

Speaking Up without Freaking Out: Easy to implement techniques for confident speaking.

by Matt Abrahams

Just days before, you were excited about presenting your wellness lecture to several prospective patients. But now that the time has finally arrived, you feel your heart racing, your brow getting sweaty, and your mouth getting dry. This event is important to you. You're well prepared and very knowledgeable. Why does speaking in front of other have to be so nerve-wracking? What can be done to be less anxious and more confident? Unfortunately, no one really knows the answer to the first question (there are plenty of theories, though), and really, the answer to the former question is much less important than the answer to the latter one. The good news is that with practice and persistence nervous and novice speakers can become more confident and compelling.

In what follows, I present five easy-to-implement anxiety management techniques. Through repeated use, these techniques can lead you to become a more confident, less anxious presenter. Please note that goal is not to overcome your anxiety. Rather, the objective is to find a few strategies for managing your fear. Managed speaking anxiety can be beneficial in several ways: It helps you to focus on your speaking task, provides you with energy, motivates you to care about your communicative outcomes, and encourages you to prepare. Of course, reaping these benefits requires you to prepare and practice.

Acknowledge your jitters. The physical, emotional, and mental anxiety reactions you likely experience prior to speaking are typical. These sensations do not show anything beyond your body's normal response to something that is displeasing. Avoid giving these natural responses special significance. In fact, you can greet or accept these reactions by saying to yourself: "Here are those anxiety feelings again. It makes sense that I feel nervous; I am about to speak in front of people." This type of acknowledgement is empowering and dampens your anxiety response.

Breathe. Take time to breathe slowly and deeply. "Belly breathing"—filling your lower abdomen by inhaling slowly through your nose and filling your lower abdomen—can reduce your nervous symptoms (e.g., lowering heart rate, calming your jittery stomach, etc.). Additionally, to quiet the mental noise that anxiety often causes slowly count to three as you inhale and then again as you exhale. Focus your attention on the counting. Repeat this type of breathing several times.

Focus on your audience. You likely start preparing a presentation by thinking "here's what I need to tell my audience," and then proceed to develop and ultimately deliver your thoughts and ideas. When you prepare a presentation from your perspective, you likely pass over critical bits of information and fail to pull your audience into the content. A better, more thorough approach to your

presentation would be to begin by asking the question: “What does my audience need to hear?” While this approach initially sounds similar to “here’s what I need to tell my audience,” the difference is striking. By embracing an audience-focused approach, you will not only engage your audience more – since you’re giving them what they need, but you will take the spotlight – and stress – off of yourself, which will allow you to be less nervous.

Expect success. To often, speakers worry about making mistakes and messing up, rather than embracing their speaking opportunity. When you think that you have a great chance to share your ideas, you are likely to feel positive, which in turn, makes you more empowered and relaxed. The more relaxed you are, the more likely you are to give a good presentation. You are using self-fulfilling prophecy to obtain a positive outcome.

Be conversational. Presenting to others is different from performing. In performing, you place a tremendous amount of pressure on yourself “to get it right.” A less stressful and more engaging approach is to see your speaking as a conversation. How do you become conversational? First, when you practice, don’t stand up and deliver in front of a mirror or camera. Practice by sitting at a coffee table or at a coffee shop with friends or family to talk through your speech. Second, include the word “you” frequently when speaking. “You” provides a direct, verbal connection with your audience and leads to a more conversational tone and approach. You can also use audience members’ names if you know them. When you converse, you connect with people through using their names. Finally, consider starting your presentation with a question to your audience. Questions — whether or not they are rhetorical — are highly effective conversation starters.

Taken together, these five speaking anxiety management techniques can definitely help you feel confident, calm, and competent in speaking up without freaking out!

Matt Abrahams is a passionate, collaborative and innovative educator and coach who teaches Presentation Skills at De Anza College. Matt recently published Speaking Up Without Freaking Out, a book written to help the millions of people who suffer from presentation anxiety.