

Anxiety

Glossophobia – fear of speaking in public or of trying to speak

Forget heights and sharks. Public speaking often makes it to the top of the Top Fears List, higher even than death. Think about that. That means some people would rather die than speak in public. And I know some of those people!

In the following pages we're going to look at some of the very common but inaccurate beliefs people have about public speaking anxiety. Then we'll talk about strategies for dealing with anxiety.

Top ten fears

1. Snakes	51%
2. Speaking in public	40%
3. Heights	36%
4. Being closed in a small space	34%
5. Spiders and insects	27%
6. Needles and getting shots	21%
7. Mice	20%
8. Flying on a plane	18%
9. Dogs (sorry, Lassie)	11%
9. Thunder and lightning	11%
9. Crowds	11%
10. Going to the doctor	9%

*Gallup Poll, February 18-21, 2001
(1,016 respondents + or - 3%)

I am nervous every time I get up to make a major speech. I am nervous every time I go into the House of Commons.

Margaret Thatcher

False beliefs about public speaking anxiety

Belief 1: Other people don't get as anxious as I do

You might look at other people speaking and assume that they are not anxious, or at least not very anxious and definitely nowhere near as anxious as you feel yourself.

You have first hand knowledge of how anxious you are when you speak. It's hard not to notice it when not only do you have butterflies in your tummy but your butterflies have butterflies too. But mistakenly we assume other people don't feel as anxious or if they do that it's not as real as our own.

The facts are that almost everyone gets anxious. And they don't like it either. I get anxious in some speaking situations and I don't like it. Even famous speakers get anxious. Churchill used to be violently ill before he made speeches. A concert pianist I know gets very physically anxious.

The reality is that most people get anxious when thinking about speaking in public. It's normal. It's not nice, but it's normal.

There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars.

Mark Twain

Belief 2: I'll speak when I get over the anxiety

Many people believe that you have to wait until your anxiety goes away before you can present. As though waiting is some magic cure for anxiety. This is an appealing but dangerous belief. It means you can avoid the anxiety but it also means you will do very little presenting and will deprive yourself of the chance to get better and reduce the anxiety.

The sad truth is – you need to speak before you stop feeling anxious. And by doing this you will become less anxious.

Belief 3: I'll watch others present and this will make me a better presenter

This belief is appealing because there is some truth in it. By watching others you will learn some of the techniques of presenting but that isn't enough. It's like watching Wimbledon and hoping you will become a better tennis player. This will help you learn the rules of tennis and learn how good players play but:

If you want to get better at tennis, you need to practise tennis.

If you want to get better at presenting, then you need to practise presenting.

Strategies to reduce anxiety

So let's look at some ways for dealing with this anxiety. There are a number of techniques that can help:

- realise it's normal
- prepare
- reframe
- breathe
- visualise
- challenge anxious thoughts

Let's look at each of these.

It's normal

Firstly, accept that it's normal. There's nothing wrong with you. It's just anxiety! It's not nice but it's just anxiety. It doesn't mean you are a good or bad speaker. It's just what happens to most people. I've been speaking to groups for over twenty years and depending on the group I still get anxious.

Secondly, since it's normal, decide to present anyway. This is the "feel the fear and do it anyway" bit. It's the best bet for reducing the anxiety. Avoiding presenting is the best way to ensure a full-blown case of glossophobia.

A great deal of talent is lost to the world for want of a little courage.

Sydney Smith

Prepare, prepare, prepare

If you've prepared a good presentation, if you know your content and you've practised well, you will feel more confident. You won't have to worry about what to say next because you'll have notes. You won't have to worry about the equipment because you've checked it. You won't have to worry about questions because you've got answers ready. So prepare, prepare, prepare.

Reframing anxiety into excitement

The physical symptoms of anxiety are:

- butterflies in the tummy
- tension in the muscles
- dry mouth
- increased heart rate

The physical symptoms of excitement are:

- butterflies in the tummy
- tension in the muscles
- dry mouth
- increased heart rate

So one strategy that some speakers use is to reframe their anxiety into excitement. What this means in practice is that as you're sitting there waiting to speak and you start to have some of these physical sensations you can tell yourself "This is because I'm getting excited. It's a bit scary but it's fun too. This will help me perform better." For some people this gives them a more positive view on what's happening. Now if you get very, very excited (anxious) you'll need other strategies as well!

Breathing

Breathing is underrated. We take it for granted. However when you get anxious (or excited!) your breathing changes. You tend to breathe more quickly and shallowly. This can lead to panting and hyperventilating which will increase the symptoms of anxiety. This is bad when you are going to talk. Firstly, you need oxygen in your brain to help you think. And secondly, you need air in your lungs to help you talk. So when you're presenting, make a conscious effort to control your breathing.

Breathing

Breathe through your nose.
Slowly inhale to the count of five .
Make sure your abdomen is expanding.
Slowly exhale to the count of five between slightly open lips.
Repeat up to ten times.
Some people say the word RELAX to themselves as they breathe in and out.
Others imagine the tension flowing out of their body.

Before your talk

You're sitting in the front row and your time to speak is getting closer and closer. This is a very good time to take some deep controlled breaths.

How to breathe

Controlled breathing means inhaling air right down into your tummy rather than just in the upper part of your chest. Then exhaling all of that and repeating this slowly several times. This in itself will help reduce some anxiety and will make speaking easier.

During your talk

When I started presenting I would almost become breathless because I was racing through the material and feeling anxious. So I used to write tips to myself in my script. I'd write the word BREATHE to remind myself to pause and have a breath. The other advantage of pausing for a breath is that it slows down your presentation and builds in a nice gap. So when you come to the end of a section give yourself a second to pause and breathe.

Visualising

This means imagining yourself giving a great talk. You see yourself looking confident, speaking clearly and the audience responding warmly. This is a much better image to have in your head than of the talk being a disaster.

Some people I know imagine themselves as someone else. They pick a confident speaker, someone they admire. Then they imagine they are that person; they try to act like that person and take on that person's confidence.

Challenging anxious thoughts

Speaking in public is hard enough but what makes it harder is that probably 80% of your brain cells are working for the other side. As you're preparing to present or in the middle of your presentation it's likely that some of the following thoughts are running through your mind:

- I'll forget everything
- People will ask questions I can't answer
- I'll stutter
- I'm going red
- I'll be boring – they will be bored – they are bored
- I'll get confused
- I don't know enough
- Why am I doing this?

These are very normal thoughts. Most speakers, even confident ones, will have some of these thoughts.

In psychology these are known as Automatic Negative Thoughts – ANTs. This means they are automatic. You didn't ask to have them. They just pop into your head. And they are negative because, well, they are negative! And having these thoughts, these ANTs, is very likely to make you feel anxious. In fact they're what make you feel anxious.

But just because you have the thoughts doesn't mean they're true. Let's look more accurately at the thoughts and try to find what I call the More Accurate Thoughts (MATHs)

We probably
wouldn't worry about
what people think of
us if we could know
how seldom they do.

Olin Miller

ANTs Automatic Negative Thoughts	MATHs More Accurate Thoughts
I'll forget everything.	This is possible but unlikely. You might forget something. Most speakers do. But if you prepare well you can handle this. If you've got good notes you'll be able to find your place.
People will ask questions I can't answer.	This is possible. But once again if you prepare well you will be able to overcome this.
I'll stutter.	What is your track record? Do you normally stutter? Most speakers trip up at some stage. If you prepare well you reduce the chances. But even if you do stutter, audiences are generally very forgiving.
I'm going red.	Do you normally go red? Do people notice or is it just you? And even if you do go a bit red is that a problem? You might find it a bit uncomfortable but often the audience won't even notice.
I'll be boring.	You can reduce the chances of this by preparing well. Another thing to remember is that the standard of presentations is generally not very high so if you put in some effort you're likely to be better than many other presenters.
I'll get confused.	Have some good notes.
I don't know enough.	If you've prepared well you will know enough to give this talk. You don't have to know everything.
Why am I doing this?	Well, that is an interesting question but the middle of a presentation is not the time to be answering it!

This process of looking at your thoughts more accurately should help reduce the anxiety a bit. You might find it useful to write down your Automatic Negative Thoughts and the more accurate challenges.

ANTs Automatic Negative Thoughts	MATHs More Accurate Thoughts
What automatic negative thoughts run through your head?	What evidence can you use to challenge these thoughts?

Of course one of the great sources of anxiety is at the end of your talk when you utter the fateful words “Are there any questions?”. So let’s look at questions.