

Wolverhampton Speakers Club

Overcome Your Fear of Speaking in Public



I'm remembering how scared I felt when I knew I had to speak in public for the first time

I remember too - I just couldn't face it

But we can both do it now - so let's give everyone some tips!



What Is This Fear?

If you are nervous about speaking in public the first thing to remember is that **you're not alone** - all of us who do speaking started as nervous beginners, and some of us were actually terrified!



Fear of speaking in public is very widespread - it is a sobering thought that as many as 75% of people fear speaking in public: statistically more than fear death or heights!

It's that black cloud that hangs over us when we first confront speaking in public. It is simply our fears about standing up in front of an audience and actually speaking to them. Standing up and speaking in front of a group of people is very different to talking to a few friends or colleagues.

What does it feel like?

Our fears can be both mentally and physically debilitating. We are right outside our comfort zone.

The event can take over our thoughts for days beforehand, it can play on our mind, we worry and visualise all the things that we think can happen to us and create all manner of negative scenarios. We feel that things are getting out of our control. This can lead to panic attacks and the wish to avoid the event - avoidance, however, is a temporary short term relief and can actually reinforce the fears.

Physically, both before and during the event, we can feel physically sick, have a pounding heart and come out in a cold sweat. Our legs tremble and feel as if they are going to give way, as does our voice, and we can feel choked and unable to breathe freely - and of course there is the 'butterflies in the stomach' feeling and needing to be close to a bathroom!

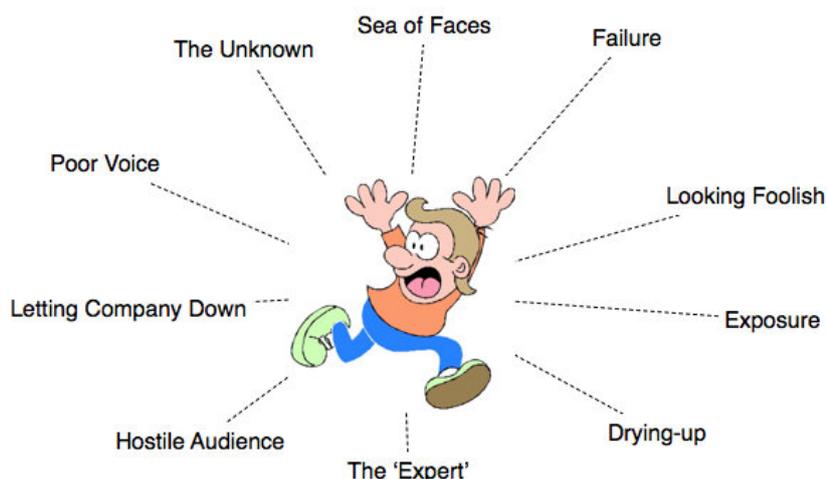


Essentially it's a form of the 'fight or flight' situation brought on by a build-up of nervous energy by adrenaline.

There isn't one simple answer and simply telling yourself to 'keep calm' is a bit too simplistic.



So let's have a look at some of these fears that surround us ...



Fear of failure and looking foolish

This is quite understandable and these are often the beginner's greatest fears!

Do remember that members of an audience don't want you to fail - they want to hear what you have to say and will be disappointed if you fail, so they are usually not the 'enemy' you fear they will be. You are speaking to human beings, just like you.

You will find that as you do more speaking and gain experience you will build your confidence.

You will find throughout all of this that you can do a lot to help yourself by **being well-prepared and rehearsed**. This is an important point that we'll mention again and again - good preparation is one of your best weapons against fear.

Fear of exposure and the sea of faces

This is fear of being singled out, of being the centre of attention in an unknown environment, and is usually due to self-consciousness and feeling alone and vulnerable up there.

One way of coping with this is to talk to yourself! It is not as stupid as it might seem - write something, or find a passage in a book, and read it aloud when you are alone. Then do the same thing in front of a mirror. You might feel self-conscious at first, but you will soon get used to it - that's the point of the exercise: get used to speaking aloud and get some of the self-consciousness out of the way when you are on your own.

That's not the end of the exercise, though - carry on with longer and longer passages until you feel happy with what you are doing, and then begin speaking in front of one or two friends or colleagues. Ask them for feedback if you want to. Repeat this until you are comfortable with doing it.

You will be ready to take your first steps in front of an audience - but looking at an audience can be daunting for the first few times.

You can make the experience more personal by thinking of yourself as speaking to one person at a time. Have eye contact with different members of the audience as you speak – but don't stare: no more than 3-5 seconds a person and then move on. This way you minimise the chance of feeling overwhelmed by your audience, whether it is large or small. The audience will feel involved as well.



Some people advise you not to look at the audience, but look at the back of the room. This is totally wrong as you are likely to alienate the audience and, quite frankly, it won't help your fear of exposure because you haven't really faced the fear - it will be as bad, or worse, next time.

Again, some tell you to look at one person and imagine you're talking to just that one person. That doesn't work either because singling out one person might make the person feel 'picked on' and uncomfortable, and the rest of the audience feel left out.

No, the answer is to deal with the whole audience by scanning them and having brief eye contact with each one.

Fear of drying-up



This was one of my biggest fears when I started - I thought that if it happened the ground would open up and swallow me!

I know how you got over it - Preparation, Preparation, Preparation

That's right, Jasmine - and it worked!



It's that nightmare - you're standing there in front of an audience and the words just leave you, and no way can you remember what to say next. What happens ...? Maybe you run out of the room, maybe the audience laughs at you, maybe you cry, time comes to a standstill - and then you wake up!

But that nightmare hangs over us like a black cloud and something ominous feels like it's about to happen.

It doesn't really occur like that (usually) but you can help yourself and prevent it from happening by preparing thoroughly.

Write your speech - preferably, if it's your first time, about something you know well - and take care over it and over the speaking notes you aim to use. Then practise it again and again until you know it well (not learn it by heart - that will make you stumble if you forget your words) gradually becoming less reliant on your notes (if you can - you will use your notes a lot the first time you speak).

It **IS** possible to dry-up so you could try the strategy of having something planned that you could say or do if you find yourself drying-up so as to get over the moment.

Fear of a bored or hostile audience

You may well feel that what you have to say will bore your audience or that they will be actively hostile.

Don't worry – there are techniques that you can learn for making your speech interesting – but for a start try to put yourself in the audience's place and wonder whether you would find yourself boring or interesting!

Partly it is down to subject matter and how you arrange it, and partly down to delivery - but the good news is that these are things you can learn. If you can, make your first speech about something straightforward that you know well.

Unless you're speaking at a political event or a contentious public meeting, a hostile audience is very unlikely to happen. As with so much else, be prepared and know what you are going to say. As we have stressed above, audiences usually don't want you to fail - stand up there and smile before you start speaking.

Fear of the 'expert' in the audience

Another nightmare - you might find, or feel, that there is an 'expert' in the audience and you fear they will know more about the subject than you do.

If you are well-prepared YOU are the expert and the audience is listening to you and not someone else.

If someone starts to argue a point while you are speaking the best plan is to ask them to pose any questions at the end of your speech - this shows the audience that you appear to have confidence.



Should it come to questions you can 'bounce' awkward questions back to the audience members and turn an awkward moment into a mini-discussion that can help you out (provided you don't let it go on too long). But be honest, don't try to waffle and if you are asked something you don't know, say you don't know and offer to find out.

Heckling is another matter - but you shouldn't experience any of that in most speaking situations and certainly not when you start. The most you might encounter is someone calling out '*speaking up - I can't hear you*' or '*slow down*' - this is extremely rude and whoever is running or chairing the event should really intervene and ask them to stop. If you feel that person has a point, say nothing and adjust your speaking - don't apologise!

Fear of letting your company down

Speaking for or at your company for the first time can be very stressful - especially if your boss is in the audience!

Make sure that you have a brief from your company and that you know your objectives and you are well-prepared and practised.

Consult with your colleagues and make sure that you know your boss's 'take' on the subject. Make sure that you know your objectives for the speech and your company's objectives too.

Fear that your voice is weak

This is one of those paradoxes - you feel that your voice is weak and not up to scratch, but you don't really know if it is until you have actually spoken!

Your voice will appear weak if you speak too fast - something we're tempted to do at first so as to 'get it over with', and beginners often speed up or become mumbly the farther the speech goes on. You can help yourself go slower by opening your mouth wider than you usually do when you speak (remember it's not a conversation) and by pausing from time-to-time (a pause seems much longer to you than it does to your audience) which gives you an air of confidence. Try to control your breathing and breathe from your diaphragm, instead of a tight upper chest, so as to release the power of the air in your breath.

You might feel that your voice weak to start off with but, because public speaking is not the same as conversational speaking, there are techniques you can learn and exercises to help. Also any work you do in front of a mirror, with friends, or especially a webcam, will help you.

If you fear that your accent will let you down you can lay that fear by pronouncing your words clearly and, if necessary, a little slower than you would normally speak – remember that it is all about communication. Don't try to put on a 'posh' accent – it will be sure to slip somewhere during your speech; but at the same time don't slip into dialect, with its particular grammar and phrases – that will put your audience off.

Your words should be standard English (or whatever language you're speaking in) but as long as you are clear your accent shouldn't matter.

Fear of the unknown

We are always nervous to some extent when we face a new situation and this is entirely natural, especially with speaking in public. The best way to overcome this is to stop it being 'unknown' by gaining experience in actually doing it a few times.

Because you are a member of Wolverhampton Speakers Club you are in the best place to overcome this, and your other fears. We are very supportive and non-judgmental and will help you all we can.

Ongoing experience and the support of the other speakers will give you more confidence. Once you find what works for you, you will begin to feel more confident.



How Can You Help Yourself?



There are two stages to overcoming your fears -

Before a speech, and during the speech itself

Jasmine will take you through what you can do in that tense period before your speech and I'll give you some tips for when you are actually speaking

Before the speech



This is that period before you give your speech - from when you first agree to do it up to the moment you step up there to begin it. Your nervousness just seems to build up to a peak and you feel overwhelmed.

I've been there myself so I know what it's like, and I've got a few tips for you.

You have a speech date, you're preparing your speech and 'looking forward' to the event. As time passes your mild 'butterflies' turn into 'vultures' and you feel more and more nervous, and even ill, and you don't want to go through with it ...

But you're not actually helpless, so what can you do? Here's my list:

- Remember it's not actually 'fight or flight' - you're not in any physical danger and it won't hurt
- Remember that audiences want you to do well - they're not the enemy
- Build your confidence by good preparation and practice - as often as you need - then you will know your subject well and you will feel that you're an expert on the subject
- Try relaxation techniques and practise deep breathing (from the diaphragm) - it uses up a huge amount of nervous energy
- Read this document again and underline in different colours the things that apply to you and what you can do about them

During the speech - Dave's tips

You will still be nervous as you step up to do your speech and just before, so ...

- Do the deep breathing before you step up and try to breathe deeply as you speak
- Smile - try not to look nervous as you step up, and never apologise to the audience for your nervousness
- Memorise your opening sentence so that you can deliver it confidently
- Keep your arms free so that you can breathe easily - holding the lectern can constrict your chest
- Look at the members of the audience for 3-5 seconds at a time for each one
- Slow down by opening your mouth more if you find you are speaking too quickly and pause from time to time



Even experienced speakers like us can find nerves lurking in the shadows - so you're not on your own. We've all been there and we know that you can overcome your fears. Go for it!

