



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, a trigger signaled to our forerunners that they 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 learn 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. However, 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. Be aware of where your friend(s) is located within your audience - if they are sitting all the way on the right or left side, you may have a tendency to be more attentive to the extreme edges of the audience. Try to give the entire audience your attention for at least part of your presentation.
- **Look at someone who’s bored.** Similarly, focusing on someone who is not paying attention, doing other work, or sleeping during your presentation can help relax you. Even if you make a mistake, that person likely won’t notice. If you can hone in on that person (or people), the people paying close attention won’t intimidate you.
- **Look at someone who’s visibly engaged and interested.** This method works well if looking at bored people doesn’t help your anxiety. Seeing a person (or people) react positively to your presentation may increase confidence.

- **Remember that everyone is so worried about being judged themselves that 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, remember that everyone must deal with the anxieties that may come with the practice of public speaking. It's likely that you're so focused on your own success that the anxieties of the other presenters don't matter much to you, and vice versa. Everyone is in the same position!
- **Convince yourself that 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 and will increase your confidence, thus creating a self-sustaining cycle of awesomeness.
- **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. Be prepared for mistakes, but visualize yourself doing everything right - this will lead to a more positive attitude when it comes time to present.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** This oldest and most proven approach really does work. As you practice, you will feel more comfortable and more confident with the material you are presenting and the way in which you will be presenting it. There's no substitute for practice when it comes to feeling prepared.
- **Don't be a perfectionist.** No speech is going to be perfect, so don't expect it to be. If you don't feel fully prepared or if you make a mistake while speaking, don't worry. It is impossible to be fully prepared for anything that may occur during a presentation, and everyone makes mistakes. Don't let your desire for 100% perfection affect your confidence.
- **Lightly grip the edges of the podium if there is one available in the room where you are presenting.** Hands are a common indicator of nerves. If your hands are shaking or you're wringing them, or if you're playing with jewelry, your notecards, or something in your pocket, it signals to your audience that you are experiencing some anxiety. As long as you're not gripping too tightly, holding the edges of the podium looks perfectly natural. This is a great method to use if you have a habit of using your hands in distracting ways or if you're not sure what to do with them while you're speaking.
- **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, the 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, removing any opportunity for your brain to recognize the situation and, in turn, making your speech seem like an extension of a normal conversation. It's during that pause between an informal conversation and a formal presentation that your brain registers you're in front of an audience, and that can potentially cause you to become nervous.

- **Alternately, 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. Make sure to pause and take a deep breath if you feel yourself becoming more anxious.

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 are in control and that you *can* do a great job.

For additional help with managing anxiety, please visit:

UMW Talley Center for Counseling Services

Appointments available from 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday

Lee Hall, Room 106

(540) 654-1053

Calls made to the counseling center outside normal business hours will be forwarded to our voice mail. Please feel free to leave a confidential message, including your name and contact number and our administrative assistant will return your call on the next business day.