to the workforce after taking a three-year break to care for my mother after an accident. I'm an accountant with an M.B.A., not a C.P.A. Where do I go from here?—C.W.*

**A:** *Your phrasing suggests you're focused on what you see as your deficits. Think about your strengths instead and frame this transition as an opportunity. Your combination of accounting skills and an M.B.A. could equip you for a variety of jobs that require analytical thinking and problem-solving skills, from financial-advisory services to the burgeoning fintech field, says Addie Swartz, chief executive of ReacHIRE, a provider of programs and resources for women returning from career breaks.*

Consider directing your search toward the kind of work that has given you a sense of accomplishment in the past. Update your LinkedIn profile and reach out to past colleagues and other contacts, Ms. Swartz says. Set aside time each week to refresh your technology and analytical skills.

Many free courses are available online, and any training or new certifications you gain will strengthen your hand with employers.

Ask for informational interviews with people in your target field, and talk with former colleagues to explore how jobs in your profession have changed. Consider searching on Meetup.com for groups that share your professional interests. Helpful websites include Après, iRelaunch and reacHIRE.

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