



Psych Services and Public Speaking

Public speaking anxiety is the **number one fear** among adults. Almost everyone experiences some anxiety when speaking. This is **completely normal** and can even be helpful, to a degree. But too much anxiety can interfere with education, career choices, and even leisure activities if the response to anxiety symptoms is “avoidance.” Here are some facts about public speaking anxiety for those who wish to combat their fear or receive help.

Identifying Anxiety

- Anxiety symptoms occur when a person perceives a threat or a danger. Mobilizing oneself in the face of danger helps us survive, but too many “false alarms” or an increased intensity of anxiety symptoms may cause extreme physical, mental, and emotional discomfort and lessened academic and career performance.
- Typical physical symptoms include a racing heart, rapid breathing, trembling, shaky voice, dizziness, feeling faint, nausea, and muscle tension.
- Anxiety may include negative predictions about one’s performance, negative assessment of one’s skills, or predicting disastrous consequences of a less-than-perfect presentation can occur in the form of thoughts and images. Many times these cognitions are distorted, unlikely, exaggerated, or all of these.
- Public speaking anxiety may be evoked by many different situations, including class presentations, class discussions, speaking at meetings, talking in a group, asking questions in class, and speaking with authority figures.

Anxiety and Public Speaking

- **Identify situational triggers and thinking patterns that contribute to the anxiety spiral.** This includes the nature/degree of all types of “consequences,” situational risk, and self-perceptions.
- **Relaxation training** is an important behavioral component of therapy. Focus on the relaxation process also diverts attention from anxiety symptoms.
- **Exposure to the feared situation** is critical and can be planned in several ways. Avoidance reinforces itself and only leads to more avoidance. Therefore, avoiding situations that give you anxiety will not help with alleviating that anxiety. Practicing real-life situations with others, such as asking questions or giving mock presentations, can help with public speaking anxiety.
- **An in-depth individual assessment of anxiety triggers and the severity of the anxiety response is the key to successful intervention.** Therapy (cognitive-behavioral therapy) addresses both physical side-effects and unhelpful thinking patterns.

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.