

# 7 Secrets to Psych Yourself Out of Pre-Presentation Jitters

By Dianna Booher

Stage fright often begins long before a performer takes the stage. For most of us, the condition sets in the moment we accept an invitation to make a presentation. And generally, the longer we have to anticipate the event, the more prolonged and severe the symptoms.

The typical person is uncomfortable in a presentation forum. Neither rank nor personality is a differentiator. In years of coaching on presentation skills, I have had some of the most outstanding executives tell me that they still feel uncomfortable in front of a group—even after hundreds of presentations before employee, stockholder, or industry groups. And even life-of-the-party-type salespeople who give a great presentation sometimes walk away with sweaty palms and knots in their stomach. The following hints may help you deal with that sense of discomfort until it dissolves into confidence.

## **Secret #1: Accept Nervousness as Part of the Process**

At times our fears are rational; sometimes not. We may fear that our subject or information is not quite what the audience expects, needs, or wants. Or we fear that they will attack the quality of our performance or challenge our credentials, asking a question we cannot answer. Or we visualize ourselves making a misstatement or omitting key information. Even if we know our subject well and feel confident about our qualifications to speak, we may fear that we will perform so badly that we will embarrass ourselves. Surely the group will notice our nervousness and our embarrassment.

If we have no other cause for fear, some of us worry that we won't have adequate preparation time or that some circumstance beyond our control (such as the audiovisual equipment going berserk) will foul things up.

If any of these are fears of yours, you are in good company. Even the most famous movie stars, singers, and politicians admit to fear before certain performances. When you hear someone claim not to be nervous before giving a presentation, you are probably in for a boring talk. Presenters who lack a certain amount of anxiety do not have enough adrenalin flow to push them to peak performance. They are too confident and relaxed to do their best job.

## **Secret #2: Use Fear to Push You to a Peak Performance**

The secret to a great presentation is performing despite the nervousness—in fact, making your jitters work for you. Imagine the tension and extra adrenalin pumping through you as catalysts to a great performance.

You may feel that you have lost control of your body, with one of the following symptoms: rapid pulse, sweaty palms, dry mouth, buckling knees, twitching muscles, shortness of breath, quivering voice, and queasiness. No matter how nervous you are, however, never tell your

audience. If they sense your discomfort, they will worry about you—much like a parent does when a daughter mounts the school stage as Cinderella. Your admission may direct them to your shaking hands when they should be listening to your words.

Take a deep breath and refuse to let your nerves get the best of you. Instead of thinking about how you might embarrass yourself, concentrate on your subject. Recall and rehearse your key points rather than your key obstacles.

Use positive self-talk rather than focusing on the fear. One way to build your confidence is to remember that you have been asked to give the presentation; someone believes in your capability and subject-matter expertise. Remind yourself that if others in the audience were more knowledgeable than you, they would have been asked to make the presentation.

Fear is a learned response. A two-year-old does not fear walking into the street until someone yanks him or her back, warning him or her of the danger. We learn the same fear of speaking before a group the first time a classmate stands up to recite a poem, has a memory lapse, and gets flustered, causing snickers to erupt throughout the room. And because fear is learned, it can be unlearned—or at least controlled.

### **Secret #3: Find Your Fans**

It is part of human nature to be cowed by negative personality types. This goes for presenters also. They look into the audience and see the one glum face staring at them, looking either bored, angry, or impatient. The tendency is to play to that one cynic, trying to persuade, soften, lead, motivate, empower, enlighten, or appease-whatever it takes to turn the gloom to bloom.

However, it rarely happens. And in the process, you grow more nervous and rattled and sometimes lose the rest of the audience.

It is far better to find your fans up front. If you know you have supportive people in the group, focus on those faces. These positive high achievers sport a different expression. They smile. They blink. They nod. They move. They shift. They are the let's-keep-an-open-mind, let's-make-this-work kind of people. They do not just suck the energy out of you—they give some back. These people have a contagious spirit that generates enthusiasm for at least a discussion, if not acceptance, of your ideas.

### **Secret #4: Play Mental Games of "What's the Worst?" to Overcome Disabling Fear**

Another trick for calming yourself is to consider the unnerving experience in light of eternity. What is the worst that can happen? What will it all matter a year from now? In fact, if you goof, who will even remember it tomorrow? In the big scheme of things, your presentation will prove minuscule. Plan, then learn to put the unexpected in perspective.

## **Secret #5: Use Physical Exercise and Activity to Release Nervous Tension**

Following are some things you can do to alleviate both the physical and mental symptoms of nervousness:

- Take a few deep breaths and exhale slowly. (This forces the muscles to relax a bit, increases the flow of oxygen to the brain, and lowers the pulse rate.)
- Let all the muscles in your body go limp, then tense them, and then let them go limp again.
- Drop your jaw and move it from side to side. Yawn.
- Roll your head, shoulders, or both.
- Go limp like Raggedy Ann and then straighten up. Repeat.
- Take a brisk walk or jog before arriving at the event.

The idea is to transport yourself from terror to fear to tension to mere stimulation. It is in the stimulation mode that you will be best able to inspire or motivate your audience.

## **Secret #6: Concentrate on Your Audience Rather than on Yourself to Reduce Tension**

How will your ideas help your audience to improve their lives, take action at work, or at least increase their knowledge? Learn to appreciate the energy this tension creates; think of the swarm of butterflies in your stomach as a wellspring of creativity pushing upward to make your presentation one to remember. Feel passionate about your subject. Prepare well. Psych yourself up for the positive results your presentation is sure to generate.

## **Secret #7: Assume a Friendly Audience**

If you assume the members of your audience are waiting to catch you in an error or argue with you, you'll likely feel nervous and may even sound hostile during your presentation.

Based on my own experience and that of many other professional speakers, I assure you that audiences want speakers to do well. After all, they have taken time out of their busy schedules, and they are hoping to gain something from your presentation. Even those who are forced to attend will be pleasantly surprised if you give them something of value or entertain them.

To reassure yourself that your audience members are friendly and positive, arrive early and talk with people individually. Chat about the occasion, their trip to the site, what their work entails, common acquaintances—anything that lets them see you as a nice person who is interested in them. Such small talk also allows you to see them as familiar "friends" who will welcome and benefit from what you have to say.

Even your body language conveys how you feel about your audience. If you feel that they are friendly, you will walk over and stand closer to them. If you are uncomfortable with them, you will hide behind the lectern or table and lean away.

Finally, do not be discouraged by frowns or silences. Silence means deep thought and agreement as often as it does boredom. With this perspective, your delivery will sound relaxed and upbeat.

## **Don't Let Fear Mean Mediocrity**

Finally, don't settle for being an "average" presenter, one who is scared into conformity. Do not risk losing your audience with a boringly straitlaced performance—one that is not too passionate, not too loud, not too flashy, not too funny, not too controversial, not too emotional, not too formal, not too informal—not too anything. Never look around your organization to see "what everybody else does" when they present and conform to mediocrity.

See what everyone else does, and do not do it. Your success depends more often on being different—on standing out as superior. Relax and excel.

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*For more on business writing, see E-Writing: 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.*