Speech Anxiety

Inquire: Speech Anxiety and You

Overview

Public speaking can be scary, but it’s not impossible. This lesson will teach you the ins and outs of speech anxiety, as well the importance of coping, and how to cope with the fear of public speaking. You can’t get out of public presentations in your life. And you likely can’t get out of feeling anxious about them if you experience speech anxiety. What you can do is learn simple things that will help you move past it and succeed in spite of your hesitations.

Big Question: When you get anxious about public speaking, how do you react?

Watch: Speech Anxiety in Action

Let’s imagine Jane has a presentation for work. Jane hates public speaking. Let’s watch as Jane tries to overcome it.

Jane realizes that the first thing she should do is think of how her anxiety appears. She usually gets very sweaty. She also gets shaky and can’t stop fidgeting. Finally, she remembers that she can get pretty dizzy because her heart starts beating very quickly.

Because she knows how her anxiety presents, she decides to do something about it. First, she gets her presentation in order and begins to practice. She practices in her bathroom mirror and with her cat. As she continues to practice, she begins to think of ways to combat her physical symptoms. She chooses a black dress for the day of the presentation that is nice and light. This stops her from getting too hot and also stops her sweat stains from showing if things get too bad. When she practices her speech, she makes sure to clasp her hands together behind her back so people can’t see her fidgeting with her hands. She also practices deep breathing so she can get her heart rate under control.

Lastly, Jane tells herself every day that she will do awesome when she presents. The more often she does this, the better she feels about the presentation.

On presentation day, Jane does very well. There are two things she wishes she had done better, but rather than letting them get her down, she makes a note for the next time she presents so she can practice avoiding those issues.

Speech anxiety might be something Jane never completely overcomes, but as she practices dealing with it more and more, she is confident it won’t get the better of her.
Read: Coping with Speech Anxiety

Overview

Speech anxiety is something many people face. Some studies say Americans fear public speaking more than they fear death. But, in order to properly deal with it, we need to first know what it is. This lesson will cover speech anxiety, how to cope with it, practical ways to reduce anxiety, and ways you can help others cope as well.

What is Speech Anxiety?

Speech anxiety is the nervous feeling many people feel when they engage in public speaking. This anxiety can present in many ways. It could be shortness of breath for some, or increased sweat, or a faster heartbeat. Some people pass out or vomit, or they convince themselves they will fail. All of these symptoms are worst case scenario, but with some clever preparation, you can overcome them.

Speech anxiety isn’t always physical. It can be a mental manifestation where you set yourself up to fail, and then actually fail, only to justify your assumption because you failed. This cycle of psyching yourself out, failing, and reinforcing your failure is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy. These prophecies can be one of the most dangerous kinds of speech anxiety because we do it to ourselves without realizing it. Many people can identify the physical symptoms, but this mental block isn’t something many people readily self-diagnose.

Coping Not Conquering

Something to keep in mind when dealing with speech anxiety is that it isn’t something that will ever go away. It isn’t something you can solve or conquer. Rather, you need to come up with a strategy to help you overcome the feelings when they start to manifest. Coping is finding effective ways to deal with difficult problems. Every time you do it, it becomes easier as you recognize how it helps. Like anything, it takes practice to make the solution that works for you work.

It’s also important to know that not every solution will work for every person. Sometimes, you will need to try multiple things. Maybe that means failing once or twice. But, that failing isn’t actually failing. It is just succeeding in finding something that doesn’t work. Coping with anxiety is all about your mentality, so by focusing on the positives and finding things that work for you, you will be able to overcome that anxiety little by little each time, until it becomes easier to get past.

Ways to Reduce Speech Anxiety

There are a few practical steps you can take to overcome speech anxiety: practice, prepare, take care of yourself, and practice.

Practicing is something not many people want to do, but it is the best way to avoid anxiety. If you are comfortable with what you have to say, it becomes easier to focus on the thing you aren’t comfortable with: speaking in public. The first way you should practice is by presenting to yourself in a mirror. It lets you see your face and familiarize yourself with the material. Then you should practice with a friend, or even a pet: someone who will support you and won't make you self-conscious about the presentation. Then, you should escalate your practice to include a few more people so you are comfortable in front of a
crowd. Each time you practice, you should perform exactly like you’ll have to for the presentation itself, so stand up and be formal. Don’t practice bad habits, or you will perform bad habits.

Once you’ve practiced, it’s time to prepare. This requires a bit of self-reflection as you figure out how your nerves present themselves. If you sweat a lot, prepare by choosing clothing that won’t show signs of sweating and getting a good deodorant. If you breathe quickly, practice deep breathing. Whatever your nerves do to you, just come up with simple, practical steps to getting past them.

Taking care of yourself is also important in overcoming anxiety. If you feel better, you perform better, so you can overcome your nerves more easily. This means you should get a good night’s sleep before your presentation. Eat a solid meal before the presentation. Avoid large amounts of sugar and caffeine so you aren’t jittery. Make sure to give yourself all of the needed ingredients to ensure your body can regulate itself properly.

Finally, practice. It really is the most important part. Finding time to practice can make all the difference in how well you present. It isn’t something many people think to do, or know how to do well, but it can be the difference between a good presentation and a disaster. Find the practice routine that works best for you, and stick with it.

Helping Others Cope with Their Fear

Many people deal with speech anxiety when it comes time to present information. If you experience speech anxiety, you are not the only one. That means you aren’t alone in handling these problems. One of the best ways to help others cope with their fear is by being a good audience member. Be engaged, pay attention, and be reaffirming of the speaker. Just think how you would want members of the audience to act if you were speaking, and be that audience member for the speaker. You can also help others by talking them through the tips in this lesson! These practical solutions work best with an accountability system, so talk with others and help each other out.

Reflect Poll: Practice Makes Perfect

What ways have you practiced for a presentation in the past?

- In the mirror
- Video recording of yourself
- With friends
- No practice

Expand: Positive Mentality

Overview

Since your mindset has such a large impact on how you perform, it is important to have a positive mentality about presenting. This section will give you some insight into how to get positive, stay positive, and use that positivity to your benefit.

Power of Positivity

Not everyone feels great about public speaking. If that’s you, that’s okay! The easiest way to get positive about public speaking is to fake it until you make it. Don’t talk about presentations as if they are
doom-and-gloom situations. Don’t tell yourself or others that it will be hard or bad. Talk about it going well. Talk about it being something you will accomplish easily, and it will become easier to actually follow through. Don’t set yourself up for failure; set yourself up for success!

Once you have a positive mindset, it’s important to keep it. One of the best ways to do so is by using the self-fulfilling prophecy for good. Tell yourself you’ll do an awesome job. That way, when you do something well, you pick up on it and use that to do even better. If you tell yourself you are doing something well, you are more likely to actually do it well and continue doing it well. Your brain has a powerful effect on your body, so use it to your benefit rather than your detriment.

Finally, learn from mistakes; don’t dwell on them. It is inevitable that you make a mistake when it comes time to present. Maybe you skip a section, flub a joke, or forget what comes next. Guess what, it doesn’t matter! Everyone makes mistakes so when one happens, don’t beat yourself up, but rather make a mental list of what happened that you want to improve on. Then, come up with ways to improve. Using past presentations as a launching pad to practice your future presentations is a smart way to improve on areas you have noticed need improvement. Don’t be discouraged by mistakes. They happen. Dust yourself off, learn from what went wrong, and tell yourself you will do better next time.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A TED talk offering ways to improve your confidence and overcome nerves
- Link to resource: https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en

An article providing tips on how to cope with speech anxiety

An article providing ways to overcome a fear of public speaking

Lesson Glossary

- **speech anxiety**: the nervous feeling many people feel when they engage in public speaking
- **self-fulfilling prophecy**: a cycle of psyching yourself out, failing, and reinforcing your failure
- **coping**: finding effective ways to deal with difficult problems

Check Your Knowledge

1. Practicing is the best way to cope with speech anxiety.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Speech anxiety is a common problem.
   a. True
   b. False
3. There is nothing you can do about speech anxiety.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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