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What Is There To Be Afraid Of?

Liya Panayotova, Psychologist, [liyap.com](#) 8K reads

Throughout our lives, most of us have experienced the perils of public speaking. School and college are usually the first areas of our public speaking efforts. Since we have all done it countless times, it may come as a surprise that most people feel anxious about their public performances.

Curiously enough, even though we all worry when we have to carry out a public speech when we are in the audience, we seldom notice the speaker's sense of insecurity. However, as the tables turn and we are the ones on stage, the level of discomfort immediately raises, ranging anywhere from a manageable feeling of self-doubt to being completely overwhelmed.

The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center, with the text "EXPLORABLE" in a large, bold, sans-serif font and "Quiz Time!" in a smaller, cursive font below it. Below the logo are three quiz cards, each with a different image and title:

- Card 1: Image of red roller skates on a wooden deck. Title: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2".
- Card 2: Image of a fan of colorful pens. Title: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2".
- Card 3: Image of a Ferris wheel at sunset. Title: "Quiz: Flags in Europe".

At the bottom right of the banner, there is a link: "See all quizzes =>".

Professionals Are Not Immune

Let's take the example of a successful radio presenter. She is terrific at her job and is appreciated by her colleagues. Upon being asked if she has ever felt anxious, knowing that there are so many people listening to her, her answer becomes an eye-opener. She replies that she experiences discomfort every single time she is on air. So how does she do it? "Well, it's my job, and just because I am a bit anxious, doesn't mean that I can't stand it and be good at what I do".

This conversation motivated us to seek out other individuals, who are public speakers. Nearly all of them said the same: "Of course I'm afraid. But that feeling goes away because I don't

surrender to it” or “I am always a bit nervous at the beginning of my speech. But then I realize it’s not a big deal, and I can handle it. So I do.”

So, What Do We Fear?

Now that we know how many people perceive public speaking as uncomfortable, the next question is - what causes this fear? What is it about standing in front of people and speaking, which has us so afraid? Are we worried that we’ll say something stupid? Well, sure, that is a possibility, but what we are truly scared of revolves around these reasons:

We are afraid of other people thinking we are incompetent.

The main goal of public speaking is to convey a message - something we want others to learn. If we make a mistake, the audience may perceive us as less valuable. And not just as an incompetent student or employee, but as an untrustworthy individual.

We tend to generalize: we perceive one, or several mistakes, we've made as our eternal flaw and base personality-related conclusions on these mistakes. That’s neither a painless conclusion nor one that is easy to change. Of course, it is not impossible, though.

We are afraid of feeling exposed.

While speaking in public, we are aware of the fact that others are watching us, scanning our reactions, and probably making judgments about the way we talk, look and behave. This might cause us to feel like every small mistake is a disaster because many people witnessed it. Exposure to public speaking often makes us feel vulnerable, and so we see others as more judgmental than we normally would.

We are afraid of how others will perceive us.

Fear of public speaking may seem identical to social phobia, but these are two very different concepts. Their roots are similar - we are afraid of how other people will evaluate us, as we are interested in the result of that evaluation. However, those who fear public speaking only fear how they will be evaluated in this specific type of situation, while individuals who struggle with social anxiety may be worried about the assessment of others, in general.

Therefore, those with social phobia will most likely experience phobic fear, while speaking in public. However, not everyone who has a fear of public speaking struggles with social anxiety. Public speaking is a very specific situation, and so a lot of people with good social skills may experience fear as well.

But How Do People Learn?

The above may not seem like an exhaustive list of explanations for why our legs shake, as we approach the podium, but all other reasons derive from the ones described here. As we examine these reasons, it becomes clear why so many people feel nervous about public speaking.

On the other hand, however, so many people become skilled public speakers. In that case, there must be some secret they know, right? Precisely! And the secret is: fear is only an obstacle, a challenge we are perfectly able to overcome.

What we do with our fear is a personal choice - you could either avoid public speaking at all costs or accept the challenge and learn how to deal with it.

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