



PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY

"Tomorrow I have to give an oral report in class and I'm nervous as hell. So nervous in fact that I haven't been able to sleep the last few nights and I feel nauseous every time I sit down to eat.

"When I think about standing up in front of that class my palms get wet, my stomach hurts, and I can feel my heart pounding. It's not the first time this has happened to me.

"Why am I so nervous? I've been working on this thing for a month now and I know I have it down cold.

"But maybe I'll be so tense I'll speak too softly, or mumble, or I'll forget everything and everyone will think I'm stupid. I'm sure I'm going to make a fool of myself.

"Maybe I'm not as well prepared as I think I am. Oh God, this is my big chance to show how smart I am and I'm going to blow it. Maybe this is my last chance.

"Now that I think of it, this happens lots of times out of class too. When I'm in a group of friends or study partners, everybody but me seems to speak up.

"I'm always thinking I have to say the exquisitely perfect thing or they'll all ridicule me. The funny part of it is that I know I'm as smart as my friends and classmates."

What this student is describing sounds familiar to a great many people. Psychologists call this "public speaking anxiety." It's not a serious illness or disease, but it is a real problem because it makes people feel badly about themselves. Perhaps even more importantly, it holds people back from accomplishing things that they are otherwise capable of doing.

At its worst, people who suffer from this kind of anxiety may find themselves making choices that will limit how much they accomplish in their lives. They'll be making choices out of fear rather than opportunity or desire.

How can people who experience public speaking anxiety overcome this problem? If you go back and reread the student's description, you will notice a continual reference to **THINKING** about how badly things could turn out and **THINKING** about what others would **THINK**.

First, it's important to change the way you think about speaking out in public. It does not help to think that the totality of one's self-worth is wrapped up in a particular performance, whether it's in class or in a social situation.

Such extremes should be avoided so that you do not assume either that all of your listeners decided that you did a superb job by giving an exquisitely perfect speech, or that one imperfect utterance was equivalent to a profound and tragic failure.

Instead of thinking we must succeed with every syllable, or we fail, a better strategy would be to focus on the subject matter at hand and block out what others might be thinking. We can never know for sure what other people are thinking, and besides, people don't all think alike. Worrying about what others think is a distraction; it takes our energy away from the task at hand, making the performance all the more difficult.

So why distract and worry ourselves with that? And why worry about being perfect? We can make mistakes, just as the wisest and most powerful people in the world sometimes make mistakes when they are talking.

Remember that ordinarily we know more about what we're talking about than anybody listening, so they might not even notice our mistakes. Listeners are only likely to pay significant attention to our mistakes if we do.

Feeling some nervousness before an event that we think is important to us is appropriate. Just because we feel some anxiety does not mean we're going to fall apart. Quite the contrary.

A moderate level of nervous anticipation can energize us to do something that approximates a real good effort. Maybe not perfect, maybe not even our best effort, but good enough to give us enough confidence to be less of a nervous wreck the next time we have to do it.

The School of Communication offers a course in Public Speaking (COS 211) for students who wish to develop more competence and confidence with this skill.