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 Fearful Public Speaker,

You're not alone. We all know the importance of public speaking. Public speaking is considered the greatest fear a person can have, even greater than the fear of death. Yet, many people are able to master their terror of speaking in front of a group. Research shows that a significant factor in people being promoted at work is the ability to express one's self in public or at a meeting, concisely and effectively, no matter how large the gathering.

Don't berate yourself for what you cannot do, or for what strikes terror in your soul. Think instead about the times you have told a joke or a meaningful story to a group of friends. These are examples of public speaking, and they are positive experiences you can build on. Practice is what helps people get better at speaking in front of people. Some people take courses or classes in speech communication, drama, and theater to increase confidence and strengthen skills. Also, throughout the country, Toastmasters International holds regular meetings where ordinary people gather to strengthen their public speaking and communication skills.

The courses, workshops, and even Toastmasters provide ideas and tips related to everything from losing your thoughts to dry mouth to shaking uncontrollably. Every physical response you can mention has a cause and a solution. Remember? this skill can be learned. For example, actors with stage fright are coached to transform their feelings of fear into excitement and anticipation. They learn to harness their fear and use it to galvanize themselves into performing at their absolute best.

The following points may also give you some specific ideas to keep in mind as you plan your talks.

- Come up with three or four important messages or headlines that you would like your
audience to understand, use, and/or be inspired by.

- Keep your talk simple; remember, you know much more about your subject than they do?
  and, being overloaded with information can be a burden.
- Weave stories ? personal or made-up ones ? through your talk to illustrate points and
  heighten interest.
- Try out some of your stories, jokes, and ideas on friends.
- Practice your presentation formally in front of a mirror or to a group of friends.
- As teachers have been saying for years about framing your talk:
  - Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em.
  - Tell 'em.
  - Tell 'em what you told 'em.
- Before you begin, ask your audience members for their names, and find out their goals
  and experiences as they relate to your presentation.
- Focus on eye contact with your attendees ? looking just over the tops of their heads or
  at their noses will work, too.
- Speak a little more loudly than you think is necessary ? talking to the person farthest
  away from you can help you maintain appropriate volume.
- Slow down, smile, and breathe.
- Allow time for questions and answers.

Another option to think about is hypnosis. Hypnosis involves the guidance of the individual by a
qualified health care provider, who suggests that this person experience changes in
perception, sensation, subjective experience, emotion, thought, and/or behavior. In this case,
hypnosis can help to allow some people to overcome their fear of public speaking through
various techniques, including relaxation and visualization.

Yet another choice is a visit to your primary care provider to discuss the possible use of
medication to help overcome your fear. Drugs called "beta-blockers" are non-habit forming,
inexpensive, and can stop the huge rush of adrenaline that occurs with anxiety right before a
speech. When taken prior to a performance situation, beta-blockers can help to reduce the
physical symptoms related to performance anxiety, including palpitations, hyperventilation,
trembling lips, and sweating palms. Also, many anxious speakers and performers prefer beta-
blockers to other drugs because they allow them to remain mentally alert, which is not always
the case with all medications used to treat anxiety.

As with almost any medication, however, drug interactions and unwanted side effects could
potentially occur. Make sure your health care provider is aware of any pre-existing medical
issues you may have ? beta-blockers can worsen some conditions, such as depression.
Nevertheless, when prescribed by a health care provider, beta-blockers are considered to be
a safe and effective aid for those who want speak out and not freak out.

A few brave steps, some practice and you'll be a speaking pro before you realize. Talk on...

Alice!
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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
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Medical Services (CUMC) [13]
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