

Oral Communication Resources

Presentational Speaking

Dealing With Nerves

Why do we get so nervous?

Notice: I said "we." Nervousness about public speaking is a universal reaction. Opinion polls have been taken more than once that indicate that people are more afraid of "speaking in public" than of dying. There is something about the presentational situation that brings on a feeling of panic in many people—if you feel nervous, you are not alone!

First, understand what is happening.

Speaking in public makes one vulnerable. As a speaker, you are exposing your thinking processes for everyone to see. What most of us keep private, you are making public. That's a risk.

Any time we face a risk—or think we face a risk—our bodies react accordingly. Our bodies prepare us to deal with that risk, giving us a dose of adrenaline to help us out. Unfortunately, in the public speaking situation, we often feel the side effects of adrenaline without realizing its benefits. We feel our shaking hands, our sweaty palms and armpits, our flushed face. We don't notice our extra acuity, our ability to think faster on our feet, and our ability to inject extra energy into our actions. Nervousness prepares us for dealing with the unexpected.

REMEMBER: the physical sensations of nervousness are simply bodily reactions. You can decide how you will respond to them.

Suggestions

Accept your nervousness. Come to expect it. It's normal. It's natural. It serves a purpose.

Realize also that other people cannot see what you feel. You probably don't look as nervous as you feel. Even if you look nervous, it need not prevent people from hearing what you have to say. If you engage them with your content,, that is where they will focus their attention.

Remember to breathe out. Some people unconsciously hold their breath when nervous, and some people don't fully exhale. Since you need oxygen, you need to make the space in your lungs for it. Exhale slowly and completely, then slowly take a normal breath. Give yourself enough of a pause to do this. The pause may seem like a long time to you, but it probably won't seem very long to your

listeners. It will give them time to think about what you have said.

When not in a presentation situation, find tension releasing exercises that work for you. Figure out how you can use them to help you release tension. Use them to release tension prior to your presentation, as well as during the presentation. Before your presentation take advantage of opportunities to excuse yourself to a private place to do a few head rolls, shoulder shrugs, deep breathing, or your favorite muscle loosening exercises prior to your presentation. During your presentation small things like exhaling slowly during a pause, can help release tension.

Create a supportive environment for yourself. Have some friends to sit in a prominent place in the audience and tell them to smile and nod encouragement while you're speaking. It may sound corny, but it works.

Focus on your content. Don't focus on how nervous you feel—that will make you more nervous. Instead, focus on what you want to say and how you are saying it.

Know your material. There is no replacement for feeling like you know what you are going to say. Go through your material out loud before your presentation, so you know how it will sound.

Time your presentation so you know how long it will take. This allows you to edit our sections before your presentation if it is too long. The more prepared you are, the more you will be able to focus in on your content, letting your nervousness energize you.

Nervousness will not just go away. In fact, you don't want it to go away. The extra acuity, the extra energy, and the general level of preparedness caused by the adrenaline rush that you experience as nervousness will help you if you allow it to. The trick to dealing with nervousness is to welcome the adrenaline, and focus on what you want to communicate with your audience.

If you are a Hamline student and interested in taking a self-test related to communication apprehension, click on the link to get to the PRCA: [the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension](#).