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Coping with Stagefright

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Coping with Stagefright

How to turn terror into dynamic speaking

YOU'RE ABOUT TO MAKE an important presentation. People are streaming into the room. Your boss is sitting up front. Important clients are sitting in the second row. Your boss stands to introduce you and you walk toward the stage.

As you approach the front of the room your confidence wanes. Your stomach starts doing somersaults, your palms are sweating, and your mouth feels parched. You pick up your notes and your hands are shaking. Thank goodness, you say to yourself, for the lectern. As you start to speak you hear your voice quiver and you feel your skin beginning to blush.

Welcome to the world of stagefright!

You are not alone if you have had this experience. Almost everyone has. Even people who regularly appear in front of large audiences experience stagefright. The great American actress Helen Hayes was known for throwing up in her dressing room before every single performance during a career of more than 50 years. Luckily, researchers in communication and psychology have identified several strategies that can help you overcome your nervousness.

Preparation is critical

Know your audience and setting. Successful speakers know it is critical to acquaint themselves with both the audience and the setting before making a presentation. Talk to a few people who will be in the audience. Ask who else will be attending and what interests them. Find out what audience members know about the topic. Discover ways this audience is similar to, and different from, other groups you have addressed.

Just as important, look over the setting before your presentation. Find out

where you will be speaking and get there early. Check the room's acoustics, sit in a chair and see the room from the audience's perspective. Test all the equipment. Assume nothing.

Prepare your material. Never underestimate how important good preparation is to reducing your anxiety. When you know what you want to accomplish, what you are going to say, and how you are going to say it, you will be less anxious. Mark Twain claimed it took him three weeks to prepare an "impromptu" speech. Another great speaker, Winston Churchill, said it took him six to eight hours to prepare a 45-minute presentation. Here are four rules for preparing your presentation.

1 Know your topic. Audiences can sense when you are bluffing, and when they feel you are unsure of your material, they lose confidence in you. Being unprepared also makes you, the speaker, anxious. You have concerns about unanswerable questions; you worry you don't have enough to say; you fear you are wrong about something. Avoid these anxiety-producing thoughts by being the expert.

2 Prepare more material than you think you will use. If you have to give a five-minute presentation, develop enough material for 15 minutes. It's better to pare down than to run out of things to say.

3 Imagine questions people might ask. Come up with answers before you give your speech. Either incorporate the answers into your presentation or hold them in readiness in case those questions are asked. Savvy corporate leaders and public officials use this technique when planning to meet the press. A day or two before the press conference, leaders are briefed by staff about likely questions and possible

answers. That review makes them more confident. They feel better prepared.

4 Memorize the first minute of your presentation. You experience your greatest anxiety at the beginning of a speech. Having the start of your presentation memorized makes you more comfortable. You also may want to memorize the last minute of your presentation in order to conclude with conviction.

Focus on your audience, not on yourself

Most of us do not like to feel conspicuous. When you talk to a group of 20 people, there are 40 eyes staring at you. If you start thinking about all this attention, you may begin to focus on how you look and sound rather than on communicating your message to your listeners. Your attention shifts from your audience to yourself. When you become self-focused, your stagefright increases and the quality of your performance suffers.

Television broadcasters know this. In studios they avoid looking at monitors while the camera is on them. If they watch themselves, they'll be distracted. Some public-speaking books suggest that you practice in front of a mirror. Bad advice! Try it and you will see why. When you start talking, you'll notice your facial expressions, your hair, and your gestures. And, you'll think little about your presentation.

What should you do when you feel self-conscious during a presentation? Talk to individual listeners. Pick out a person. Tell yourself that you are going to talk right at him until he begins to smile. Smile and you'll find that he'll probably smile back. Then, move to another audience member and think, "I'm going to talk directly to this person until she nods her head." As you talk, start nodding your head and watch as she reciprocates. What you are doing is shifting your attention away from yourself and onto the audience.

Relabel your physical symptoms positively

Much like an athlete getting ready for a big game, your body gets “up” when you make a speech: your heart beats faster, your palms get sweaty, your legs seem a little wobbly. When experiencing these feelings, some people think, “I’m scared.” Other people say to themselves, “I’m excited.” Physiologically, there is little difference between fear and excitement. The real difference lies in what you call it.

Think of something adventurous you do—riding a roller coaster, scuba diving, a bicycle race. What are your feelings at the start? Many of these physiological reactions are no different from the ones you have when you start a presentation. The difference is that you call these activities fun while labeling presentations scary. Same physiology, different labels. So next time you start a speech, label the experience positively.

Labeling is only the first step. People who have a great deal of stagefright often talk themselves into being nervous: “This is going to be awful...Why am I up here?...I’m going to make a fool of myself...People are going to walk out...What if they hate me?” When you talk this way, you may begin to believe it. Experienced speakers convince themselves that they’ll do a great job: “I’m going to be effective...This is exciting...What an opportunity...I know my stuff and I am going to convince this audience.”

Use the energy you experience—don’t be used by it. Before your presentation, walk around if you can, take some deep breaths, stretch. When you start your presentation, move, use gestures. Let your nervous energy animate your speech.

Avoid rigid rules

People with stagefright often have very rigid rules about what makes a good presentation. One computer executive who often experienced stagefright told us that “every good speech starts with a

joke.” An anxious scientist believed that “all speeches should have three main points.” A VP related that “every presentation must include color graphics.” These speakers dearly loved their rules about speaking. Consequently, they were haunted by them. In truth, none of them are mandatory rules of good speaking. Is it possible to give an excellent presentation without any jokes? Sure. Do all excellent presentations have three major points? Of course not. And many outstanding briefings have no graphics at all.

Here’s something else to think about: Most people are more comfortable answering questions in Q&A sessions than they are giving speeches. You’d think it would be the opposite. Presentations are prepared in advance. But it is difficult to prepare for every question: you think “on your feet” when answering questions. Sounds as though questions should be more nerve-wracking. But not so for most speakers. Why? Because people have far fewer rigid rules about question-answer sessions. On the other hand, almost everyone has strong rules about speeches. Be flexible. Drop the rigid rules!

Think before you speak

Learn some simple ways to manage your anxiety. Think before you make a presentation so you can avoid or control what makes you nervous. For example, what if your hands shake when you speak? Place your hands on the lectern. Or suppose the notes you hold rattle as you speak? Why not put your notes on a clipboard? If you are so nervous that the clipboard shakes, lay the notes on a table or lectern. What if you blush when nervous? The blushing starts at your chest and slowly works up your neck. Why not wear a scarf or turtleneck that hides the blushing?

You don’t look that nervous

Has this happened to you? You finish a presentation and people come up and congratulate you. While you thank them for the compliments, you’re thinking, “They’re just being nice.

They really think I did a lousy job. They could see I was shaking and sweating.” Research tells us you’re probably wrong: speakers are often inaccurate in their assessments of how nervous they appear. But these inaccurate perceptions feed stagefright. When you think you look anxious, you feel more apprehensive. And the cycle continues until it detrimentally affects your performance.

20 Strategies for Reducing Stagefright

- Understand that your listeners want you to do well.
- Believe you know more than your audience.
- Familiarize yourself with the setting.
- Get to know some members of the audience before you speak.
- Choose topics you know something about.
- Prepare your message; indeed, overprepare.
- Imagine questions that might be asked.
- Memorize the first and last minutes of your presentation.
- Focus on your audience, not on yourself.
- Don’t practice in front of a mirror.
- Never tell the audience you are nervous.
- Label your physiological excitement as positive rather than negative.
- Talk positively about your presentation to yourself.
- Turn your energy into something positive.
- Get rid of your “rigid” rules about speaking.
- Be flexible and adaptive during your presentation.
- Understand that no presentation is “that important.”
- Remember that you are not a good judge of how nervous you appear.
- Believe compliments on your presentation.
- Think! Plan ahead to avoid problems.

Reducing stagefright is not easy. It requires conscientious work on your part. You'll have to try the techniques we've described in front of real audiences. But, if you are well prepared and willing to discard your misconceptions about speaking, you can reduce and maybe even conquer your stagefright. And you will gain the flexibility and confidence to transform a fearful ordeal into an invigorating and successful experience.

— JOHN DALY AND ISA ENGLEBERG □

Further Reading

Avoiding Communication: Shyness, Reticence, and Communication Apprehension, edited by John A. Daly, James C. McCroskey, Joe Ayres, and Timothy Hopf (1997, Hampton Press, 528 pp., \$32.00, Tel. 800-894-8955)

Conquer Your Speechfright: Learn How to Overcome the Nervousness of Public Speaking by Karen Kangas Dwyer (1998, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 112 pp., \$21.00, Tel. 800-544-6678)

Overcoming Your Fear of Public Speaking: A Proven Method by Michael T. Motley (1997, Houghton Mifflin, 140 pp., \$14.76, Tel. 800-225-1464 or 978-661-1300)

Never Be Nervous Again by Dorothy Sarnoff with Gaylen Moore (1987, Fawcett Columbine, 216 pp., \$11.00, available through local and online bookstores)