

# Managing Speech Anxiety

*By Donn King*

This article is adapted from a chapter of *Responsibly Spoken*, a textbook I co-authored with Don Thomas and Vic Blocher. I hope you will find it useful to you in taking whatever speech anxiety you might have and harnessing it to help you achieve your purposes in communicating. You have a message—share it and change the world!

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# Managing Speech Anxiety

Your palms are sweating, your pulse is racing, your knees are shaking. Are you going to your first job interview? Are you coming down with a serious illness? No, you are experiencing a physical and emotional reaction to talking before a group of people.

You're experiencing speech fright—a normal response, a fear often felt by even the most knowledgeable and experienced speakers.

Speech fright, the fear of speaking before a group, is common to almost everyone. To some extent, we all feel uncomfortable standing while others are sitting, being stared at, and being “judged” by other people. A poll conducted for the National Communication Association found that only 24 percent of Americans are “very comfortable” giving a speech, and only 34 percent are “very comfortable” speaking up at a meeting.

While you may never be able to overcome this nervousness, you can learn to change some of the feelings of dread into feelings of anticipation and even excitement. In other words, you can learn to harness the energy.

We don't really want to get rid of it.

You have something important to say. Assume your audience knows that and is eager to listen to you and to learn something from you. Most likely you have been asked to make this talk, so your audience is looking forward to your presentation. Even if you have sought this opportunity to present information or ideas, your audience will appreciate your efforts, will respect your knowledge, and will be supportive of you.

## Fight-or-Flight Syndrome

Many thousands of years ago our early ancestors roamed the earth fighting for their lives every day. When they awakened in the morning, they had to kill or be killed by the very beasts that might become their dinner. Emotionally and physically our ancestors had to rise to the occasion. Psychologists identify this response as the “fight-or-flight response.”

The fight-or-flight syndrome is not merely a mental state, but evokes an increase in blood pressure and respiration and the secretion of the endocrine system, especially the adrenal glands. When your brain registers a threat, at once adrenaline blasts into the blood stream.

At the same moment, a trigger shoots glycogen (a special form of blood sugar) from the liver into the blood stream. When these powerful secretions reach the heart, it starts pounding. When they hit the respiratory center in the brain, the victim starts to gasp. When these hormones hit the blood vessels going to the brain, they contract and wooziness occurs.

Less obvious effects are even more profound. Blood is drawn away from the internal organs and transferred to the large outer muscles—arms, legs, etc.—and as a result the digestive process is slowed down or stopped altogether. The blood clots more easily. Muscles become tense all through the body, and tense throat muscles tend to produce a harsh and constricted voice. Salivary glands stop secreting, the mouth becomes dry, and the tongue feels thick. In contrast,

the sweat glands increase secretion until beads of perspiration stand on the forehead and the skin becomes moist. Breathing, of course, is difficult and short and jerky.

These reactions had value in terms of helping humans cope with physical danger. You were prepared to either fight or run. The problem for speakers is two-fold: the part of your brain that takes care of the perception of danger works prior to the reasoning part.

For survival, that makes a lot of sense. Your reasoning abilities are powerful, but they don't work quickly enough to respond to actual danger. By the time you reasoned out a response, you would be dead.

For speaking, though, this causes a problem. You can reason to yourself all you want that you shouldn't be afraid. It's too late. If your brain has perceived danger, it will kick in the fight-or-flight response. All of this takes place in a very short time in the body of one afflicted by speech fright in its extreme form.

In most speech situations you cannot do what your body is most prepared to do. It's generally considered bad form to run. It's very bad form to punch audience members. The result can be similar to sitting at a traffic light with your foot on the brake and the accelerator at the same time. Of course you're going to shake!

In milder forms, the body undergoes fewer changes, and the person feels "queasy," has faint disagreeable sensations, or is simply keyed up and tense.

Speech fright evokes in all speakers the fight-or-flight syndrome to some extent.

A biographer observed at George Washington's first inaugural that he was so "visibly perturbed that his hands trembled and his voice shook so that he could scarcely be understood."

Abraham Lincoln suffered from speech fright all his life. When he rose to speak, he "froze in his tracks and he had a far away prophetic look in his eyes."

Even Cicero, a great orator who lived in the century before Christ, experienced speech fright and left a record of his inner struggle in the words of Crassus: "I turn pale at the outset of a speech, and quake in every limb and in all my soul."

It was said of Nathaniel Hawthorne that he was drenched in cold perspiration at the very thought of speaking at a banquet.

John Dryden described his sensations: "Whenever I speak a cold sweat trickles down all over my limbs as if I were dissolving in water."

Remember that there is nothing weird, unnatural, or abnormal about being afraid to speak before others. Speech fright is the manifestation of your inner emotions and feelings. It is the body's way of preparing you emotionally and physically for a higher level of performance. Athletes call this response "the butterflies."

## **Dealing with Speech fright**

Under the pressure of giving a speech you may not be able to remember a lot of specific things to do to assuage speech fright. However, you can probably remember a few specific things, and you can remember the underlying principles of dealing with it.

We want to do two basic things: stop the build-up of the adrenaline and other fight-or-flight chemicals, and deal with the adrenaline that is already present.

## **Build-up**

For most people it's not the adrenaline that's the problem, but rather the vicious cycle of adrenaline build-up. It generally works like this:

As you stand up to give your speech, you feel uncomfortable and vaguely threatened, so your body responds by shooting some adrenaline into your bloodstream to prepare you to fight or run. You do neither, but you have all that excess energy which causes your hands and knees to shake a bit. Because you can feel the shaking, you assume the audience can see it, although they really can't. "They know I'm scared," you think to yourself, which makes you feel more threatened, which shoots more adrenaline into your blood, which makes you shake more, which makes you feel more exposed, which makes you feel more threatened, which . . . .

You can see the problem. Some of our techniques, then, simply interrupt this vicious cycle.

Once you've interrupted the cycle, though, you still have to deal with the adrenaline that is already in your blood. You certainly need a positive mental attitude to succeed as a speaker, and PMA helps stop the cycle, but PMA alone won't make the adrenaline go away.

If you've ever had too much to drink, and then (for whatever reason) suddenly needed to be sober, you know that just thinking about it doesn't make it so. The alcohol is in your blood, and it will metabolize at its own rate, regardless of your wishes.

Drinking coffee won't get someone sober—you'll just have a wide-awake drunk on your hands.

Fortunately, adrenaline (and the related stress chemicals) is designed to be used by your body. You can, therefore, affect the rate of absorption and channel how it is used. Some of our techniques enable you to either "burn off" or harness the energy supply that adrenaline represents.

Speech fright is the body's way of preparing you emotionally and physically for a higher level of performance.

## **Warm Your Hands**

In the fight-or-flight response the blood supply is drawn away from the smaller blood vessels, muscles, and bone structure. As a result the blood supply leaves the feet and hands and travels to the brain, heart, and other major organs and muscles. This response prepares an individual for the exerting/stressful occasion at hand.

Those experiencing the flight-or-flight syndrome usually have cool or cold hands and feet. Hence, we have coined the term "cold feet." Researchers have found that warming the hands significantly diminishes the fight-or-flight

response, thus helping the speaker to induce self-relaxation techniques which reduce speech fright. This interrupts the build-up cycle, and allows you to metabolize excess adrenaline.

Here are some ways to warm your hands:

- Sit on your hands.
- Rub your cold hands together briskly.
- Fold your arms in front and under each other.
- Deeply breathe into your cupped hands.

## **Know Your Subject Matter**

Knowing your subject matter and focusing on your research findings help in the relaxation process. For example, invariably when a speaker gets emotionally involved in the actual presentation of the speech regarding such topics as abortion, the death penalty, or religion or politics, all or some of the speech fright symptoms sail out the window.

This fits with a bumper-sticker-philosophy summary of this principle: “What you focus on, you get more of.” If you focus on speech fright, it will increase. Focus on your message. When you focus on your message, you don’t focus on yourself, and you get more familiarity with the message.

Center concentration on the message and the research—and not on the speech fright or nervousness.

Joe still lived with his mom. One day Joe was cooking pancakes for breakfast. He really liked pancakes, got distracted by the wonderful smell as they cooked up on the griddle, and in his distraction reached for the unprotected handle of the cast iron griddle. He burned his hand and screamed out in pain. “Mom, Mom, I burnt my hand cooking these pancakes!” he cried. His mom came over to the stove, grabbed a frying pan and bashed Joe over the head with it! As Joe came to his senses, he asked his mom, “Why did you bash me with that skillet?” She said, “You forgot about your burnt hands, didn’t you?”

## **Focus on What You Want**

Many speakers focus on the very thing they want to get rid of. Your mind cannot really think in negative terms, however. Try this: don’t think about a pink elephant. Don’t think about it! Get that pink elephant out of your head!

If you just focus on not thinking about a pink elephant, can you think about anything else?

If you want to be rid of the pink elephant, think about a green monkey instead.

In the same way, if you are thinking, “Don’t be scared, don’t be scared,” you’re just thinking about being scared. What you focus on you get more of. Is that what you want? When you as a speaker truly focus your attention on the issue or task at hand, speech fright symptoms will be forgotten or diminished appreciably.

Does it sound easier already? It should, because speaking before a group is seldom as stressful as you think it is going to be, especially once you start talking.

Audiences really do “pull” for speakers and want them to do well. Once you see the friendly faces of the group turned toward you, your smiles returned by the audience, and their nods indicating support, agreement, or understanding, most likely you will automatically relax a bit and may even enjoy the experience.

If you are one of the few speakers whose speech fright does not diminish as you progress through your talk, you can learn to deal with the discomfort at whatever stage the speech fright is most intense.

## **Have a Conversation**

In fact, an easy technique that helps both your delivery and your speech fright is to pick out three or four (in a wider or fan-shaped audience, pick out five or six) people who are actively engaged with you (that is, they’re looking back, smiling, nodding) and have a conversation with them. The others are welcome to eavesdrop.

When you’re sitting in the school or company cafeteria having a conversation, other friends drift up and you naturally include them in the conversation. You will also include other audience members, but you can start with those few.

Susan Jeffers, in her book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, says she uses this technique quite often. She has learned to think of audiences as “friends I haven’t met yet,” which changes her whole approach.

You may wonder: if speech fright is common even to experienced speakers, how is it that they rid themselves of these symptoms? Professional speakers have simply learned to deal with speech fright and to channel its energy into an enthusiastic, confident delivery.

If you don’t think of it as something to get rid of, but rather as something you actually want to cultivate (like being up for a basketball game), it doesn’t feel bad.

Many people pay good money to engage in such things as attending scary movies, riding roller coasters, going bungee jumping, driving race cars and other activities for the thrill associated with “getting the adrenaline pumping.” You can speak for free! In fact, other people will pay you to do it!

Realistically, you can hope to alleviate your symptoms of speech fright during the next few weeks by:

1. Identifying your feelings and symptoms.
2. Realizing that nearly all speakers experience the same feelings.
3. Learning ways to cope with your individual symptoms by participating in several “desensitizing activities.”
4. Practicing the delivery of several types of speeches in the mirror and utilizing a tape recorder.
5. Choosing an interesting subject.
6. Mastering your subject thoroughly.
7. Thinking about your audience and your subject, not about yourself.
8. Using some physical action while you speak.

9. Remembering that some nervous tension is necessary for good public speaking.
10. Speaking at every opportunity.
11. Thinking of your audience as individuals, not as a mass.
12. Developing a positive mental attitude (PMA).
13. Warming your hands before the speech.
14. Faking it until you make it.
15. Using humor.
16. Smiling.
17. Breathing deeply (breathe in slowly for 15 seconds; breathe out slowly for 15 seconds).

You as a speaker must rid your mind of the mistaken notion that your listeners will get a good warm feeling out of seeing you embarrassed or ill at ease.

As Dr. Batsell Barrett Baxter pointed out several years ago, you can do a great deal to substitute confidence for fear by acting as if you feel confident. You can change depression into exhilaration by throwing back your shoulders, standing erect and speaking in a strong and pleasant voice. You really are happier when you are smiling than when you are frowning. Physiologists have long maintained that it takes more energy to frown than to smile.

More recent body-mind studies show that your consciously-chosen physiology drives your feelings as much as your feelings drive your body language. In other words, if you act confident, you will actually *feel* more confident.

The governess in *The King and I* uttered a profound truth when she said that she whistled when she was afraid, and that by doing so she not only fooled others, but—even more importantly—she fooled herself as well.

You're not covering up your fear; you are transforming it into delivery energy. *That's* something you have control over.