

What Are You Afraid Of?

The Art of Public Speaking Without Anxiety

by Jim Lofton



Public speaking causes high anxiety

Public speaking can be terrifying. Many people are more afraid of public speaking than of snakes, spiders, or even death, according to some surveys. Sometimes referred to as “stage fright,” this reaction does not just occur in novices. In *The Challenge of Effective Speaking*, the authors report that “as many as 76 percent of experienced public speakers feel fearful before presenting a speech” (Verderber et al. 2012). We all know the feeling. When we rise to our feet to make a speech or give a presentation, almost all of us feel stress, anxiety and nervousness, which trigger a surge of adrenaline that can manifest in a variety of ways: muscle tension, trembling hands, a squeaky voice, rapid and shallow, sweaty palms, fidgeting, or even worse—outright panic.

The Cause of Anxiety

Why do we feel nervous or stressed when giving a public address? Is it our fear of rejection or failure, or fear of the unknown? It’s usually some kind of fear, but why are we fearful and who is doing the fearing? Actually, a little voice in our heads is almost always talking to us, and it’s almost always in the past or in the future.

Who are the speaker and the listener in

your head? In his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, a book about how to achieve peak performance, W. Timothy Gallwey calls them “Self 1” and “Self 2.” Self 1, the inner self or the ego-mind, is constantly providing mental input to Self 2, the outer self, the “you” who is performing the task or the activity. The primary insight from Gallwey’s book is when you are performing, the ego-mind is constantly providing mental obstacles to the outer self in the form of nervousness, judgments, self-criticism, self-doubt, and lapses in concentration. Gallwey believes to achieve peak performance as a tennis player, you must eliminate the mental interference from the little voice in your head, the ego-mind.

Of course, this distracting inner monologue from the ego-mind does not just occur when you are playing tennis. It happens any time you are performing an art or activity that requires skill and practice; and it certainly applies to the art of oratory.

For most of us, as we prepare to start an opening statement, give a presentation at a public workshop, or conduct a training class, the ego-mind sends us an adrenaline surge, inflicting self-doubt, casting judgment on our abilities, and planting the fear that we are going to forget what to say next. It distracts us from focusing on the message that we are de-

livering. The best presentations are delivered with confidence, authenticity and passion, allowing us to connect with our audience. But when interference from the ego-mind activates fear, it prevents us from giving our best presentation. So, quieting that inner voice that puts up those mental roadblocks to peak performance is crucial to speakers.

Here's how you can do it.

Quieting Your Inner Voice—What You Can Do to Prepare

1. Master the subject matter

In order to speak with authority and confidence, the very first thing that you must do is to master the subject matter. More than 2,000 years ago, the senator, lawyer, and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote that public speaking without mastery of the subject matter was nothing more than windy verbiage. That observation still holds true.

If you are giving a presentation, you owe it to yourself, and to your audience, to own it—to become an expert on whatever the topic is. If you are not secure in your own knowledge about the topic, you cannot deliver the presentation with confidence and assurance. Every presentation has a message that we want the audience to hear and receive. And almost every presentation includes some element of persuasion: we want to convince our audience they should accept and believe the facts, the observations, and the conclusions we are delivering. One of the key components of persuasion is credibility. We establish credibility through demonstrating to our audience that we are an authority on the subject. If you are an authority on your topic, you can deliver the message with passion, with authenticity, and can be completely absorbed in delivering it with confidence.

2. Practice

There is a saying in soccer: The game is the teacher. The more you play in a game, the more you learn about it and develop as a player. Players develop “muscle memory,” which is sometimes really “mind memory.” The scientific term for this is “neuroplasticity.” We now know that the brain is a dynamic organ and continues to wire and rewire itself in response to experience. Scientists sometimes refer to neuroplasticity as “structural remodeling of the brain.” The structural remodeling can apply to us as speakers. The more we speak in public, the more the mind develops to do it well.

According to psychologist Dr. Pascale Michelon, we all get better at what we do repeatedly: “The brain areas involved in language—the areas that help you talk and explain ideas more clearly—these brain areas become more activated and more efficient the more they are used. The more you speak in public, the more the actual structure of the brain changes. If you speak a lot in public, language areas of the brain become more developed.”

Of course, any art or performance that involves skill requires practice for the specific event. Athletes practice for the game, musicians practice for the concert, and lawyers must

practice an opening statement or presentation for the audience.

Before a speaking engagement, I usually write out a detailed outline for my presentation to organize the structure of my talk. And the more satisfied and familiar I get with the structure, the less I depend on the notes. Eventually, my script evolves into slides with minimal words on each slide or a one-page outline that only lists the topics that I plan to cover. In other words, my visual cues for the talk provide the structure of my presentation, but as I master the materials of the presentation, I allow myself the liberty of delivering my presentation in the way that we speak conversationally—that is with spontaneity and feeling. Preparation allows me to converse with the audience and to improvise, while removing the fear caused by being unprepared.

You are liberated from notes... and can connect with your audience in the most impactful way.

In *The Articulate Advocate*, Brian Johnson and Marsha Hunter have coined the term structured improvisation to describe this method of speaking: you have practiced, and you know the structure of your presentation, but you improvise the words as they are actually spoken. This is a powerful way to deliver a presentation. You are liberated from notes, from reading, from memorizing, and can connect with your audience in the most impactful way.

The use of structured improvisation as a method to deliver a presentation is consistent with artistic techniques in other fields to achieve peak performance in an activity. Athletes call it “getting in the zone;” psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called it “finding flow;” Zen Master Alan Watts called it “discipline in spontaneity and spontaneity in discipline.” Whatever it is called, peak performance in an endeavor like public speaking can only be achieved when the ego-mind is still, and when concentration is focused on and totally absorbed in the present.

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Jim Lofton spent nearly 30 years as an attorney in federal service. He spent 26 years at the U.S. Department of Justice trying and managing complex environmental cases. He continues to teach trial advocacy and public speaking at the Justice Department's National Advocacy Center and recently taught the first class that was offered online there. This year, he was selected as a Fulbright Scholar and will teach Rule of Law and trial advocacy in North Macedonia beginning in January 2021. In 2015, he was named the Government Attorney of the Year by the ABA Section on Environment, Energy and Resources. Jim can be reached at LoftonLegallySpeaking.com.

3. Get there early and check your electronics

Always make sure that you get to the venue early. When I need to travel to a different city to give a presentation, I try to arrive the day before the event. That way, I can visit the room where I will be speaking, test the sound system, and if I am using slides, ensure that my slide presentation has been loaded and is displayed properly.

The time when you will be most nervous, of course, is at the beginning. Don't place extra stress on yourself by arriving just in time to discover that there is some issue that is going to delay or interrupt your talk. If others are speaking before me, I try to arrive in time to hear others speak. I usually think to myself: "His speech is not perfect, and yet he is doing just fine. The audience is engaged and his talk is going well. So will mine!"

Delivering Your Presentation: Transcending the Adrenaline Surge

Now that we've covered how you can prepare to reduce anxiety, let's talk about transcending stress when you are delivering your presentation.

1. Pause

Victor Frankl famously said: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." So, you've risen to your feet and are ready to start. Stop for a just a moment. Nobody will mind. Collect yourself and bring your full attention to the moment. Allow yourself to find that space between the stimulus and your response. There you can find the freedom to focus your attention on only the present, to speak from the heart.

2. Breathe

Check your breathing before you begin. Is it slow and steady? One of the tells of a nervous speaker is shallow and quick breathing. Bring awareness to the breath, and let it be relaxed and unforced. Focus for just a microsecond on the space between your breaths. You should feel the muscles in your face, jaw and forehead relax, which should cause a ripple effect throughout your body. As Alan Watts wrote: "Not only is breathing one of the two fundamental rhythms of the body; it is also the process in which control and spontaneity, voluntary and involuntary action, find their most obvious identity."

3. Use silence as your ally

A sign of an untrained speaker is one who fills any opportunity for space or silence with "thinking noises": the um's, ah's, uh's, you knows. Composer Claude Debussy once said, "Music is the space between the notes." A corollary might be that powerful and effective speech is built with the space between words and phrases. Many inexperienced speakers are uncomfortable with allowing any gap or silence between the end of one thought and the beginning of another.

But if you can become comfortable with silence, using it as an ally rather than as something to be feared, it can be calming and quieting. You will need to practice this, but a microsecond of verbal quiet can help you settle, refocus your concentration, and move on with grace and clarity.

4. Use the power of awareness

Two kinds of distractions can affect us when we speak, internal and external ones. In *The Inner Game of Music*, Barry Green argues that by accepting distractions for what they are, we can choose to focus our attention where we want it. First, acknowledge the little voice. The strategy is to acknowledge it and observe it, rather than engage with it. If you can observe the inner voice almost as if you were a third person observing yourself, you can transcend it. You can say to yourself: "Ok, I realize that this presentation is not going to be perfect, and I might leave out something that I want to say. But I give myself permission not to be perfect."

In his book, Green describes a story about a young musician who was so nervous while performing during a class that her hands were shaking. The instructor stopped and gently asked her which hand was shaking the most. Then, he asked which fingers were shaking the most. Then, the instructor asked her to describe the pattern of shaking to others in the class. Each time the instructor asked a question, and the student paid more attention to her hands, her hands shook a little less. Finally, the instructor asked the class if it was okay for the student's one remaining trembly finger to shake. The class said it was, and the shaking disappeared.

Try this technique yourself. Be aware of any physical signs of nervousness. If your hands or voice are trembling, be aware of it nonjudgmentally and give yourself permission to shake. Give yourself permission to be nervous. Acknowledge it, but don't engage with it.

5. Make eye contact with your audience

When I teach public speaking classes, one of the important themes of my class is the power of connecting with your audience through eye contact. If you are making good eye contact with those in your audience, you can talk conversationally with the audience rather than lecturing. Eye contact helps you gauge how you are doing: whether the audience is engaged, whether the message is understood, whether the audience is affirming you. But eye contact has another advantage: it allows you to focus your attention on the people in the audience rather than on the inner self.

Regardless of how large or small the audience is, the best technique is to make eye contact momentarily with someone in the audience and then move on to someone else. I think of it as "watering the flowers" moving left, right, up, back, without any deliberate pattern. Making eye contact this way will get you in the flow of spontaneity and help you connect to your audience.

This is, of course, much more difficult when you are speaking online, but it's still possible. When you are speaking through Zoom or some other online format, encourage

those in the audience to turn their video cameras on so that you can see them. If you can see your audience, even virtually, it will make a huge difference to you as the speaker because you can see who is validating you, who is engaged, and who is following your presentation. Even through the internet, you can make a connection.

Conclusion

When you've mastered the topic, and you've practiced so that you know the material, you should be ready to speak

from the heart. Yet, as with any athlete or artist, peak performance does not come when you are thinking about it or when you are trying to exercise control. But if you use structured improvisation to deliver your message, you can speak with spontaneity and your mind can become focused, quiet and still. Your mind can indeed become one with your body, enabling you to utter your words effortlessly, your automatic functions working without interference from your thoughts. ☺