

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN

COUNSELING AND CAREER SERVICES

PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY

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What is Public Speaking Anxiety?

Public speaking anxiety is very common among both college students and the general population. Some estimates are that as many as 20-85% of people experience more or less anxiety when they need to speak in public. Many people who speak for a living, including actors, businesspeople, and politicians, experience public speaking anxiety. In fact, some of these experienced public speakers feel that a little nervousness before a performance or speaking engagement gives them the ability to perform at their best. However, for some people the anxiety becomes so intense that it interferes with the ability to perform at all. In the case of students, this may lead to avoiding certain courses or even majors where oral presentations are required, never speaking in class, or deciding against certain careers because they would require occasional speaking before a group. Students who are very anxious about public speaking in class may sometimes also avoid social events they would like to attend or may not talk to classmates they would like to get to know.

A phobia is a fear that is out of proportion to the danger. For example, if you were very afraid if a lion charged into your classroom, this would be a very reasonable fear, but if you were very afraid if a baby (non-poisonous) spider was spotted in your classroom, this would be a phobia because the spider could not hurt you. If your nervousness about public speaking is great enough that you feel it is interfering with your life and things you would like to do, you may have a Social Phobia. The most common form of Social Phobia is public speaking anxiety.

Students experiencing public speaking anxiety say they are concerned they will be embarrassed if they speak. They say they are worried they will make a mistake, look “stupid” to others, or be judged unattractive. Some students say they get upset thinking about others looking at them or being the center of attention. Others express the belief that no one would be interested in anything they would have to say, or that nothing they would say would be worthwhile. The bottom line is fear of unfavorable evaluation by others. Many students reveal that their public speaking anxiety started after an upsetting or humiliating public speaking experience when they were in elementary or high school. They may not have examined

these experiences from an adult point of view or received objective feedback about the situation from someone else. Some students feel their oral presentation must be perfect (something, of course, not expected or reasonable), and feel anxious due to their self-imposed pressure for perfection. Many students who experience public speaking anxiety have low self esteem.

In addition to the emotional aspects of public speaking anxiety, there are often physical symptoms as well. These are symptoms that are associated with anxiety, and include trembling or shaking, cold clammy hands, shaky voice, rapid heartbeat, sweating, blushing, dizziness, shortness of breath, digestive discomfort, or forgetting something you know or were about to say. In some cases, a person with Social Phobia for public speaking may experience a panic attack.

The good news is that if you are experiencing public speaking anxiety there is a lot you can do to make things better. One professor, who invited students who were nervous about giving an oral presentation in class to come and speak to her privately, found that in every case these students gave one of the best oral presentations in their class. The professor attributed this to the preparation the students did for their presentations, including careful choice of topic, thorough preparation, and practice. Incidentally, polished public speakers practice, too!

How to Prepare for an Oral Presentation

The first step in preparing for an oral presentation is to choose a topic that really interests you. Sometimes, however, your instructor will assign a topic for oral presentation. In that case, you may still have some flexibility in the specific area or approach to your topic, and you should try to present an area of your topic or take an approach to the assigned topic that is more interesting to you. There are several reasons why selecting a topic that really interests you is important. It ensures that you will learn something of value to you personally. It also is very likely that if you are interested in the topic, other students in your class will be, too. It is going to take time to prepare for your presentation, and the more interested you are in your topic, the easier it will be to keep motivated as you do your research and preparation. And, last but definitely not least, when it comes time to give your presentation, you will be more enthusiastic in your presentation, and will have less reliance on your speaking notes, if you are talking about something you are interested in or even passionate about.

If you want to sell a house, real estate brokers say the three most important things are “location, location, and location.” If you want to “sell” your presentation to others, meaning doing a good job of getting your points across to an interested audience, the three most important things are “practice, practice, and practice.” Find out how long you will have to speak. Actually, it can be easier to have a little more time than a little less; the less time you will have, the more you will have to analyze what you are going to leave out (you will have more than enough material after your preparation). Each time you practice your speech, time it with a clock. The first time you practice, you will probably find that it took more or less than your allotted time. As you continue to practice, you will need to add or remove material so your speech will fit into the assigned number of minutes.

Most students and even experienced public speakers find it helpful to have a sheet of paper with key words or phrases in front of them. It is best not to keep a script or even anything with complete sentences on this sheet, because you will be tempted to read from it. You know from experience that when someone reads your attention tends to leave that speaker, making for a boring presentation and one you will less likely learn from. Index cards, when repeatedly flipped, can be distracting to the audience, so one sheet of paper may work better. Some speakers like to use large type for their notes so they are easier to see at a glance. As you practice, imagine that you are explaining things to a friend of yours. A conversational tone, like you would use to speak to someone over dinner, makes your audience feel comfortable. Some students find it helpful to videotape or audiotape themselves or to look into a mirror while practicing, while others would feel more anxious to do these things. You may do these things if you find them helpful, and skip them if you don't.

It is very important and helpful to practice in as close a situation as possible to the real thing. You will probably be giving your speech in your own classroom. If not, try to go to the room where it will be so you will know what it looks like and where you and everyone else will be in the room. Try to set up a practice room at home or in your dormitory that will be a little like the place you will give the speech. For example, if people will be sitting and you will be standing, set up some chairs facing you and stand to practice. If chairs will be in a circle, put them in a circle. If you will be behind a desk while you talk, try to have a table in front of you. And always practice out loud. A short speech may only need to be practiced three or four times. Practice your speech as many times as you need to until you feel the presentation flows, you feel comfortable working with your notes, and you can complete the speech in the assigned amount of time.

As you practice giving your speech, imagine presenting the speech beautifully. It is well known that if we imagine ourselves doing something well (anything from a speech to a tennis serve), this will help our performance immensely as the power of the imagination is very strong. You may wish to imagine something unexpected happening during your speech while you handle it well. For example, you may imagine a classmate entering the classroom while you are giving your speech while you completely maintain your concentration.

Some students have shared the techniques they used to help them do their class presentation. These students were about to drop out of their class rather than do the required oral presentation. One student, whose worst fear was people looking at her while she talked, prepared a very extensive and excellent handout on her topic and distributed a copy to everyone in the class as soon as she got up to the front of the room. She said everyone started reading the handout and didn't look at her. Of course, if you want your audience's full attention during your speech, you should distribute your handout at the end of your speech. Another student showed a brief video clip as part of his presentation, because he felt too nervous to talk without a break for more than a few minutes. Later he told his professor that several students in the class told him how much they liked his presentation because it included some variety. One student sat down for her presentation; she said she felt she could do it if she sat down but was sure she could not do it if she had to stand up. Think about your presentation and what would help you. Check with your professor if you're not sure if your plan would fit your professor's requirements. Don't hesitate to tell your professor that you are nervous about giving your presentation, and ask for his or her suggestions. Most professors are understanding and may even have some good suggestions for you.

Although it may not seem likely now, it may be that sometime in the future you will decide that you really like to give oral presentations. One student, who had been terrified when he had to give a speech in a professor's class, stopped that professor in the hall one year later to say that he was currently enrolled in a Speech class that he had taken as an elective. He told the professor that through giving his speech he discovered that he really enjoyed public speaking, and that he wanted the opportunity to do it again. This may happen to you, too! One day, you may find yourself looking forward to giving speeches, or find that you are a little nervous but also excited about it!

Giving Your Speech

On the day you give your oral presentation, wear clothes that you feel good in and that are appropriate to the setting. When you step up to the front of the room to give your oral presentation to your class, have the attitude, "I'm glad I'm here, I'm glad you're here." As you give your speech, do NOT concentrate on yourself ("What are people thinking about *me*?" "How do *I* look?" "How well am *I* talking?" "Do people think *I'm* nervous?" "Is what *I'm* wearing okay?"). Instead, concentrate on the interesting and important information that you want to give to ***OTHERS AND HOW IT WILL HELP THEM***. Thinking about helping others instead of thinking about oneself is an excellent way to change from being a nervous and self-conscious speaker to a comfortable and confident speaker who is enjoyable to listen to. And if you selected a topic of interest to you, you will be excited about being able to share this potentially very helpful information with others. Something you say may even change somebody's life!

Many speakers like to look at three or four people in the audience who are sitting in different parts of the room as they give their speech (these can be friends of yours, if you wish, who could nod or smile to reassure you that you are doing well). As you look from one to the other, it appears that you are looking around the room. Or, you can just look at different people in your audience at random; experienced speakers do this to gauge whether the audience is “with them,” and if not, they can slow down or explain something in more detail. Remember to refer to your notes but not read from them as that is the fastest way to “lose” your audience; look at your audience instead.

There are some physical things you can do to prepare for your speech. Exercise can increase feelings of both mental and physical wellbeing, so exercising for a few weeks while you’re getting ready for your presentation is likely to be beneficial. Caffeine (found in colas, coffee, and chocolate) can increase the likelihood of panic attacks, and alcohol and marijuana can make some people feel panicky. Very low blood sugar (from not eating) can cause feelings of anxiety, and food allergies can cause depressed feelings. The staff at UTM Counseling and Career Services is available Monday through Friday to talk with students about public speaking anxiety. Appointments are free and confidential. Please call Extension 7720 (587-7720 from off campus) or stop by our office at 213 University Center to make an appointment.

Remember, no speech will be loved by everyone and no speech will be “perfect,” because everyone likes different things. But a well prepared speech will be appreciated by many students in your class, as well as count favorably toward your final grade. Each time you speak in public it will be a little easier. You may even find that eventually you will seek out opportunities for public speaking in areas of your interest!

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