

# How to Conquer the Fear of Public Speaking

Are you ready for a standing ovation?

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Fear of public speaking is very common, with almost 1 in 4 people reporting being anxious when presenting ideas and information in front of an audience. Being a good public speaker is an essential skill that can help you advance your career, grow your business, and form strong relationships.

Researchers have identified many reasons why we are afraid of public speaking, which you can [read more about here](#). It seems that the way we feel, think, and act with respect to having to speak in public can raise or lower the amount of fear we experience significantly.

While fear teaches you to protect yourself in risky situations, letting that fear stand between you and your audience could prevent you from sharing inspiring ideas, speaking about important work, and presenting interesting solutions to problems that affect many people. In short, it's everyone's loss.

What can we do about it?

The factors that cause fear of public speaking are also the factors that researchers have targeted to help people overcome it. Several methods exist for conquering the fear of public speaking. Some of them address the physiological aspect of fear, others focus on the cognitive aspects, and a few focus on the

behavioral components that contribute to higher levels of fear and anxiety around public speaking. Based on that research, here is where to start:

1. Learn how to put your body in a calm state.

A variety of relaxation techniques can reduce the increased physiological activity that the body produces automatically when confronted with an event or situation that causes fear. In the case of public speaking, the stimulus that causes fear can range from the actual speaking event itself to the mere thought of having to speak in public. Learning to relax while thinking about, preparing for, or giving an oral presentation reduces the experience of fear and prevents it from interfering with performance. Relaxation techniques involve learning to control your breathing, to lower your heart rate, and to lessen the tension in your muscles. These techniques work best when paired with gradual exposure to public speaking. For example, you begin applying these techniques first when you agree to speak, then as you prepare your speech, and eventually when you present it. You could also gradually increase the scale of the events as you learn how to manage your anxiety through relaxation, starting with very small audiences and moving up in numbers bit by bit. You could also start with speeches that are easier to prepare for or less scary to deliver to master the relaxation techniques, and then continue to use them as you enter speaking situations where the stakes are increasingly higher. Relaxation is an effective technique, with quick, but not necessarily long-lasting results.

2. Challenge your beliefs about public speaking.

Another way to conquer the fear of public speaking is to challenge your beliefs about your ability to prepare and deliver an effective and impactful speech. Cognitive reframing approaches target your negative self-statements (*I am not a good speaker, audiences find me boring*), or any irrational beliefs about public speaking (*People can see how anxious I am on stage*). Irrational, in this case, means that your beliefs are not supported by the facts or by your experience. Cognitive reframing helps you challenge negative statements and beliefs and replace them with favorable, supportive, and proactive statements. It is important to note that these techniques are not intended to simply replace negative thinking with vapid and meaningless statements. They challenge you to think more pragmatically and intentionally. In essence, you are teaching yourself to see public speaking as a non-threatening event that you can learn to handle and to see yourself as a confident speaker-in-progress.

3. Shift your focus from performance to communication.

A different cognitive approach includes shifting your perspective from being evaluated to being of value. You train yourself to see public speaking as a situation where you are communicating with people something that you think they will benefit from, instead of thinking of it as a situation where you will be tested and judged. That shift in perspective relieves you of the worry of how you will come across and focuses you on how to best get your message across.

#### 4. Prepare, prepare, prepare.

A public speaking appearance is only the culmination of a thorough process of preparing and rehearsing your presentation. The more prepared you are, the less worried you will be about looking nervous, forgetting your lines, or losing your train of thought. Think about the amount of work actors put into delivering entire scripts in front of audiences. Approaching public speaking the same way actors approach performing will help you shift your focus from worrying to preparing, and the more prepared you are, the more focused on your message and the less distracted by your fear you will be. In this [TEDx talk](#), Amy and Michael Port (author of *Steal the Show*) encourage people to see themselves as performers and apply techniques similar to those that actors use “to create a reality of their choosing” in high-stakes situations that involve sharing ideas and information with other people. Such an approach allows you to accomplish your goal and at the same time maintain your authenticity. Remember, being underprepared is always more nerve-wracking than being overprepared.

#### 5. Seek out more opportunities to speak.

Whether you are working on your body responses to fear, your view of yourself as a speaker, or your general approach to public speaking, the more experience you get, the more confidence you'll gain. Finding and creating opportunities to speak gives you the chance to practice what you have learned and get better at it. In addition, it helps you learn how to use your own experiences to continue improving your presentation skills. Essentially, you learn from what didn't work well, instead of punishing yourself for it. And the more often you speak, the more you realize that what makes a good speaker is a combination of the noble intention to inform or inspire an audience, a positive mindset, and a lot of prep work.

#### 6. Ask for help.

While you can do a lot to overcome the fear of public speaking on your own, there are many options available for a little extra help. Getting help can, in many

cases, be a more effective way of achieving results than doing it alone. [There are several tested interventions available to help overcome the fear of public speaking](#) and many [specialized professionals who deliver them](#). In addition to asking professionals for help, there are consumer-organized groups, like [Toastmasters](#), which also provide opportunities for building your skills in a non-threatening and non-committal environment. Many people join such groups specifically to overcome their fear of public speaking.

*The bottom line is that if something scares you, you will avoid it, and if you avoid it, you will not get enough practice, and when you don't get enough practice, you will not get better at it, and if you are not getting better at it, you will continue to be afraid of it. This cycle of fear can go on and on. But it doesn't have to. With the number of options available, it is up to you to decide when and how to break this cycle of fear of public speaking.*

#### References

[A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts: Defining, Explaining, and Treating Public Speaking Anxiety](#) Graham D. Bodie, Louisiana State University