

Presentation anxiety, friend or foe?

There are two types of presenters, those who are nervous before presenting and those who are liars. You've heard it said many times before - the fear of public speaking is considered by many as their number one fear, outdistancing death and spiders. There are many stories of entertainment superstars who undergo extraordinary episodes of stage fright immediately before they perform. They've experienced blurred vision, nausea, and headaches - even after performing hundreds of times. So, if these entertainers face anxiety on stage, is it any wonder that the rest of us may be fearful of appearing before a group of people?

Rule 1 Anxiety is good

The truth is, anxiety is here to stay, so we must use the nervous energy positively and not let it prevent us from accepting speaking opportunities that could advance our careers. The good news is that anxiety is a crucial part of performing well, as long as it doesn't take over you and prevent you from reaching your fullest potential.

Rule 2 You can't perform brain surgery after a day's training

Presentation anxiety is caused by a multitude of factors centred around the fear of failure, humiliation and loss of self esteem. We can learn to control our anxiety and present with confidence, and the key word here is 'learn', just like any other skill. Many people have unrealistic expectations about their speaking ability, thinking that if they can run a successful business, they can easily put together a presentation. However, this assumption is flawed, often resulting in failed presentations, leading to frustration and even more anxiety. How often do you find yourself speaking in public? Two to three times a year? Now compare that to the amount of meetings you attend, so why do you expect your speaking skills to be as developed as your decision-making ability? You simply do not practice enough to have overcome those fears of public speaking.

Rule 3 The pressure's off

If you devote only a small amount of time to public speaking, you're unlikely to become an accomplished speaker, and you cannot expect to excel without some coaching and practice. Perfection is unrealistic, but speaking effectively is easily within your grasp.

Rule 4 Amateurs and fools wing it

Delivering effective presentations is a skill that's learnt and developed, and rehearsing is a critical step of your presentation and one of the key ways to reduce your anxiety. This will enable you to become familiar with the material so you can focus on the passion and emotion needed to create a natural free flowing speech.

Rule 5 Presentation anxiety is not life threatening

It may sound silly, but what's the worst that could happen? Anxiety is based on the belief that something terrible will happen. You could forget your lines, shake, sneeze - none of them are fatal - and chances are if you've rehearsed they won't happen, so smile to yourself, remember Rule 5, and you will live through it.

Top Tips

Connect with the audience before you go up on stage, circulate with the delegates and ask them what they hope to get from the event.

Relax, count to three before you speak, make eye contact and let them know that you're controlled, confident and ready.

Speak slowly to start, the audience needs to get used to your voice and your accent. Anxiety causes us to speak quicker than we normally do, so take your time.

Think successfully. The audience want you to succeed so picture the audience at the end of your presentation applauding, visualise yourself at your best, positively getting through the speaking engagement and handling the presentation effectively even if things don't go as planned.

As you're waiting to speak, control your breathing, start by inhaling slowly through your nose - and as you inhale your stomach should expand outward. As you exhale through your mouth, your stomach flattens out. Start to breathe this way while you're waiting to speak. And when it's time, take a nice, deep, breath, and when you begin to exhale, start talking out loud.

And lastly, next time you hear an impromptu, off the cuff presentation, remember this quote from Mark Twain

"It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech,"



John Davies, Senior Partner, Oatmeal Training

IN THE SECOND OF FOUR ARTICLES, JOHN DAVIES, OF OATMEAL TRAINING LOOKS AT THE FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING.

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