

Public Speaking Anxiety

IT IS NATURAL TO FEEL APPREHENSION before speaking in front of a group, particularly a group of peers. A certain level of anxiety is actually necessary for you to perform your best. The key is to use this anxiety to your advantage, harnessing it to make you dynamic and animated. The physical symptoms of anxiety are very similar to that of excitement. If you can train yourself to interpret your symptoms as excitement, instead of nerves, you are well on your way to using the anxiety to your advantage. So, how do you do this?



CONTROLLING ANXIETY

Avoid Negative Self-talk

For example, do not use phrases like, "They won't listen. They'll be hostile." Talk like this is not only self-defeating, but it is self-fulfilling. Tell yourself instead that you will succeed. Tell yourself, "I've done my research. I'm prepared, and I have practiced." These kinds of statements are also self-fulfilling--in a positive way.

Don't exceed your time limits for a topic

Know how much time you have been allotted and then keep to the schedule. Carefully preparing your material will allow you to cover the topic well, but also selectively. It takes longer to say something than it does to read something. The best way to make sure you do not run over time is to follow the suggestions that follow.

Practice and prepare

Once your presentation *material* is prepared, it is time for *you* to prepare. Practice is the key to feeling confident. There are several ways to do this.

- Practice on an audio or video tape. Play it back to catch mistakes you might have made. This will help you catch distracting idiosyncrasies such as touching your hair, playing with your rings or saying "um" over and over again.
- Practice in front of a mirror. Remember to practice what you do with your hands and arms. If you use gestures when you speak, make sure they are natural and not overdone.
- After you have practiced on your own, it is good to get an "audience" to watch your presentation. An audience doesn't have to be more than one person. Ask for constructive feedback that will help you improve and bolster your confidence.
- If you are trying to persuade your audience of your viewpoint, ask a friend to give you some opposing viewpoints to get a sense of what your audience may be thinking as they hear your presentation. Understanding opposing viewpoints is especially important if you allow questions after the presentation.

Know your audience

Your presentation must correlate to your audience's interests or you will lose them. Knowing your audience will also give you a positive, confident attitude about speaking with them.

Visualize yourself succeeding

Do not just tell yourself that you will do well; picture yourself doing well! Take a deep breath, close your eyes and imagine yourself walking to the front of the audience with your shoulders back and a smile on your face. See yourself speaking while the audience nods with approval, laughs at your jokes and applauds when you finish. Carry that successful mental image with you when it is time for you to present.

Fake it until you make it.

Your audience will not know how nervous you are. They will only know what you show or tell them. Regardless of how you feel inside, *act* confident. Acting confident can actually make you feel confident.

Don't stress over what "could have been" or "should have been"

Leave the presentation behind once you have finished. Allow yourself five minutes to obsess about what you could have done differently, and then move on. Plan constructively for your next project. Set some goals and take what you learned to make the next presentation even better. A good evaluation tool for yourself is to consider the impact your presentation had on the audience. After all, it was for them you did it.