

HOW I OVERCAME THE FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

by Arnold Sanow

Rapid heart beat, sweaty palms, nausea, frequent bathroom breaks, may sound like some terrible sickness, but to many of us the diagnosis is speakers anxiety or fear of speaking in front of a group.

In fact, according to the book of lists, the #1 fear of most Americans is speaking in front of a group with the fear of death a distant #6.

For most of my life I had this terrible affliction, I was afraid to speak up for the fear of looking like a fool and being rejected by my peers. In fact, at staff meetings, I would never contradict ideas or voice my opinion and when it came to speaking to a big group I would always find an excuse to get out of it.

There were a number of steps that helped my transformation and if adhered to can help you become more confident and master this most important skill.

- 1. Join Toastmasters International** – My involvement with Toastmasters was life-changing. Toastmasters is a non-profit organization that helps people master their communication and speaking skills. It's easy to set up a group in your organization or join an existing one. Through a combination of exercises and positive feedback by the other participants you will see your speaking skills and confidence reach new levels. Contact their national office at 1-800-9-wespeak.
- 2. Get Rid of the Beliefs and Behaviors that Cause Fear** – Many of our fears about public speaking come about due to unwarranted and unjustified thoughts. Here are some negative affirmations and beliefs to put out of your mind forever.
 - “ Speaking is dangerous to my well being.
 - “ I failed before in a speaking situation. I will probably fail again.
 - “ A survey says that public speaking is the #1 fear, so it must be my #1 fear.
 - “ The audience wants me to fail. The audience is my enemy.
 - “ I don't have the physical appearance or natural ability. My talents and looks are limited.
 - “ I may make a mistake. I want to be perfect.
 - “ Jimmy Stewart, Willard Scott and Johnny Carson have feared it. Therefore, I ought to fear and avoid it.

As Abraham Lincoln said, “You are what you think”. Before each speaking opportunity, think and write out positive affirmations (“I'm a great speaker”) and you will eventually believe it and become it.

- 3. Practice ... Practice ... Practice** – Learning to become a confident speaker is like learning to swim. You can watch people swim, read about it, listen to people talk about it but if you don't get into the water you'll never learn. Take every opportunity you can to speak!
- 4. Focus on a Friendly Face** – Everytime you speak there is always at least one person who is smiling, looking at you or nodding in agreement. Keep your eyes on them until you feel relaxed.
- 5. Visualize the Audience in Their Underwear** – Winston Churchill used this technique to overcome those apprehensive, grim looking people in the audience. It immediately calmed his fears by realizing that everyone is just a person like himself.
- 6. Plan** – 90% of a good presentation revolves around good planning. If you want to decrease your anxiety — know your audience, research your topic, prepare a good outline and then follow it.
- 7. Visualize a Successful Presentation** – Picture the opening, body and the close. Picture everyone smiling, laughing at your humor, applause at appropriate times and then coming up afterwards telling you about the great job you did.
- 8. Use your Own Style** – Be yourself. Many fears can be attributed to a speaker trying to adapt to a style that is not their own.
- 9. Get to the Meeting Early** – If possible, I'm always at my speaking engagements at least three hours before I'm scheduled to go on. By being early, I can check out and get comfortable with the room, practice my presentation, and get to know some of the participants.
- 10. Meditate** – One exercise I use is a relaxation exercise which involves tensing up parts of the body and then relaxing them. For example, I will tense my hands, then relax them. Do this with your hands, feet, head and entire body until you feel totally comfortable.

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As a result of following the above, I overcame my fears and for over a decade, I've been a full-time professional speaker who gives over 150 paid presentations a year to companies, governmental organizations, and associations at conferences throughout the world. In fact this year I was awarded the CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) award by the National Speakers Association which has been earned by less than 300 speakers in the world. In addition, I now teach presentation skills courses to organizations like Public Broadcasting Service, C-Span, U.S. Department of Transportation, Promar International, Georgetown University and others.

As Walter Cronkite says, "It's natural to have butterflies, the secret is to get them to fly in formation". By following the formation above, your fears will be replaced with confidence.

Arnold Sanow, is a speaker, trainer, marketing and business strategist and the author of five books.

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