

To Overcome Your Fear of Public Speaking, Stop Thinking About Yourself

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Most of us — even those at the top — struggle with public-speaking anxiety. When I ask my clients what makes them nervous, invariably they respond with the same answers:

“I don’t like being watched.”

“I don’t like the eyes on me.”

“I don’t like being in the spotlight.”

And it follows that when they get up to speak, nearly all of them initially avoid making eye contact with members of the audience. Therein lies the problem: While avoiding direct eye contact may seem like an effective strategy for coping with speaking anxiety, it actually makes you even more nervous.

To understand why, we need to go way back to prehistoric times, when humans perceived eyes watching us as an existential threat. Those eyes were likely predators. People were literally terrified of being eaten alive. In response to that prehistoric reality, the amygdala, the part of our brain that helps us respond to danger, kicked into full gear. And when our fight-or-flight response gets triggered, we understandably feel intense stress and anxiety. What does this have to do with public speaking? Turns out, everything.

Here’s the bad news: Our brains have transferred that ancient fear of being watched onto public speaking. In other words, public-speaking anxiety is in our DNA. We experience public speaking as an attack. We physiologically register an audience as a threatening predator and mount a comparable response. Many people’s physical responses while speaking resemble how their body would react to physical signs of danger (shortness of breath, redness of face, shaking).

So today when we speak in front of a group and feel the eyes watching us, we feel painfully visible, like a caveman exposed in daylight. And because our brain is telling us that we are under attack, we do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves. We construct walls between ourselves and the source of danger — in this case, the audience — to repel the attack and blunt any danger.

What do these walls look like? We focus on our slides. We look down. We retreat into our notes. In the process, we disregard the people in front of us, wishing them into invisibility. Even the most confident speakers find ways to distance themselves from their audience.

It's just how we're programmed.

Fortunately, there is a solution: human generosity. The key to calming the amygdala and disarming our organic panic button is to turn the focus away from ourselves — away from whether we will mess up or whether the audience will like us — and toward helping the audience.

Studies have shown that an increase in generosity leads to a decrease in amygdala activity. Showing kindness and generosity to others has been shown to activate the vagus nerve, which has the power to calm the fight-or-flight response. When we are kind to others, we feel calmer and less stressed. The same principle applies in public speaking. When we approach speaking with a spirit of generosity, we counteract the sensation of being under attack and start to feel less nervous.

Admittedly, this is hard to do. As a speech coach, I often find that my clients who are the most generous in work and life have the hardest time speaking in public, because their brain is telling them, “Now is not the time to give. It's time to *run!*” But it's absolutely possible to become a generous speaker. Start with these three steps:

1. When you're preparing, think about your audience.

When we start preparing for a presentation, the mistake we all make is starting with the topic. This immediately gets us inside the details — and makes it harder to break down the wall between us and others. Instead, start with the audience. Before diving into the information, ask yourself: Who will be in the room? Why are they there? What do they need? Be specific in your answers. Identify the audience's needs, both spoken and unspoken, and craft a message that speaks directly to those needs.

2. Right before you speak, refocus your brain.

You are the most nervous right before you speak. This is the moment where your brain is telling you, “Everyone is judging me. What if I fail?” And it is exactly at this moment that you can refocus your brain. Remind yourself that you are here to help your audience. Be firm with your brain. Tell yourself, “Brain, this presentation is not about me. It is about helping my audience.” Over time (usually between four and six presentations), your brain will begin to get it, and you will become less nervous.

3. While you're speaking, make eye contact.

One of the biggest mistakes we make is speaking to people as a group. We scan the room — trying to look everyone at once — and end up connecting with nobody.

In reality, each person in the room is listening to you as an individual. And so the best way to connect to your audience is by speaking to them as individuals. How? By making sustained eye contact with one person per thought. (Each thought is about one full clause.) By focusing at one person at a time, you make each person in the room feel like you are talking just to them.

This is hard. We are accustomed to scanning the room. Making direct eye contact can feel uncomfortable at first. Yet, as you practice it more, it will actually make you less nervous. It is far easier (and more effective) to have a series of one-on-one conversations than it is to speak to everyone at once. When my clients use this technique more than three consecutive times, they almost always report a decrease in speaking anxiety. (Note that the most important people to look at are those who are at the far edges of the room. These are the people who are already at a disadvantage. By being extra generous to those at the edges of the room, you bring everyone in.)

We know the power of generosity to give us a sense of fulfillment, purpose, and meaning. Generosity is just as powerful in speaking. It turns a nerve-wracking and even painful experience into one of giving and helping others. A generous speaker is calmer, more relaxed, and — most important — more effective at reaching the audience and making the desired impact.