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[Home](#) > Dealing with “What Ifs”

Dealing with “What Ifs”

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When preparing for public speaking, it's easy for your mind to get flooded by everything that can go wrong. Not only because of cognitive distortions, but also because we often aim to reach perfection and often set the bar unnecessarily high.

Public speaking is a specific event because everything happens in a real-time: you have no opportunity to consider thoroughly what you will say, before providing an answer to a question from the audience.

Besides, traditionally, you would be standing on a stage, and everyone's looks will be directed towards you, so it may seem that everything you do is easily noticeable. That is why preparation is important, but before we get to that, let's deal with the biggest rival of public speaking - “What Ifs”.

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What If It Is a Disaster?

Let's be honest - this is possible. But so are other, more likely scenarios. When thinking about an event we are afraid of, we tend to imagine the worst scenarios, while we don't even consider the positive ones. By now, you already know, that the reason behind negative thought patterns can be found in cognitive distortions.

If you approach your public performance as something terrifying, you'll have a greater chance

to underperform, just like a self-fulfilling prophecy. The solution isn't to force yourself into being optimistic, but rather to prepare well and to be self-compassionate. The odds are that your public speech won't be a disaster, but you probably won't be entirely perfect either.

When you have certain disastrous thoughts about your public performance, think about how realistic they truly are. Indeed, everything is possible, but be honest with yourself in answering how likely is it in reality.

What If My Fear Persists?

Is it realistic to expect that your fear will disappear entirely? No, your fear will remain present for a while, but with a significant difference - you'll know how to deal with it and how not to beat yourself up because you are afraid.

Accepting and working on your fear is a process, not a one-time intervention. Don't let this discourage you because every new public speaking event will help you earn valuable experience and become better over the course of time.

What If Everyone Sees How Afraid I Am?

And if they do, what is, objectively, the worst that can happen? They'll see you are afraid and then what? They'll think that you are weak or incompetent? They'll laugh at you? Or they'll see a courageous person who may be afraid, but despite fear, is standing in front of them and is willing to do their best.

Instead of imagining what others may think, focus on your preparation. Even if some people in the audience do think badly of you (and this is hypothetical), does that mean that make a worse person? Do you need everyone's approval for what you do and how you act?

Of course, you don't. Even if you do better than you have ever before, your brilliant public speech won't stop people from passing judgments. Those who judge others will do so regardless of what we say or do. You can't please everybody, so stay focused on what's truly important.

What If I Make a Mistake?

There is a possibility that you'll forget to say something or make a mistake. Also, there's a possibility that you won't. Fear can contribute to such lapses, but it cannot diminish the influence of proper preparation.

So, prepare your presentation and if you make a mistake, you don't have to pretend it didn't happen: you can acknowledge it and fix it. In this way, the audience will see that you are okay with not being perfect and comfortable enough to point out your mistake and then make it right, which could only earn you your own and their respect.

Grow, But Don't Seek Perfection

As you might have noticed, the majority of these "What Ifs" correlate with your expectations.

They usually revolve around a desire to do everything perfectly. That doesn't imply that you shouldn't care about your performance, but rather that you should try to adjust your notions to reality.

Don't be unforgiving with yourself, because mistakes happen to everyone, even to people who act as they were born in front of the audience or camera. It certainly seems more difficult for someone who is dealing with anxiety or fear of public speaking, but striving to be perfect and flawless can easily become counterproductive.

Don't let your standards sabotage you. Instead, strive to improve constantly and be a better version of yourself, but understand that perfection is an elusive idea that cannot be achieved.

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