



Stage Fright & How To Control It

You have a problem.

You are one of the millions of people who are frightened to speak in public.

You are not alone.

Whether this is your first presentation, or number 1,000, almost everyone suffers from some level of stage fright or performance anxiety. Actors suffer from the same feelings, and many say they never get over them.

What they have learned, and what you can learn, is to take those feelings and use them to your advantage.

Although in surveys, the fear of speaking in public ranks higher than death, flying, heights, and snakes, this fear *can* be controlled. It is a perfectly normal feeling, and a form of energy that can be channeled to your benefit. To use these feelings to your own advantage, first you must identify them.

There are four common fears that most speakers have:

1. **Fear of fainting.** Unless you have a medical problem, this is almost unheard of. You may feel faint, but it is highly unlikely that you will faint.
2. **Fear of boring your audience.** If you approach speaking as an audience-centered sport, you will seldom need to be concerned with boring your audience. Make sure that:
 - your material is interesting, and you have backed it up with facts, figures, and anecdotes to enhance and illustrate your points
 - you are speaking directly to each person in the audience, so there is no reason for anyone to be bored
 - you are enthusiastic about the topic, and your voice and body language show it
3. **Fear of your mind going blank.** This can happen. We have all seen it happen to other people, and you need to learn what to do if it happens to you: Pause, look at your notes or outline and try to pick up again where you left off, or move on to your next thought. Don't be afraid to use your notes to get back on track. If you realize a mistake was made during your presentation, correct it if it will have impact on the audience, or let it slide if it is something unimportant.
4. **Fear of being judged.** If you are well prepared and have practiced enough, everything should go smoothly. It is important that the audience knows you enjoy discussing your subject, even if you've



made some mistakes or have lost your place. A sincere presenter doing his or her best, who is obviously well prepared, will not be judged harshly.

Once you have identified your fears, begin working to manage them and let them help you.

First, accept that stage fright is a normal feeling, experienced by most people. Next, observe how other speakers handle their anxiety, or ask them what they do to relax before a presentation. Perhaps you've noticed speakers doing breathing exercises, or shoulder and head rolls before their presentations.

Many speakers have brief exercise routines that help them relax. Others use self-talk to turn the fear into excitement. An important aspect of stage fright control is to speak frequently. The more you practice, the better speaker you will become.

Self-talk builds self-esteem

The conversations you have with yourself build or destroy your self-image. If you can regulate your self-talk to upgrade your self-image, you can convince yourself of almost anything. If you walk into a presentation believing you are going to fail, you probably will.

But, if give yourself a positive self-talk, your chances for success will increase drastically. We like the self-talk mantra created by speech expert Dorothy Sarnoff. It goes like this: "I'm glad I'm here. I'm glad you're here. I care about you. I know that I know."

The message you are sending to yourself is one of joy and ease. It expresses your pleasure in being there to present. It says, "I'm thinking about you." And it communicates that you have taken the time and effort to prepare a presentation worth giving and worth listening to.

Every time you arrive at a presentation, repeat this mantra to yourself over and over. Say it silently or out loud, fast or slow, it doesn't matter. It will become a chant allowing you to entertain only positive thoughts and messages. Positive self-talk is an effective means of controlling stage fright.

Visualization

Another effective way to control stage fright is by using visualization. In the visualization process, you picture yourself in front of an audience. You are composed, confident, and in control. You see yourself delivering a presentation, and in your mind's eye, you watch yourself as you successfully reach out to the audience and deliver an audience-centered presentation.

You need not go farther than your introduction, but you may want to include a positive response by the audience. By picturing yourself in a successful situation, you are able to give yourself the confidence you need to achieve your goal.



Staying in control

Positive self talk and visualization are tools to help you control your stage fright, but there are some basic rules to follow which will make controlling your fears easier:

Arrive early

Get to where you are presenting with lots of time to spare. This will give you a chance to relax, survey your surroundings, make a trip to the restroom, organize your thoughts, and check the facilities -- as well as any equipment you may be using. The speaker who rushes in at the last minute does himself or herself a disservice. We all need the time to mentally prepare ourselves for the event at hand.

Eat lightly

Before you are going to present, it is best to avoid heavy meals. This also means no alcohol, and nothing that might cause you stomach upsets. Bananas are a good choice, they are light and filling. It is also important to avoid taking decongestants or other medications that might make you drowsy. You don't want to appear tired during your presentation.

Use humor

Use humor to help release endorphins. Listen to a funny tape on the way to your presentation and let yourself laugh. Laughter is a great tension reliever.

Use interactive techniques

When you begin your presentation, plan to ask audience members a question and get them to raise their hands. Or have them make a sound, or any other interactive device you can think of. This will take some of the focus off of you, and put it onto them. You can use these moments to take a deep breath and relax.

Another way to help you relax before your presentation is to do some simple exercises:

1. The "rag doll": Stand up straight with your feet comfortably apart. Stretch up tall, then bend over by collapsing quickly and loosely from the waist with your arms relaxed and hands dangling. Keep your arms, hands, and neck relaxed so you look like a rag doll. Do not bounce. Wait 10 seconds. Now, slowly rise up to a straight position, keeping relaxed. Repeat five times.
2. Head rolls: Immediately after the rag doll, while your neck is still relaxed, stand straight with your hands close to your chest. Begin to slowly rotate your neck first to the left, then forward with your chin down in front, then to the right. Don't roll your neck back. Reverse the rotation rolling to the right, then front, then left, the front. Be sure your neck is relaxed. Repeat five times.
3. Arm swings: After the head rolls, stand straight with your arms to your sides. Swing your left arm in a large circle from front to back, as if you were doing the back stroke. Swing your right arm in a large circle from front to back in the same manner. Reverse and swing your left arm in a large circle from back to front. Do the same with your right arm. Swing your arms in this manner five times on each side.



4. **Shoulder shrugs:** Right after the arm swings, stand straight with your arms at your sides. Using your arms, move your shoulders straight up to the level of your ears. Drop your shoulders back down to their resting position. Shrug your shoulders four more times.
5. **Yawning:** After completing the rag doll and the head rolls, your face and neck muscles and vocal chords should be relaxed. Now, standing straight, slowly yawn, sounding an “ahhhhh” on exhalation. The sound you make is a relaxed sound. Strive for this relaxed and open quality whenever you speak.
6. **Abdominal breathing:** Sit upright in a chair and place both feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap. Take a deep breath through the nose while extending your stomach. Push your stomach out as the air comes into and fills your lungs. Your shoulders can rise and may possibly go back a bit. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Which hand rises most? If it is the hand on your abdomen, you are breathing properly. If not, pull your breath deeper into your lungs. Once your lungs are full, hold the air to the count of six and then let the air escape from your nose. Repeat, taking each deep breath slowly through the nose. Do this 10 times.

If you find you need a quick refresher before giving your presentation, here are two that you can do:

Deep Breathing I: Take a deep breath in through your nose and tighten everything in your body, from your head, neck, shoulder, hands, fingers, legs and toes. Hold the breath for six seconds, then slowly let go of the tension in your body as you exhale through your mouth to a count of 10.

Deep Breathing II: Take a deep breath and clasp your hands together. Hold your breath as you squeeze your palms together tightly. Let go of your hands and breath at the same time.

Both of these deep breathing refreshers help you to slow your heartbeat. As you do this, you will also slow down the surge of adrenaline that is making you tense.

How to handle stage fright

1. Accept the fact that stage fright is normal; you may have it every time you speak – but let it work for you by thinking of it as excitement not fear.
2. Watch other speakers and learn their techniques.
3. Concentrate on your strengths, compensate for your weaknesses.
4. Practice, practice, practice before you are going to present. Remember, practice makes perfect presentations.
5. Speak often; the more you speak the better you will be able to manage your stage fright.



Managing the physical symptoms of stage fright

For dry mouth:

- No milk products, soda, alcoholic beverages, caffeine, or sugar
- Lightly coat your teeth with petroleum jelly; it will stop your lip from sticking to your teeth
- Bite the tip of your tongue (this helps you to salivate)
- Drink room temperature or warm water (with lemon, if available)

For sweaty hands/body:

- Use talcum powder or corn starch on hands/body
- Carry a handkerchief

If you have red splotches on your face:

- Wear pink or red colors
- Wear high necklines
- Use humor to release endorphins

If your voice is shaky:

- Project your voice to the back row of the audience

If your hands are shaky:

- Gesture; make them small gestures, don't wave about wildly

If your legs are shaky or your knees are knocking:

- Move about the platform or walk

If your heartbeat is rapid:

- Do some deep breathing



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