

Academic Success Centre

Presentation Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural part of presenting. In small amounts it can help the presenter focus and make presenting exciting. At times, a slightly anxious speaker can give the audience a sense of honesty and integrity. However, in large amounts, anxiety can be debilitating.

To deal with presentation anxiety, sometimes it is necessary to identify the sources of anxiety:

New to public speaking—for someone who is new to public speaking, presenting in front of an audience can be quite nerve-wracking. However, with appropriate preparation and a few simple strategies, these first presentations can become potent learning experiences.

General stress causing presentation anxiety—this type of anxiety is not directly connected with public speaking. In this case stress from other parts of one's life manifest as anxiety associated with presenting. This type of stress is can be detected when a person sometimes feels anxiety related to public speaking but not in every instance. A stress management routine (e.g., yoga, counseling) can help with this sporadic anxiety.

Anxiety related to a specific public speaking event—sometimes a person who is comfortable with public speaking will become anxious regarding a specific presentation, possibly because the outcome is important or the format of the presentation is new. Research, preparation, and practice can help build confidence. Reviewing the long-term importance of the event in a dispassionate manner can also help to reduce the pressure associated with the event.

Fear of public speaking (glossophobia)—if a person has a genuine phobia of public speaking, the strategies identified in this document may not be sufficient. Talking with a counselor is a first step towards getting the necessary support for dealing with this phobia.

Beliefs and attitudes that affect anxiety:

There are attitudes and beliefs that can contribute to presentation anxiety: perfectionism, developmental beliefs, and competitiveness. Once challenged, these beliefs can give way to more productive approaches to presenting.

Perfectionism—some people avoid failure at a great personal cost, continuously striving for perfection. This attitude places a great deal of pressure on the individual—pressure that can be counterproductive. Presenting is a learning process, and failure is a natural and inevitable part of the process. Perfectionism also does not mesh well with presenting because there is no single right or wrong way to present on a topic.

Intrinsic Ability—some people believe that their abilities are intrinsic. Thus, they do not perceive presentation ability as a measure of exposure, practice, and development. Instead, they believe it is an inborn ability; therefore, success and failure are inevitable, uncontrollable outcomes. This belief denies the learned aspects of presenting.

Competitiveness—some people want to be perceived as better at a task by their peers or instructors. This need to excel can result in the person avoiding situations in which they may not be the most successful, avoiding opportunities to develop new skills.

Strategies for dealing with presentation stress:

Present Regularly—one of the most effective ways to reduce presentation anxiety is to present on a regular basis. With repeated exposure, a person can become desensitized to the stress associated with presenting.

Re-evaluate your perceptions of public speaking—although having the attention of many people can be unnerving, it can also be exhilarating. Try to enjoy the attention.

Look at individuals in the audience before beginning—this activity can prevent the perception that the audience is larger than it is.

Move while speaking—moving around the presentation area can help keep muscles loose, burns off nervous energy, and hides the physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., shaky hands) from the audience.

Humor—many presenters start a presentation with a component of humor; the resulting smiles can make an audience seem friendlier. However, humor is not always appropriate for the presentation audience or format. Also, the use of humor should be limited to avoid losing focus on the purpose of the presentation.

Learn from others' experiences—talk to experienced, skilled public speakers. Many skilled presenters have developed strategies for dealing with anxiety, which they are willing to share. They can also provide strategies for presenting in a specific forum or format.

Long-term strategies for becoming more comfortable with public speaking

Very few people can successfully avoid public speaking through their entire lives. Speeches and presentations are necessary workplace, civic, artistic, and social activities. Wedding toasts, work proposals, and presentations of awards are all common activities. As such, public speaking is a life skill and a necessary ability for a well-rounded person. There are low-impact venues for public speaking that provide opportunities to practice.

Acting Class—Acting classes provide participants with the opportunity to be the centre of attention, which is one source of anxiety. They also provide opportunities to develop “personas”—patterns of communicating and behaving that may differ from one’s own mannerisms. For example, a shy person who normally speaks quickly and quietly in interpersonal interactions may develop a presentation persona that speaks in a completely different manner.

Toastmasters—Toastmasters is an organization dedicated to helping people become better public speakers. Members attend weekly meetings and actively support each other as they develop their presentation skills. At the meetings, members undertake challenges in a non-competitive environment and provide each other with developmental feedback.

Join the Debate Club—The Debate Club is a student group dedicated to developing their debate skills. Debate addresses a particularly challenging aspect of public speaking, responding to questions or criticism in a public forum.