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5 Common Myths

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Most people, especially students and those who want to pursue a career, need to stand and speak in front of others, every once in a while. Since most people feel nervous when speaking in front of an audience, how can it be that some do it with ease?

Despite there being hundreds of sources and directions on how to become a great public speaker, we continue to believe in myths, about public speaking, created by popular culture. They are primarily centered around our own perceptions of performance anxiety, as well as a profound misunderstanding of what makes public speakers exceptional. Let's expose those myths!

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Myth No. 1: Public Speakers Are Born That Way

Although some people feel more comfortable with speaking in front of an audience, compared to others, being a good speaker is more about perseverance, than it is about anything else. What is crucial is to keep practicing exposure. Thus, it is a skill you can learn and perfect, regardless of whether you are you are anxious or not. People are seldom born with an orator gift – becoming a great speaker requires a lot of work.

Myth No. 2: My Fear Means I Shouldn't Do It

If everybody, who felt anxious upon having to speaking in front of an audience, and that is most people, felt that way, then public speakers would be extinct. Yet we see people speaking publicly all the time. Therefore, the reality is that your fear of public speaking is something you can work on and overcome, and definitely not a reason for you to give up. You are the one who can choose what to do with the fear, not the other way around.

Myth No. 3: My Fear Is a Constant

This myth has a grain of truth to it, since it is not always realistic to expect that you nervousness will be completely demolished. If you overcome your fear, that doesn't mean that you will forever be immune to it. Remember how you already learned that overcoming fear doesn't mean that you'll never experience it again. Rather, it means that next time you face your anxiety, you'll know what to do about it and will feel more capable.

Myth No. 4: I'm Afraid, so I Can't Do It

This myth is in contradiction with the simple fact that the only way to face your fear is to engage in an activity that provokes it, or in other words – to practice exposure. You can't overcome a fear of flying if you refuse to ever board a plane. The same principle can be applied to public speaking. You can do a lot about your fear before you face it, but exposure is absolutely necessary for overcoming it. So, not only is that this myth false, but it makes overcoming fear impossible.

Myth No. 5: If People Notice My Fear, It Is Over

Can you recognize certain cognitive distortions in this myth? By now, you are well aware of what you can do with cognitive distortions, in order to have a more realistic outlook. As you can probably deduce on your own, most people won't even notice your nervousness, and even if they do, that won't reflect poorly on you. If some members of your audience are critical people, then they will criticize, whatever and however you do. Their behavior has nothing to do with you, your competences, or personality traits, but is rather about their own unhappiness with themselves. Remember - it requires a lot of courage to be afraid of public speaking, and yet face your audience and speak. Always make sure you appreciate yourself for your bravery.

A Personal Story

I once had a public speech, in front of approximately 500 people. It was on a real stage, with cameras, spotlights, microphones, and everything else that would make one feel extremely exposed. I was so afraid that I thought I would faint; my voice was shaking, and I couldn't stand still. The latter was fine, since I was walking and talking, while my presentation was being projected on a large white canvas behind me.

Someone from the audience noticed how nervous I was and wrote on Twitter that it seemed as if I would pass out. Did I mention that tweets, with the hashtag of the event, were being streamed live during my speech? Everyone saw that tweet. Another one expressed amazement on how a psychologist could possibly be so anxious. But then people reacted, and other tweets emerged: about how brave I was for being afraid and still making the effort to speak; how it's easy to sit comfortably in the audience and criticize the person on the stage. It

felt empowering to see how the people supporting me vastly outnumbered those who wanted to make bad jokes about me and my speech. Later I thanked them all and said that being afraid is okay, as long as you don't let it dictate your life. And I didn't. It wasn't easy, but it was the right thing to do for myself.

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