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[Home](#) > A Speaker's Perspective

A Speaker's Perspective

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A curious feature of anxiety, triggered by public speaking, is how differently we seem to view it, depending on the side we are standing on. While we may be shaking with fear, when we have assumed the role of presenters, we tend to be much more understanding, when in the audience.

When we listen to someone, speak in public and when we notice that they are nervous, we usually don't see that person as incompetent or weak. We don't judge, and we don't laugh at them. Instead, we tend to be empathetic, because we know what he or she is going through. Sure, there are those who may tease nervous speakers, but people, in general, are far more considerate.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center. Below it, three quiz cards are displayed in a row. Each card has a small image at the top and a title below. The first card shows roller skates on a wooden deck, the second shows a fan of colorful pens, and the third shows a Ferris wheel at sunset. A link to 'See all quizzes' is located at the bottom right of the banner.

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To Turn the Tables on Yourself

The perspective, however, shifts as we climb up on the stage. We are then no longer willing to remember how seeing a nervous person doesn't lead to any particular conclusions about his or her competence. All we can see now is an unfriendly, judgmental audience. Even if listeners are looking upon us with sympathy, we usually aren't able to see it, and we continue to perceive our audience as our worst enemy. We may even go as far as believing that the audience is scrutinizing our every mistake, endlessly searching for weaknesses.

Understand Yourself

In spite of this distortion of perspective, it's easy to recognize when someone is anxious about speaking in public, especially if we can relate. If you feel nervous about talking in front of an audience, it may help to understand yourself and your difficulties better, by examining the speaker's point of view, from an intellectual, emotional, and physical point of view.

Before Public Speaking

Mind

When we are afraid or anxious, our minds usually don't help us overcome fear. Quite on the contrary – our intellectual side could present another challenge entirely. For example, we may experience following thoughts:

"I can't do this. I should get out of here, while I still can."

"I can't take this any longer. Everyone will laugh at me, and that would be horrible."

There are plenty of variations to those negative thoughts, but all have the same (likely subconscious) roots - we keep telling ourselves that we are weak, incompetent, and may see the consequences of showing that to the audience as catastrophically exaggerated.

Emotions

As we await our turn to speak, we may feel anxious, with accompanying anxiety symptoms, such as heart palpitations, sweating, dizziness, pains, and aches. We might also feel lost, desperate, disoriented, alone, but vague and foggy fear is usually the most prominent emotion.

Body

While waiting for the "disaster" to happen, your body releases adrenaline and other hormones, preparing us to fight or flight. Such preparation is valuable to us when a bear attacks us, but the thing with the anxiety is that there's no bear. Thus there's no need to run or to fight. So we start sweating, our hands are shaking, and we feel lightheaded, which are typical symptoms of anxiety.

During Public Speaking

Mind

When it is finally your turn to take the stage, the first couple of minutes may seem most difficult. At this moment, your mind can be described as functioning on an “autopilot”, and you will probably start to present what you have prepared earlier. So your mind, during this phase, is focused on execution, and relies on your preparation. As time passes and your speech continues, you are more likely to take control of the “autopilot” and have an easier time, as you realize that you have survived the first couple of minutes.

Emotions

The predominant emotion during this phase is intensive anxiety. It may hide behind the wall of the “autopilot”, and you may be saying everything you need to, but anxiety may still be the background of your speech, as you continue to present.

Body

Your body is likely to maintain the symptoms of anxiety during this stage. Often, it is even harder to concentrate, with sweaty palms and trembling voice. A lot of people find that the pitch of their voice changes while speaking in public, which may add to the anxiety, as the person notices the change.

After Public Speaking

Mind

After the speech has ended, our minds tend to frantically analyze and strive to remember everything we’ve done wrong, while forgetting or neglecting all the positives. “Thank God it’s over” and “Now everyone saw how weak I am” are usually the dominant contents of our thoughts. It may feel as though we never do well enough, and instead of appreciating ourselves for having the courage to go on stage and speak, we may keep beating on ourselves and perceiving ourselves as “losers”.

Of course, this is a largely subconscious process. It is also common for people to forget what has happened during their speech, once it is over – those few minutes may seem like a black hole, with all the memories sucked out.

Emotions

The fact that you survived does bring some degree of relief. Fear will likely still be present - fear of how your performance was and how others perceived it. During this phase, you may also experience anger toward yourself, sadness, or exhaustion.

Body

After it’s over, your body is still in a moderate state of vigilance, but as time passes, the bodily symptoms of anxiety tend to wear off.

We Are All Anxious Sometimes

Let's take the example of a college professor, with extensive experience in the field of speaking in front of an audience. As that professor is asked to carry out a lecture in a foreign language, her voice becomes shaky and high-pitched, she looks scared.

Nevertheless, she stands her ground and speaks. The students are impressed by her bravery, despite the anxiety. We can all deal with the fear of public speaking. There are certain tricks and techniques we can apply, to increase our confidence and let braver prevail over anxiety. You are about to find out just what they are.

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