

Helping Students Cope with Stage Fright

If you look at almost any list of fears and phobias, speaking in public is almost always at the top (usually competing with fear of death and fear of heights!). Whether it's a social anxiety disorder or a minor case of the "jitters," speech anxiety can disrupt student learning and affect their ability to give an effective presentation. This handout includes an introduction to the types of stage fright/speech anxiety that are commonly experienced by students as well as several techniques for helping students cope with stage fright.

Types of Speech Anxiety

Model A

Onset of Anxiety

1. Pre-preparation (anxiety begins when the student first learns of the presentation)
2. Preparation (anxiety begins while preparing the presentation)
3. Pre-performance (anxiety begins while rehearsing)
4. Performance (anxiety begins immediately before or during presentation)

Model B¹

Fear of...

1. Seeming Incompetent (a student may fear appearing unprepared or ineffective)
2. Uncomfortable Physical Responses (a student may fear the physical symptoms of anxiety: flushed skin, shortness of breath, nausea, shaky voice, etc.)
3. Not Measuring Up to One's Own Ideal (a student may fear falling short of their personal expectations, especially in students with perfectionist tendencies)
4. Negative Evaluation (a student may fear receiving negative feedback)

Both models of classifying speech anxiety help students articulate their fears and anxieties. Once specific fears and anxieties have been identified, they can be addressed more effectively.

Methods of Identifying Specific Fears/Anxieties

Scheduled Worrying

Though it seems counter-intuitive, encourage students to set a timer (minimum of 5 minutes, maximum of 20 minutes) and write down all of their fears regarding their presentation during that time. Encourage them to sit and contemplate their worries for the full time. What usually ends up happening is that students either "run out of worries" or they find themselves repeating related fears. This helps the students identify the source of their fears. For example, if a student finds that most of their fears relate to seeming incompetent (specifically, they fear they will seem like they are uninformed on their topic), they can add extra sources, double-check the accuracy of their current sources, ask a peer to review the soundness of their argument, etc. This will help build confidence in their knowledge, thus building their confidence going into the presentation. This exercise also helps students identify actionable fears—fears that can be addressed. For example, if a student fears that their peers will view them as unknowledgeable or unprepared, they can take reasonable steps to prevent this: double-checking research, asking for a peer review of their rough draft, putting their notes in their backpack the night before, arriving a few minutes early to set up their visual aids, etc. If the student finds that they included fears that are not actionable (like crying during the speech or the fire alarm going off), the act of

¹ Sprague, Jo, et al. *The Speaker's Handbook*. 12th ed., Cengage Learning, 2018.

writing it down and reading it back to oneself often diminishes the power of that fear. Be sure to remind your students that once the timer goes off, they should let go of the worries and focus on preparation and rehearsal.

Mindful Self-Talk²

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally.” Eowyn Ahlstrom of the Brown University Mindfulness Center likes to add “or at least, don’t judge the judgement.” In other words, sometimes we can’t prevent the judgement, but we don’t have to accept it as true.

My old therapist always reminded me that “our thoughts are not Truth with a capital T.”

When we put these ideas together, we are asked to get curious about our thoughts, especially the way we speak to ourselves. For example, if a student thinks “I hate public speaking, I’m awful at it,” we can encourage them to get curious about that thought:

Is that true? Do I actually hate public speaking? Are there specific parts of it that I hate? Why do I hate/dislike that part? What about it causes me discomfort? How can I alleviate that discomfort? If I can’t alleviate it, how can I replenish my energy afterwards (perhaps taking a walk, having a meal with friends, etc.)?

Is that true? Am I actually awful at it? Am I awful at all aspects of it? Is there an element of public speaking that I’m not giving myself credit for? Are there elements that I can work to improve? How can I gain realistic feedback as to my skill level? What can I do to improve those skills?

By getting curious about their thought patterns (and the truth or not thereof), students are able to get specific about their fears, anxiety, discomfort, etc. This type of thinking can also help foster a Growth Mindset³ in which a person believes that effort makes leads to improvements in strength, intelligence, skills, etc. By looking for ways they can improve, students set themselves up for growth and development.

Coping with Speech Anxiety

Abdominal Breathing⁴

Deep abdominal breathing helps to slow one’s heartbeat and stabilize blood pressure. Proper technique is important in order to maximize one’s benefits.

Lying Down

While lying on your back with your feet flat on the floor (semi-supine position), place your hands on or near your belly button. Begin by simply observing the breath with no desire to change, control, or manipulate it. Does your chest move when you breathe in? Does your belly button move? Maybe both? Try allowing your breath to come in through your nose and out through your mouth. After observing your breath for a few minutes, allow your belly button to expand upwards (away from your spine) when you breathe in. You may need to deliberately expand your belly button several times. If it feels a little uncomfortable, that’s normal—most people breathe into their chest instead of their abdomen, so the muscles need time and practice in order to adjust. Continue practicing for several minutes. When you’re finished, take your time when getting up. You may feel light-headed or dizzy from the extra oxygen.

² Kabat-Zinn, Jon, et al. “Jon Kabat-Zinn: Defining Mindfulness.” *Mindful*, 11 Jan. 2019, <https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/>.

³ Dweck, Carol. “The Growth Mindset - What Is Growth Mindset.” *The Growth Mindset - What Is Growth Mindset - Mindset Works*, Mindset Works, <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/>.

⁴ JeddahBeautyBlog. “The Benefits of Deep Breathing.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 4 Apr. 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNUV9pPcfto&t=4s>.

Sitting

Sit comfortably in a chair. Allow your spine and head to lengthen upwards into a position that is tall but relaxed (a stiff spine will hinder abdominal breathing). Place your hands on or near your belly button. Repeat the same sequence as when lying down. Begin by simply observing the breath with no desire to change, control, or manipulate it. Does your chest move when you breathe in? Does your belly button move? Maybe both? Is it different than when you were lying down? After observing your breath for a few minutes, allow your belly button to expand away from your spine when you breathe in. Again, you may need to deliberately expand your belly button several times. Continue practicing for several minutes. Once again, use caution when standing up in case of light-headedness.

Standing

Stand with your feet placed directly below your hip bones. Allow your knees to unlock. Allow your shoulders and neck to relax. Unclench your jaw. Repeat the same sequence of observation and practice as before. Begin by simply observing the breath with no desire to change, control, or manipulate it. Does your chest move when you breathe in? Does your belly button move? Maybe both? Is it different than when you were lying down and sitting? After observing your breath for a few minutes, allow your belly button to expand away from your spine when you breathe in. Again, you may need to deliberately expand your belly button several times. Continue practicing for several minutes. Due to increased oxygen intake, it's normal to feel slightly light-headed. If so, place one hand about 8-12 inches from your face with your palm facing you. Find an intersection of two lines on your palm and focus your eyes there. If you continue to feel light-headed, pant like a dog for one minute. If you feel like you may fall or lose your balance at any point, kneel on one knee or sit in a chair until the feeling passes.

Relaxation Techniques

*Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)*⁵

PMR is a technique to help relax major muscle groups and joints while practicing abdominal breathing. It involves breathing in while tensing a group of muscles, then relaxing the group while breathing out. For example, as you breathe in, tense your toes; as you breathe out, relax your toes. Allow them to remain relaxed while you breathe in and out two more times. Next, breathe in as you tense your whole foot; as you breathe out, relax your foot and allow it to remain relaxed for two more breaths. Repeat this sequence throughout the body, working your way from your toes to your scalp. More detailed instructions are included in the footnote.

Pre-speech Checklist

This checklist focuses on relaxing common points of tension and realigning the body into a comfortable, confident posture. Follow the checklist below to “drop in” to your body before speeches or any other stressful event.

- ✓ Feet—place feet under hips, with your weight balanced between the balls of your feet and your heels.
- ✓ Knees—should be unlocked. If you are habitually locking your knees, shift your weight from 50% on balls of feet/50% on heels to 60% on balls of feet/40% on heels. This balance naturally discourages people from locking their knees.
- ✓ Buttocks—if our knees are locked, our glutes are almost always clenched. Yes, it usually makes people giggle when it's brought up, but it's a common habit, especially when people are anxious.
- ✓ Abdomen—letting go of the muscular “corset” we create when we suck in our gut allows us to breathe into our abdomen more fully. Place your hands on or near your belly button, relax your abdominal muscles, then jiggle

⁵ Healthwise Staff. “Stress Management: Doing Progressive Muscle Relaxation.” Stress Management: Doing Progressive Muscle Relaxation | Michigan Medicine, <https://www.uofmhealth.org/health-library/uz2225>.

your belly like Santa's belly; "like a bowl full of jelly" (*The Night Before Christmas*). You can also give a hearty "ho ho ho" as you exhale.

- ✓ Shoulders—do shoulder circles to work out the "snap, crackle, and pops" in your shoulders, then raise & drop your shoulders, allowing them to literally "fall into place"
- ✓ Neck--chin should be parallel to the floor, the back of the neck should be long and relaxed. To really relax the neck, gently stretch your right ear towards your right shoulder, then slowly roll your chin towards your chest. From there, continue slowly rolling your left ear towards your left shoulder. Repeat back and forth two more times while breathing slowly and deeply.
- ✓ Jaw—teeth should remain unclenched, with the tongue resting in the bottom of your jaw

Setting Realistic Expectations

Best Case, Worst Case, Most Likely Scenario

This exercise helps to set realistic expectations and identify actionable fears. It also gives the speaker room to laugh and find a bit of fun during the preparation process. You simply ask three questions:

- What could go wrong?
- What could go well?
- What's most likely to happen?

Begin small with each answer. Perhaps I could forget my notes, or my Powerpoint won't work. Gradually let the worst case scenarios get bigger (and less realistic). Maybe I'll trip as I walk up to the podium and twist my ankle. Maybe the fire alarm and sprinkler system will go off during my speech and ruin my speech and my laptop. This is another technique for identifying actionable fears and diminishing the power of other fears.

Repeat this with the best case scenario. Maybe my speech will go smoothly. Maybe I'll get a standing ovation. Perhaps my speech will be so ground-breaking that the professor will excuse me from class for the rest of the semester with an A because I demonstrated such mastery of the subject! This makes space for laughter and fun within a process that is often fraught with stress. It relieves stress and anxiety while encouraging the use of visualization of success.

Finally, re-ground yourself in reality by exploring the most likely scenario. I'll probably trip over my words at some point, or I might switch to the wrong slide, but overall, the speech will be successful. This creates realistic expectations and discourages perfectionism (which always leads to disappointment).

Rehearsal

Although the popular saying is "practice makes perfect," the truth is that **proper** practice makes perfect. To encourage effective rehearsal techniques and to help foster a growth mindset, students can use the "Hey Listen to This" exercise, created by Janet Rodgers. In this exercise, students literally ask a peer, "hey, can you listen to this?" and rehearse their speech with a peer. They also video record themselves while practicing. This exercise accomplishes several objectives. It helps students ask for effective, actionable feedback. It teaches students how to incorporate feedback. It also increases confidence in their final presentation. The full assignment is included with this packet.

Hey Listen to This

This is an exercise in gathering feedback and applying it to your presentation.

- Peer: You will ask a peer (classmate, friend, roommate, etc.), or multiple peers, to listen to your presentation, and ask for feedback; things you did well in addition to things you can improve upon. Take notes about their feedback, asking for clarification if necessary. If something was effective, ask them why. If something was ineffective or distracting, ask them why it was ineffective or how it was distracting. Practice your speech, incorporating their feedback, and ask the same peer(s) to listen again (at least two days later so you have time to practice), comparing their feedback from both times.
- Self: You will record yourself performing your presentation (video). Go back and watch to it multiple times (yes, you will think you sound weird; yes, you will get used to it if you listen to yourself enough). Take notes about things you are doing well, and things you can improve upon. Practice your text (again, for at least two days) incorporating your own notes. Record yourself again, noting any growth (or backslides) in the performance.

Once you have gathered feedback from both sources and incorporated it into your performance, write up a summary of the feedback given and its effect on your rehearsal process and performance. Respond to the following questions:

- ✓ What were your biggest strengths in your original performance of the text (peer and self)?
- ✓ What were your biggest opportunities for growth in your original performance of the text (peer and self)?
- ✓ When you performed your text a second time, what aspects of it improved (peer and self)? How did you improve them?
- ✓ When you performed your text a second time, did any aspects of it backslide (peer and self)? If so, why, and how can you improve it?
- ✓ How did your peers' feedback differ from your self-feedback? If you practiced with multiple peers, did individual feedback differ? For example, did one source think you were too active, while another thought you weren't active enough? Why might account for this discrepancy?