Overcoming Stage Fright
“THE HUMAN BRAIN STARTS WORKING THE MOMENT YOU’RE BORN AND NEVER STOPS UNTIL YOU STAND UP TO SPEAK IN PUBLIC”

George Jessel
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1. **Stage Fright!**

It goes by several different terms. Fear of Public Speaking, Performance Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, or just plain Stage Fright. By any name it is the intense and debilitating fear of being “on” in front of people. The actor George Jessel said it best *The human brain starts working the moment you’re born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public.*

For anyone who has been filled with dread at the mere thought of getting up in front of a group of people you know this feeling is very real and not something to take lightly. It drains our confidence, and self esteem. For many it can prevent moving forward in school or career. Simply expressing an opinion to a group, persuading others of an idea, or just meeting new people at a networking event are best described in the words of Tony Soprano… “Fahgettaboudit!” Most take the path of avoidance, not speaking up, staying “below the radar”. As a result many great ideas go unexplored. Many wonderful songs go unsung.

The good news is (finally good news) that public speaking is a learned skill. Just like learning to play the piano, a new sport or hobby, it is developed over time with guidance and practice. You really can, to quote Walter Cronkite, “teach the butterflies in your stomach to fly in formation.”
To be sure however, improving skills is just one piece of the larger puzzle. Very often what bears equal weight in the anxiety equation is conquering the fear of being judged.

Janet Esposito M.S.W., in overcoming her own terror of public speaking, has done extensive investigation into extreme forms of fear and anxiety associated with performance in public. “To substantially reduce your fear you must address and revise the negative perceptions, thoughts and beliefs you have related to public speaking or performing. It is helpful to uncover the deeper fears related to being seen and heard by others, showing vulnerability, and being considered less than perfect” (Janet Esposito, 2012)

Who does it affect?

While it’s tempting to think of stage fright as something that happens to “new speakers or performers”, the truth is it happens to seasoned pros as well. In fact for performers it can happen in mid career, often in the wake of other stress. Once unleashed it’s like a demon that lurks on the margins of awareness ready to strike at any moment. One study of symphony and opera musicians found that 24% listed stage fright as a primary health concern. (Wise, 2011)

The bottom line frankly is that almost all of us feel some degree of nervous apprehension when preparing to speak or perform in front of an audience. In fact some would argue that it is a very healthy and you might say "necessary" feeling that can help keep us focused.
3. **Why it matters**

Close your eyes and think back to an earlier experience when you were well and truly in the grip of "stage fright". Maybe it was a presentation at work or school. Perhaps at a town meeting where you really wanted to say something on a particular topic but felt paralyzed to get up there. Maybe you were the "Best Man" or "Bridesmaid" at a friend’s wedding. I remember the very first time for me like it was yesterday. I was 11 years old. Following a long year of accordion lessons our music school had a "recital". Each of the students had to perform one piece they had been practicing. I was never more scared in my life. I actually felt weak in the knees as my turn came. In the end what got me through was a kindly lady who sat in the front row and looked up smiling at me. I riveted my gaze on her and somehow made it through. I will never forget that afternoon, or the power of a smile.

If you can remember “that” time, imagine what it would feel like **NOT** to feel that way. Filled with dread. Nervous yes, but not the debilitating mind numbing fear you recall, and now firmly associate with public speaking or performance.

Speaking publicly **is** necessary. We are social creatures, and we live by communicating. Our ability to speak with confidence and convey our thoughts, ideas, and messages largely determines how far we go in life.

Here are just a few areas where you may find that a “renewed confidence” could come in handy.
### OVERCOMING STAGE FRIGHT

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The ability to stand up in front of a group confidently convey your thoughts has the amazing effect on one’s self confidence and esteem. You **CAN** do this. Stage fright can be tamed. Once you do, your whole world will open up.

and most be open
So what happens to us?

Do you remember the “fight or flight” syndrome from high school biology? According to Dale Cyphert Ph.D., regardless of its cause your stage fright symptoms are part of the body’s Primary Threat Response. This is the set of normal physiological responses that allow us to take effective action – running away or fighting – when we feel threatened or under attack. (Dale Cyphert, 2005)

Happily, speaking engagements do not normally involve being attacked, but your body doesn’t know that. It picks up the signals of a perceived threat (let’s face it, that’s how scared we can feel) and prepares you accordingly. In short, your body is doing its job. Unfortunately it goes way beyond feeling jittery.

OK. Great lesson, but who cares about all this bio stuff? We should. The idea here is if we know and recognize the physical symptoms, we can develop tools to reduce their effects and be more relaxed and effective...

**Blood pressure elevates**

Your heart pumps faster in order to move and nutrients to where they are needed for action. Heat builds in your body’s core and you often begin sweating. In addition normal areas such as your armpits, groin and forehead, you also feel it on the palms of your hands making them feel clammy.
**Blood vessels constrict in your extremities**

The tiny blood vessels in your hands, toes, fingers and nose for example constrict to force additional oxygen into your major organs and muscle groups. This of course leaves you with cold hands and feet and maybe some numbness.

**Muscles contract**

Your body is preparing to spring into action with a burst of energy. Your neck and shoulder muscles contract pulling your head down and your shoulders up. Your back muscles draw your spine into a concave curve which brings your pelvis forward. All this to protect your vital organs and ready you for action. Without use, your contracted muscles begin to tremble and the harder you try to hold them still, the more they tremble. Your neck, shoulder and back muscles start to fatigue. Your lungs and diaphragm remain constricted in your body’s attempt to maintain a protective fetal position. As you hold your head up your vocal cords are stretched and your voice tightens, which often adds to the problem. (Dale Cyphert, 2005)

**Breathing becomes rapid**

The body’s need for a steady supply of oxygen forces a pattern of rapid, shallow breathing.

**The digestive system shuts down**

Processing food is a low priority under stress. Foods in your stomach just sit there waiting for the production of saliva and stomach acid to resume. This can result in the familiar “lump”
or “butterflies” in your stomach, along with dry mouth or possible nausea.

**Pupils dilate**

During perceived danger your body responds with a heightened sense of hearing, visual acuity and motion. Your eyes automatically shift to “long distance” view at the expense of the short view. You may also feel an increase in peripheral vision. Needless to say none of this helps if a speaker is trying to glance at notes or make eye contact at short distances. The speaker can often be painfully aware of every frown on the face of audience members or loose focus from things happening off to the side.

**Brain wave frequency increases**

Brain activity actually speeds up allowing you to think more clearly and process information more rapidly. It can feel as though time is distorted making you react too quickly to stimuli. You might think of new things to say in the middle of your speech causing you to ramble or speak too fast. (Dale Cyphert, 2005)
5. **Tools to manage**

Remember this is a two part puzzle. The "psychological element" (negative perceptions, thoughts and beliefs) induces the physiologic symptoms as a “stress response” to that fear. The symptoms won’t keep you from giving a great presentation but learning to channel the physical reactions can actually help deliver a dynamic, energized performance.

**Recognize the stress as excitement.**

The physiologic symptoms you feel during public speaking are similar to those you would experience on a roller coaster or rafting trip. The difference is that:

- Roller coaster = Fun!
- Public Speaking = Fright....

The goal of controlling stage fright is not to make the symptoms go away but to make them work for you. (Dale Cyphert, 2005)

**Use your large muscles**

Your contracted muscles are waiting for you to hurl a spear at a Saber Tooth tiger, and they won’t relax until you do. Move. Take a walk around the building, move your arms around,
throw a punch into the air, roll your head around to loosen your shoulder muscles. Scowl, make ugly faces (this one’s easy for me 😊)

**Abdominal breathing**

Sometimes called diaphragmatic breathing, this is perhaps one of the most useful of all techniques for changing your body’s physical state. As you force yourself to take deep breaths, you bring in oxygen and release carbon dioxide. Your body interprets this as the “all clear” signal and stress levels decline.

Here’s how you do it. Stand straight, exhale, place your hands on your abdomen so that your two middle fingers touch. Now breath in deeply through your nose by moving your abdomen outward. Breath deep until your two middle fingers are separated. Then relax and exhale through your mouth.

**Watch what you eat**

We all have an innate feeling of what our digestive systems do or don’t do under stress. Time your food intake to accommodate it.

**Bad guys:**

- Avoid Milk and dairy – Creates phlegm (ugh!)
- Avoid sugar – just before speaking is NOT the time to go for a candy bar.
- Maintain glucose levels – You use more energy than you know during a speaking engagement. Eat small amounts well before hand and include complex carbohydrates along with protein.
Overcoming Stage Fright

- Avoid alcohol, nicotine and caffeine – All will stimulate the adrenal glands and increase stress symptoms. If you smoke on the other hand, today is not the day to quit… (Dale Cyphert, 2005)

**Good guys:**

- Exercise – maybe the best tool of all. It reduces stress and large muscle contraction and produces endorphins. A good workout the night before will help you stay more relaxed.
- Vitamin C – increases energy, stamina and general resistance to stress.
- Vitamin B – Your body goes through a lot of it during stress. Deficiencies can show up as loss of dexterity, forgetfulness, depression and confusion to name a few.
- Calcium and Magnesium – A balance of both minerals acts as a system tranquilizer.
- Get your rest – You simply must get enough sleep the night before. Nothing will cloud your mind like a lack of sleep.
Let’s bring it home!

OK. You have an upcoming speech or presentation. It’s an important opportunity and you will be very much in the spotlight. You feel queasy every time you start to think about it. What to do?

Let’s lay out a timeline of what you need to do, and not do, as you lead up to speech time. If you follow this simple recipe, you will not only survive but probably give a pretty good speech...

Weeks Before

Preparation, preparation, preparation. Prepare and practice. Of all the things you should do, **this is by far the most important**. No other single element will give you the peace of mind that comes from knowing your material. It’s important for you to know your material and be very comfortable with it. No you don’t need to memorize a long speech. Yes you do need to say it out loud. It’s important to hear your own voice in this process. Find a quiet place and practice OUT LOUD. It is generally a good idea to write out your speech, but then to “compartmentalize” it into key points or sections. Follow the logic.
**Days Before**

It’s important now to start thinking about how you are eating. Eat sensibly. Begin to limit caffeine, sugar and alcohol as much as possible. Exercise. Endorphins provide a great natural way to relax and take the edge off your jitters.

Visualize a successful outcome. Focus on your strength and ability to manage challenging situations. This is your “pre-view” of success.

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**Hours Before**

STOP scaring yourself with thoughts of what might go wrong. Focus your attention on images that are calming.

REFUSE to follow thoughts that create self doubt and lower self confidence.


VISUALIZE success.

ARRIVE early. Make connections to your audience. Smile and greet people as they come in. You will think of them as friends rather than enemies.
**NOW**  \[ T = 0 \]

**LET GO!** Shift the focus from yourself and your fear to your true purpose - contributing something of value to your audience.

**GIVE UP** trying to be perfect and know that it's ok to make mistakes. Be natural, be yourself. (Janet Esposito, 2012)

The memory aid here is to think safer with **SAFVR**

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<td>A</td>
<td>Abdominal breathing. Has a great calming effect. Sends your brain the “all clear” signal</td>
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<td>Focus on intent. It’s not about you!</td>
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<td>Release. Let go and be yourself!</td>
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Final Thoughts

As we noted earlier there simply is no substitute for knowing your material. Becoming very familiar with your subject and practicing what you want to say will give you the peace of mind that no other “technique” or “tip” could provide. Yes they all help, but in the end, it’s all about knowing your subject. It’s important to practice out loud to get used to the sound of your voice and the speed of your speaking.

Probably one of the best ways to practice any presentation is in front of a group of supportive friends. Toastmasters International can provide you the opportunity to do just that.

A Toastmasters club is a group of like minded people in a relaxed atmosphere who are all there to improve their public speaking and leadership skills. It’s a fun, supportive environment where everyone goes at their own pace. There are even workbooks to help guide you through the different types of speeches as well as the various elements of good speaking.

You can get more information or check out the many clubs in our area on-line at

http://www.toastmasters.org/
Works Cited


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