



There is no greater loan than a sympathetic ear.

Frank Tyger

3 Causes of Public Speaking Fear

Fear of public speaking often feels like it hits you out of nowhere. But I'm going to suggest that there are three distinct causes of speech anxiety.

These three different causes of speaking anxiety relate to three different areas of the brain – the Old Brain (it's called this in neuro'pop' books but is more correctly called the Hindbrain), Midbrain and the New Brain (again more correctly called the Forebrain). [Note: I have edited this paragraph to make it more scientifically accurate - thank you to Zen Faulkes who commented on my previous description].

My descriptions are a simplification of the science – in particular, the parts of the brain all interact with each other, so it's not strictly correct to say that just one part of the brain causes nervousness. But I think it's a useful model which may help you understand your fear of public speaking and work out the best way to reduce it.

Old Brain nervousness

Your old brain is the part of your brain that is constantly scanning the environment looking for threats. Survival is what matters to the old brain. Many people suffer from 'Old Brain' nervousness. In prehistoric times, being part of a group was essential to our survival. So one of the threats to our survival was being kicked out of the group. What might get you kicked out? Standing out in some way, saying something offensive or stupid, or not performing up to expectations.

Fast forward to now. You're standing in front of a group ready to open your mouth and your old brain goes (metaphorically):

Oh-oh. This is a threatening situation. If you say something stupid, YOU MIGHT DIE!

It's no longer true that you might die, but your Old Brain doesn't know that. Your Old Brain activates your survival system: fight, flight or freeze. When it comes to public speaking the most common reactions are flight or freeze:



See everything, overlook a great deal, correct a little.

Pope John XXIII

Flight - You avoid public speaking if at all possible. If you do have to speak, speak as fast as possible so that you get through it as quickly as possible.

Freeze – You feel stiff and artificial as you speak, your mind goes blank.

Here's what can you do about this type of nervousness:

1. Accept nervousness

This type of nervousness may happen every time you speak. Accept that nervousness may be your ever-present companion. If you fight your nervousness (eg: say to yourself 'I shouldn't be nervous' – see New Brain nervousness below) you'll make it worse. In the post [How to use your fear of public speaking to make you a better speaker](#) I've written about three specific ways to accept your nervousness.

2. Get used to it

You may suffer from nervousness less as you gain more experience presenting. That's because your old brain has gradually realized that this public speaking thing is possibly not that life-threatening. So desensitize yourself – take every opportunity to speak in front of a group.

Mid Brain Nervousness

Our emotions are regulated by the Mid Brain. In conjunction with other parts of your brain, your Mid Brain will make you nervous when you're reminded of a previous nerve-wracking experience. So if you had an experience at school where you were humiliated in front of your classmates, or suffered an embarrassing mindblank in an important presentation, those strong emotional memories may come back to haunt you.

If you can readily identify a previous experience which is causing you to be nervous now, the most important thing to do is rationally evaluate how bad it was. If you continue to tell yourself that it was a terrible, awful experience it will continue to create nervousness for you into the future. So rationally evaluate how awful it was. What were the consequences of it?

Here's an exercise I use on our courses to help people put these experiences in perspective.

You can do this now:



Happiness walks on busy feet.

Kitte Turmell

Think of that nerve-wracking presentation experience.

How awful was it on a scale of 0 to 100%?

Imagine, your little finger has just been cut off in an accident!

How awful is that on a scale of 0 to 100%?

And now how awful is that nerve-wracking experience compared to losing your little finger.

Most people revise the awfulness of their nerve-wracking experience from somewhere near 100% to somewhere near 0%. They would prefer to relive that nerve-wracking presentation experience rather than lose their little finger. The loss of the finger helps them to put it in perspective. (If you're happy to lose your little finger, imagine losing your hand, or the finger or hand of a loved one – at some point you'll gain some perspective).

The rational reality is that most of the things that happen to us in presentations, are not that bad.

They're nothing compared to the other things that can happen to us in life – like relationship break-ups, loss of a loved one, and serious health issues.

The most serious consequences of a presentation going badly are losing a large sale, an election or other contest, or your job (though I've never heard of someone losing their job because of one bad presentation). These consequences are disappointing – but not catastrophic.

New Brain nervousness

The New Brain is the conscious thinking part of your brain. Most of us have patterns of thinking that contribute to our nervousness. You can reduce your nervousness by exploring your patterns of thinking. This is part of the basis of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. One of the most common patterns of thinking that contribute to the fear of public speaking are demands.

Here's an example of how they operate. A few weeks ago I was running a training course. I knew that the CEO would be one of the participants. I felt myself get a little nervous as we were setting up.



*Just as iron rusts from disuse,
even so does inaction spoil the
intellect.*

Leonardo Da Vinci

When he walked into the room I got hot and my heart started racing. Why would I react in this way? I have a demand around CEOs. It goes something like this:

CEOs are really important and I **must** have their approval.

My demanding thought made me nervous. What was the result? I messed up the instructions for a simple exercise that we do at the beginning of every course and that I've done perfectly hundreds of times before!

Here are some common demands people have about presenting and public speaking:

- I must be interesting and engaging
- I mustn't leave anything out
- I mustn't waffle
- I mustn't show I'm nervous
- I've got to be able to answer every question

These demands make you nervous because you can't guarantee that the demand will be met. To reduce their power, rationally analyze the truth and usefulness of these demands. For example, with my CEO demand I can see that it's not essential that a CEO approve of me. I don't demand that everybody approves of me – and it's irrational to demand that a CEO must approve of me. I can also see that it's not useful to have this demand as it made me mess up! In the post [The Seven Thinking Sins of Public Speaking](#) I've analyzed other common demands and explored how to defuse them.

I get that fear of public speaking can be debilitating, and can have you avoid opportunities in your life. I hope this post has been useful to you in thinking through how you can best reduce your nervousness.



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