**UMW Speaking Center Presents**



Managing Speaking Anxiety

Speaking in front of an audience is scary. Public speaking triggers a primal part of our brain that was useful for early humans. When being faced with a group of animals, much like a presenter is faced by his/her audience, that trigger meant our forerunners were probably in danger. Public speaking produces chemicals in our brains that put us in “fight or flight” mode. In other words, it’s perfectly natural to have speaking anxiety. That’s why you shouldn’t try to fight it or get rid of it; you should try to control it.

The way to control it is by having confidence. Speaking anxiety is all about confidence. The more confidence you have, the less anxiety you’ll have. But it takes time to gain confidence. So in the meantime, here are some tips to help you gain confidence and speed up the process of managing speaking anxiety.

* Look at a friend. While speaking, looking at a friendly face more than you look at other members of the audience can help relieve anxiety. Just make sure they’re not sitting all the way on the right or left side of the audience so you aren’t holding a gaze to the extreme edges of the audience.
* Look at someone who’s bored. Similarly, focusing on someone who’s not paying attention, doing other work, or sleeping during your presentation can help relax you because you know even if you make a mistake, that person won’t notice. If you can hone in on that person (or people), the people paying close attention won’t intimidate you.
* If looking at someone who’s bored wouldn’t help you, try the inverse and look at someone who’s visibly engaged and interested. Seeing them react positively to your presentation may increase your confidence.
* A helpful thing to keep in mind is that everyone is so worried about being judged, they don’t have time to judge you. If you’re in a situation where everyone in the room will have to give a presentation, take note of how much you actually care about how well the others do on their presentation. You’re probably so focused on your own success that the other presenters don’t matter much to you. The truth is people don’t care how well others present because people are too busy thinking about themselves, so it’s not worth getting all worked up about.
* As overcoming anxiety is mainly an issue of confidence, the most direct way to tackle that issue is to convince yourself you’re awesome. If you deliver your speech with confidence, you *will* be more awesome, which will in turn make it easier to convince yourself you’re awesome which will increase your confidence, thus creating a self-sustaining cycle of awesomeness.
* Another way to increase your confidence is to visualize success. When you think about your upcoming presentation, try not to imagine all the mistakes you could make or everything that could go wrong. Certainly be prepared for those, but you should visualize yourself doing everything right, which will lead to a more positive attitude when it comes time to present.
* Practice, practice, practice. The oldest and most proven approach. If you practice, you will feel more comfortable and more confident. There’s no substitute for practice.
* With that said, don’t be a perfectionist. No speech is going to be perfect so don’t expect it to be. If you’re about to present and you’re not 100% prepared, just let it go and don’t let it affect your confidence. And if while you’re speaking you make a mistake, do the same.
* Hands are a common indicator of how nervous someone is. If they’re shaking, if you’re wringing them, playing with jewelry, playing with something in your pocket, playing with buttons, etc, it probably means you’re experiencing some anxiety. If you have a habit of using your hands in distracting ways or you’re not sure what to do with them while you’re speaking, lightly grip the edges of the podium. It will guarantee your hands don’t become distracting and as long as you’re not gripping it too tightly, it looks perfectly natural.
* As you’re about to start talking, converse with someone nearby. There is a thin line between a conversation and formal speaking, but the latter generally causes much more anxiety than the former. If you’re speaking to someone in the front row from the podium moments before you start your presentation and you jump right into your presentation, that pause that signifies the conversation is ending and your presentation is beginning isn’t there. Eliminating this pause can trick your brain into not recognizing the “danger” that you’re encountering. It’s during that pause that your brain registers that you’re in front of an audience and that can potentially cause you to become nervous. Eliminating this pause all together can help relieve anxiety by removing any opportunity for your brain to recognize the situation and making the speech seem like an extension of a normal conversation.
* If you aren’t able or don’t want to do the previous tip, the more common practice right before you begin a presentation is to look at your audience, take a deep breath, and begin. This gives you a chance to take in your surroundings and calm yourself down. If you start your speech looking at your notes, it will be much harder to look up for the first time after you’ve begun your speech because you’ve set your default eye contact to your notes.

Speaking anxiety is something that affects even the greatest speakers. Don’t expect it to ever fully go away. Instead, use these tips to know that you’re in control and that you *can* do a great job.