

Conquering Stage Fright: Get the Butterflies to Fly in Formation

By Kathy Kerchner, Media & Speaking Expert
InterSpeak, LLC
www.MasterYourMessage.com

If public speaking scares you, you're not alone. Even successful celebrities get stage fright. Some of those alleged to have suffered from this affliction include Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Carol Burnett, Johnny Carson, Erma Bombeck, Laurence Olivier, and Barbra Streisand. Just like them, you may never get rid of the fear, but you can learn to control it.

Stage fright is a normal human response to stress. It's part of the fight-or-flight syndrome. This pumping adrenaline can actually help your presentation. The nervous energy can make you give a more animated and enthusiastic performance. Being a little on edge can help you focus on your talk.

Once you can understand and accept that you'll naturally be nervous about speaking, you can begin acting on your fear.

Prepare

The better prepared you are the more confident you'll be as you face the audience. Plan and practice your entire presentation several times. Find out beforehand as much as you can about the audience and the environment you'll be speaking in.

While I don't suggest memorizing an entire presentation, having a very clear idea of how you're going to open the speech will get you through the beginning, usually the scariest part for most people.

Visualize Success

A teacher says to his student: "Think positive." The student responds: "I am. I'm positive I'm going to fail. It's an old joke, but it shows how negative reactions to stress begin in the mind. They can also be stopped there. Begin by visualizing your success. Imagine yourself giving a smooth, confident performance. Your gestures, body language and voice are powerful. The audience hangs on your every word as you deliver pearls of wisdom.

While you're visualizing your success, you also have to stop the self-defeating self-talk. Some experts estimate that 80 to 90 percent of what that little voice in our head tells us is negative: "You're not good enough; the audience knows more than you do; you're going to screw up." And on and on and on.

Arrive Early

Much of the stress you feel is often fear of the unknown. Is the room set up right? Did they give me the correct AV equipment? Will anyone show up? Getting to the location early helps relieve most of those questions and gives you time to fix any problems. You can also begin building rapport and making friends with audience members as they arrive.

Physical Solutions

Breathing is one of the oldest and best techniques for relieving stress. When we're nervous we tend to breathe more shallow chest breaths—or we stop breathing altogether. Make yourself take deep diaphragm breaths before and during the presentation to get plenty of oxygen to the brain.

Stretching helps relieve muscle tension quickly. Do some head rolls, arm lifts and other stretches in the restroom to relax before you speak.

Keep Speaking

Usually, people who are nervous about speaking want to avoid presentations at all costs. But that only makes things worse. The skills used in speaking are like muscles—the more you work them, the stronger they get. If you don't use them they weaken and atrophy. Once we face our fear, we realize that we imagined the situation to be worse than it really is. As the character "Haw" realized in the book *Who Moved My Cheese*, once you move beyond your fear you feel free.

Media Expert Kathy Kerchner's depth of experience includes 15 years as an award-winning news anchor and reporter and more than 15 years as a media advisor to international corporations, associations, government agencies, banking institutions, and other organizations. She has coached CEOs of Fortune 500 companies to perform better during analyst calls and media interviews, has helped executives win new business using masterful presentations, and has trained managers at global companies to talk to their employees about sensitive issues.

Contact Kathy Kerchner at www.MasterYourMessage.com.

