Terrified of public speaking [1]

(1) Dear Alice,

I have been a student for two years now and still suffer from terrible anxiety when it comes to doing a presentation or speaking in class. When it comes to presenting in front of my classmates I become so nervous that I can barely speak. I perspire; there is minimal shaking; feel so embarrassed that it even makes me want to cry. Now I even feel physically ill. It has gotten to the point where I refused to do a presentation last semester and my grade was badly affected. I know everyone becomes anxious in such situations but I truly feel there is something else going on with me because I've had to do presentations before coming to school but never felt this terrible. Even speaking in class is a very hard struggle, and my grades depend on it!

Any insight would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

(2) Dear Alice,

I have an extreme problem with speaking in front of groups of people (especially speeches). I can't do them! My voice either doesn't say anything, or it shakes like I am going to cry or something. I know public speaking is like the most common fear, but mine is one I must confront. What kind of options do I have besides books? Any ideas?

Fearful Public Speaker

Answer

Dear Can't Speak in Class and Fearful Public Speaker,

Although many people have a fear of speaking in front of others, it sounds like the anxiety you both experience is a real barrier to a successful speech or presentation. But, you both have already gone through the hardest step: admitting that this nervousness isn't working out and that it's worthy of putting forth effort to overcome. The good news is that because so many people share your anxiety, there are lots of tips and resources out there that might help you handle public speaking and presentation panic.

One way to become more comfortable with public speaking and presenting is to do some prep work and rehearse beforehand. There are a number of variables that are worth considering,
including what you’ll say, in what way you’ll present it, and what setting you’ll be in? all of which you’ll likely know ahead of time. During your next prep session, consider the following to help ease your speaking anxiety:

- **Consider your audience.** What do they already know about the topic or information you’re speaking about? How are they likely to respond to it? Take what you know about your audience and tailor your presentation or speech to maximize audience engagement.

- **Prepare a script.** Rather than relying on impromptu speaking or planning out what you want to say verbatim, write up notes in a script-like style that will be easiest for you to read and say. Make sure to write in the same way you would speak (like dialogue in a movie script), instead of how you might compose an essay or paper which is typically more formal. You might also pencil in some “stage directions”: noting when you’ll refer to a visual element at a certain point, when to pause, or when to insert a break to ask questions of your audience. Just make sure to make the text large enough for you to read.

- **Practice and record yourself.** This will help you to get familiar with what you want to say and to be aware how you sound. When you review your recording, think critically about what you’re saying and your delivery. You may identify points of improvement that you can go back and practice more, such as correcting mispronunciations, slowing or speeding up your speech pace, adding in pauses, raising or lowering your voice, or cutting out “filler” sounds (e.g., “um?,” “uh?,” “er?,” “aaah?”).

- **Get familiar with your surroundings.** Ahead of the presentation date, figure out the logistics. Where will the presentation take place? Where will you stand? Do you know how to operate any necessary audio-visual components? If you have a poster or other materials, where will they be on display while you’re speaking? On the day of, take note of where any wires are on the floor or any obstacles present while you move around during the presentation. Keeping the unknowns to a minimum might help alleviate some of the speaking jitters you’re experiencing.

- **Ready yourself for presenting.** Practice deep breathing before you speak and make sure to take deep breaths during your presentation as well. Find a standing posture that is comfortable, but not too rigid or slumped over. Avoid big meals prior to go time (some even advise steering clear of dairy products to reduce the need for clearing your throat).

To compliment these strategies, you might also look into what resources are available to address your anxiety. One resource dedicated to helping people strengthen communication skills and confidence is Toastmasters International [2], a membership organization that offers public speaking tips and information on best practices for presentations. Similarly, you could consider taking a public speaking course? check to see if one is offered at your school or within your community. Can’t speak in class, reaching out to your instructor may also be worthwhile; perhaps they can offer some additional guidance or alternative options for meeting the objectives of the presentation assignment. Lastly, you might consider chatting with a mental health professional that can help you develop strategies to cope with your anxiety. There’s no need to choose just one of these resources for assistance, more than one may be of use to improve in this area.

As you both think about what might be the next best course of action, remember your communication strengths. It’s also helpful to hone in on specific situations where you’re more or less nervous. For starters, can you identify times when you’ve spoken in front of a group without feeling as nervous? What about speaking with smaller groups or with one other person? What’s that like for you? Does it matter whether you know the audience on a
personal level? Do you feel less nervous when you’re not being evaluated in a certain way (e.g., being graded)? Have you noticed how preparation and familiarity with material is related to un/easiness during a presentation? In addition, what are the pros and cons of seeking help? What would life be like if you didn’t have this fear? What possibilities would open up to you? These are questions you could explore alone and with a mental health professional as well.

It may bring you both some relief to know that oftentimes, a successful speech or presentation takes more than just knowing the material you’re going to cover. With a winning combination of preparation strategies and resources though, you’ll likely become a more confident and skilled speaker in the future. In any case, you both deserve a standing ovation for investigating ways to grow as a speaker? bravo!

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health
Communication Concerns
Stress & Anxiety

Related questions

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I feel like I have lost the ability to communicate with people

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)
Published date:
Oct 13, 2006
Last reviewed on:
Apr 22, 2016
If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/terrified-public-speaking

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