**Anxiety and Public Speaking**

I’ve often observed that many people’s top-ranking fear is not death but having to speak in public. The joke is that these people would rather lie in a casket at their own funeral than give the eulogy.

Public speaking for people who suffer from panic attacks or general anxiety often becomes a major source of worry, possibly weeks or even months before the speaking event is to occur.

These speaking engagements don’t necessarily have to be the traditional “on a podium” events; they can be as simple as an office meeting where the individual is expected to express an opinion or give verbal feedback.

In this case, the fear centers on having a panic attack while speaking. The individuals fear being incapacitated by the anxiety and hence unable to complete what they’re saying. They imagine fleeing the spotlight and having to make all kinds of excuses later for their undignified departure -out the office window . . .

This differs slightly from the majority of people who fear public speaking. With others, their fear tends to revolve around going blank while speaking or feeling uncomfortable under the spotlight of their peers. The jitters or nerves are, of course, a problem for this group as well-but they’re unfamiliar with that debilitating threat, the panic attack, because they most likely haven’t experienced one before.

So how should a person with an anxiety issue tackle public speaking?

Stage 1 is accepting that all of these bizarre and, quite frankly, unnerving sensations aren’t going to go away overnight. In fact, you’re not even going to concern yourself with getting rid of them for your next talk. When they arrive during a speech or meeting, you’re going to approach them in a new manner.

We need to build your confidence back to where it used to be before any of these sensations ever occurred. This time, you’ll approach it in a unique, empowering manner, allowing you to feel your confidence again. Some say that most of the top speakers are riddled with anxiety before an event, but they somehow use this nervousness to enhance their speech.

**I’m going to show you exactly how to do this.**

**My first point is this, and it’s important:**

The average healthy person can experience an extreme array of anxiety and very uncomfortable sensations while giving a speech and is in no danger of ever losing control, or even appearing slightly anxious to the audience. No matter how tough it gets, you’ll always finish your piece-even if, at the outset, it feels very uncomfortable to go on.

You won’t become incapacitated in any way.

The real breakthrough happens when you fully believe that you’re not in danger and that the sensations will pass. By asking for more, you’re saying:

“I realize that you [the anxiety] hold no threat over me.”

What keeps a panic attack coming again and again is the fear of the fear-the fear that the next one will really knock your socks off and the feeling that you were lucky to have made it past the last one unscathed.

Because they were so unnerving and scary, it’s your confidence that’s been damaged by previous anxiety episodes. Once you fully understand that you’re not under any threat, then you can have a new response to the anxiety as it arises while speaking.

There’s always a turning point when a person moves from general anxiety into a panic attack, and that happens with public speaking when you think to yourself:

I won’t be able to handle this in front of these people.

That split second of self-doubt leads to a rush of adrenaline, and the extreme anxiety arrives in a wavelike format. If, however, you feel the initial anxiety and react with confidence that this isn’t a threat to you, you’ll process the anxiety rapidly.

Using this new approach is a powerful ally because it means it’s okay to feel scared and anxious when speaking. That’s fine-you’ll feel it, and you’ll move with and through the sensations in your body and out the other side.

Because people are often very anxious before the talk has begun, they may feel they’ve already let themselves down. Now you can relax on that point. It’s perfectly natural to feel the anxiety.

Take, for example, the worst of the sensations you’ve ever experienced in this situation-be it general unease or loss of breath. You’ll have an initial automatic reaction that says:

“Danger-I’m going to have an episode of anxiety here, and I really can’t afford for that to happen.”

At this point, most people react to that idea and confirm that it must be true because of all the unusual feelings they’re experiencing. This is where your train of thought creates a cycle of anxiety that produces a negative impact on your overall presenting skills.

So let that initial “Oh dear, not now” thought pass by, and immediately follow it up with the attitude of:

“There you are-I’ve been wondering when you would arrive. I’ve been expecting you to show up. By the way, I’m not in the least threatened by any of the strange sensations you’re creating. I’m completely safe here.”

Instead of pushing the emotional energy and excitement down into your stomach, you’re moving through it.

Your body is in a slightly excited state, exactly as it should be while giving a speech-so release that energy in your self-expression. Push it out through your presentation, not down into your stomach.

Push it out by expressing yourself more forcefully. In this way, you turn the anxiety to your advantage by using it to deliver a speech; you’ll come across as more alive, energetic, and in the present moment.

When you notice the anxiety drop, as it does when you willingly move into it, fire off a quick thought when you get a momentary break (as I’m sure you have between pieces), and ask it for “more.” You want more of its intense feelings because you’re interested in them and absolutely not threatened by them.

It seems like a lot of things to be thinking about while talking to a group of people, but it really isn’t. You’d be amazed at how many different, unrelated thoughts you can have while speaking. This approach is about adopting a new attitude of confidence about what you might have deemed a serious threat up until now.

If your predominant fear of speaking is driven by a feeling of being trapped, then I suggest factoring in some mental releases that can be prepared before the event. For example, some events allow you to turn the attention back to the room to get feedback, etc., from the audience. If possible, prepare such opportunities in your own mind before the engagements.

This isn’t to say that you have to use them, but people in this situation often remark that just having small opportunities where attention can be diverted for the briefest moment makes the task seem less daunting.

It may even be something as simple as having people introduce themselves or opening the floor to questions. I realize these diversions aren’t always possible and depend on the situation, but anything you can factor in that makes you feel less trapped or under the spotlight is worth the effort.

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