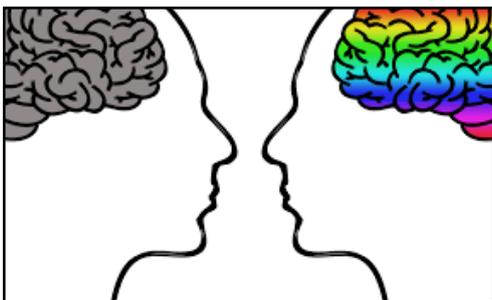


MANAGING PRESENTATION NERVES

Mark Twain said that “There are two kinds of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars.” It’s true — most people feel at least a bit nervous when they speak in front of an audience. For some people, these nerves can become quite distressing — what is sometimes referred to as public speaking anxiety.

What is public speaking anxiety?

While a little bit of anxiety when presenting can actually help you perform at your best, at a certain level it can get in the way of you effectively preparing for and delivering your talk. Public speaking anxiety can be particularly distressing because it doesn’t just involve nerves on the day, it can also include anxious anticipation in the days or weeks leading up to the talk, and rumination about your talk once it is over.



Public speaking anxiety stems from a fear of being scrutinised by others. It is often characterised by self-critical thoughts such as “I’m no good at this”, a fear of failure “I’m going to mess this up”, fear of the anxiety itself “I’m going to get nervous and forget what to say”, and negative evaluation after the event “I made a fool of myself”. Such thoughts can lead to a negative cycle where the more you experience these thoughts, the more anxious you become.

Public speaking anxiety also has a physical component. When we perceive a situation as a threat, it automatically triggers the fight or flight response which is designed to prepare our bodies to fight or escape from immediate danger. Our bodies produce stress hormones including adrenaline and cortisol which can lead to symptoms such as:

- an increased heartrate,
- an upset stomach,
- a dry mouth,
- pale or flushed skin,
- sweating,
- tensed muscles,
- tremors or shaking.

While the fight or flight response helped our ancestors to survive, unfortunately, it is not so useful when trying to give presentations.

However, there are many strategies you can use to reduce your anxiety.

1. Get used to public speaking

One of the most effective treatments for public speaking anxiety is desensitisation — gradual exposure to the thing that is anxiety-inducing. The more we are exposed to something, the less anxious we become.

Throughout university you will have many chances to practice presenting, but some people find this is not quite enough. You can seek out further public speaking opportunities by joining a public speaking group such as Toastmasters. While it may feel like the last thing you want to do, remember that it will help you in the long run.

2. Prepare

Anxiety can make you want to avoid even thinking about your talk, let alone practicing it. However, making sure you are well prepared can reduce anxiety. Research, plan and prepare your talk early, then practice as many times as possible. It's best to practice in front of someone if you can (a mirror is not as good). Avoid memorising a script or reading straight off your notes because this can actually lead to more mistakes in your presentation. Use palm cards with dot points if needed. Practice taking slow breaths wherever a pause is appropriate.

TIP

Pay particular attention to the beginning of the presentation so you feel confident when you first start speaking.

3. Try positive visualisation

Recognise negative thoughts and replace them with a positive visualisation of your presentation. For example, instead of thinking "I'm going to fail", picture yourself successfully preparing for and completing the presentation.

4. Look after yourself

In the days leading up to the talk, try to reduce or avoid alcohol and caffeine intake, exercise regularly, and use relaxation techniques such as mindfulness.

On the day:

- Arrive early to set up and get comfortable in the space.
- Right before your talk, spend a few minutes taking slow, deep breaths. Deep breathing helps to counteract the fight or flight response.
- Reframe your anxiety as excitement. Research shows that because these emotions actually feel quite similar, it is possible to trick your brain into thinking that your nerves are a physical sign of excitement. So try to think about your talk as an exciting opportunity rather than a threat.
- Often we overestimate the extent to which people notice us — something called the spotlight effect. Remember, the audience is not actually that good at picking up on whether you are nervous. So don't apologise or mention your anxiety to the audience — they probably haven't even noticed. It can also be helpful to look for friendly faces in the audience.
- Nerves can lead to rushed speaking so try to slow down a little.
- Accepting your anxiety can reduce it. Try to notice any anxious thoughts and physical responses without judging them. Instead, tell yourself that it's OK to be nervous and that your nerves are understandable and normal.

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