

## ***Proven Ways to Prevent and Deal with Speech Nerves***

BY Joan Detz

"I'm afraid I'll be nervous." That's a common feeling people have when asked to give a speech – and in some ways it's healthy. It shows you care about getting your message across to the audience. You really do want to look and sound good.

But it's important to understand what nervousness is. Nervousness is simply energy. If you channel that energy, you can turn it into a positive force. You can make it work for you. You can use the extra energy to your advantage.

But if you allow that energy to go unchecked – if you allow it to control you – then you're going to have problems. A dry mouth. Perhaps a cracking voice. Lots of rocking back and forth on your feet, or lots of "uh's" and "um's." Maybe even forgetfulness.

How can you channel your nervous energy?

Learn to direct your extra energy into eye contact, body language, and vocal enthusiasm. These physical activities provide an outlet for your nervousness. They offer a way to use up some of that extra energy.

What's more, good eye contact, strong body language, and vocal enthusiasm will build your confidence. It's hard to feel insecure when you look directly at your listeners and see the responsiveness in their faces.

### **Pre-speech Tricks that Work**

These are tricks to every trade, and public speaking is no exception. Do what the pros do to keep their nervousness in check:

#### **The Physical Exercises**

Just before you speak, go off by yourself (to the restroom or to quiet corner) and concentrate on the part of your body that feels most tense. Your face? Your hands? Your stomach?

Deliberately tighten those muscles until they start to quiver; then let go. You will feel an enormous sense of relief. Repeat this a few times.

Drop your head. Let your cheek muscles go loose and let your mouth go slack.

Make funny faces. Puff up your cheeks, then let the air escape. Or open your mouth and your eyes wide, then close them tightly. Alternate a few times.

Yawn a few times to loosen your jaw and your mucous membranes.

Pretend you're an opera singer. Try "mi, mi, mi" a few times. Wave your arms as you do it.

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#### **Try Mental Exercises**

Picture something that's given you pleasant memories: Sailing on a blue-green ocean.

Swimming in a mountain lake. Walking on a beach. Feeling the sand between your toes. (Think of something other than your impending speech.)

#### **Try a Rational Approach**

Say to yourself, "I'm prepared. I know what I'm talking about." Or, "I've spent a year working on

this project. Nobody knows as much about this project as I do.” Or, “I’m glad I can talk to these people. It will help my career.” Convince yourself that speaking to an audience is not that big of a deal.

I know someone who repeats to herself, “This is better than death, this is better than death.” That may sound extreme, but it works for her. And, she’s right. Giving a speech is better than death.

If you’re scared to give a speech, try to think of something that’s really frightening. The speech should seem appealing by comparison.

#### Try a Test Run

Visualize exactly what will happen after you’re introduced. You’ll get out of your chair, you’ll hold the folder in your left hand, you’ll walk confidently across the stage, you’ll hold your head high, you’ll look directly at the person who introduced you, you’ll shake his or her hand, you’ll...

If you see yourself as confident and successful in your mental test run, you’ll be confident and successful in your delivery. Above all, never say that you’re nervous. If you do, you’ll make yourself more nervous. And you’ll make the audience nervous, too.

#### During-the-Speech Tricks to Use

OK. You’ve prepared your speech carefully. You’ve done the pre-speech exercises. Now you’re at the lectern and – can it be? – your mouth goes a little dry.

Don’t panic. Just intensify your eye contact. Looking at the audience will take away your self-preoccupation and reduce the dryness.

Persistent dryness? Help yourself to the glass of water that you’ve wisely placed at the lectern.

Don’t be embarrassed. Say to yourself, “It’s my speech and I can damned well drink water if I want to.”

What else can go wrong because of misplaced nervous energy? I once found that my teeth got so dry, my lip actually stuck to them. An actor friend later told me to rub a light coating of Vaseline over my teeth. It’s a good tip.

#### Other mini traumas?

##### Sweat Rolling Off Your Forehead

Wipe it away with the cotton handkerchief that you placed at the lectern. Don’t hesitate to really wipe. Little dabs are ineffectual, and you’ll have to dab repeatedly. Do it right the first time and get it over with. Also avoid using tissues. They can shred and get stuck to your face – not a terribly impressive sight.

##### A Quavery Voice

Again, intensify your eye contact. Focus on your audience. Then lower your pitch and control your breath as you begin to speak. Concentrate on speaking distinctly and slowly.

##### Trembling Hands

Take heart. The audience probably can’t see your trembling hands, but if they’re distracting you, then use some body movement to diffuse that nervous energy. Change your foot position. Lean forward to make a point. Walk out from behind the lectern, if possible. Move your arms. (If your body is in a frozen position, your shaking will only grow worse.)

##### A Pounding Heart

Your going to have one, but the audience cannot see the rising and falling of your chest.

##### Throat Clearing

If you have a cough, cough away from the microphone. Drink some water, or pop a cough drop into your mouth. Again, the well-prepared speaker has an unwrapped cough drop handy at all times and ready to use.

#### Runny Nose, Watery Eyes

Bright lights can trigger this type of reaction. Simply pause, say "Excuse me," blow your nose or wipe your eyes, and get on with it. Don't make a big deal over it by apologizing. A simpler "Excuse me" is just fine.

#### Nausea

You come down with a viral infection two days before your speech and you're afraid of throwing up in the middle of it. Well, that's why they make anti-nausea drugs. Ask your doctor about a prescription.

For actors, the show must always go on... even with serious viral infections. Many actors place a trash can backstage so they can throw up between acts. But you are not an actor, and you rally don't have to put yourself through this test of will power.

If you are terribly ill – as opposed to being just mildly nervous – cancel your engagement. Since you've prepared a complete manuscript, perhaps a colleague could substitute for you. If substitution is not possible, offer to speak at a later date.

#### Burping

Some people feel they have to burp when they get nervous. If you are one of these people, do plenty of physical relaxation exercises before you speak. Don't drink any carbonated beverages that day, and eat only a light lunch.

#### Fumbled Words

Professional speakers, radio announcers, and television anchor people fumble words fairly often. Someone once introduced President Reagan with this slip of the tongue: "Everyone who is for abortion was at one time a feces (sic)." So, why should you expect to be perfect?

If it's a minor fumble, just ignore it and keep going.

If it's a big one, fix it. Simply repeat the correct word with a smile, to show you're human.

Continue with your speech, but slow down a little bit. Once you've had a slip of the tongue, chances are high that you'll have another. A fumble is a sort of symptom that you're focusing more on yourself than on your message. Relax and slow down.

#### Forgetfulness

Some people look at an audience and forget what they want to say. Aren't you glad you made the effort to prepare an outline? It's all right there, so you have one less thing to worry about.