

4.9.6: Overcoming Fears and Anxiety

Learning Objectives

- Discuss various strategies for overcoming common fears and anxiety about public speaking

In addressing fear of public speaking, author and professional speaker Michael Aun shares a quote from his grandfather who defined fear as “an absence of knowledge and a lack of information.” If you think about it, the fear of public speaking is simply a recognition of a learning gap, be it a lack of confidence in our knowledge of the material or an inability to effectively communicate our expertise. We don’t look at a bicycle and fear learning how to ride it (maybe getting hurt, but not the process of learning a new skill), so why should we fear developing skills that can improve our careers, our lives and, perhaps, our world? Logic aside, the fear of public speaking is so common that Mayo Clinic addresses it as a “specific phobia” on its website. In an article titled “Fear of Public Speaking: How Can I Overcome It?,” Dr. Craig N. Sawchuk provides ten tips for managing performance anxiety or stage fright, which are adapted below:

- **Know your topic.** In a point echoed by many professional speakers and coaches, Sawchuk notes that having a strong interest in and understanding of your material, including preparing responses to possible questions, will help you stay on point and keep your composure.
- **Get organized.** The more organized you are—regarding information, materials and logistics—the less nervous you’ll be.
- **Practice, rinse and repeat.** If possible, practice your speech and request feedback from friends, family, and colleagues. You can also record and critique your own performance.
- **Challenge worries.** Reality check your negative projections. List and then directly challenge specific worries, considering the evidence and alternative outcomes.
- **Visualize your success.** Imagining a successful speech creates a more positive frame of mind that can reduce anxiety.
- **Do some deep breathing.** To calm yourself, take a few deep, slow breaths before you get up to speak and remember to breathe during your speech.
- **Focus on your material.** People tend to focus on new information, so focus on your message rather than the messenger (you and your nerves) or the audience.
- **Don’t fear a moment of silence.** If you draw a blank or get off-topic, take a few seconds and a few deep breaths to regroup.
- **Recognize your success.** Congratulate yourself for on a completed speech. Reflect on your performance and identify what worked well and areas for improvement.
- **Get support.** Join a public speaking group that can help you develop your skills in a supportive setting.

In an article for Forbes, author Carmine Gallo cites the results of a Prezi survey of American professionals indicating that 70 percent of those who give presentations agree that presentation skills are critical to their career success. Gallo’s rejoinder: “The other 30 percent don’t know it yet!” Further, 20 percent of respondents indicated they would do almost anything to avoid giving a presentation, even if it means losing respect. Given that, developing effective speaking skills is a powerful differentiator. The good news is that you’re not in it alone. You can join a local Toastmasters group (your college or work may sponsor a group), a campus speech and debate team, a speakers bureau, or take a Dale Carnegie course. If you’re an introvert, you can start by analyzing TED Talks and reading related articles and books on public speaking skills.

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