Why does public speaking produce 'panic'? [1]

Dear Alice,

I would like to know why our bodies react the way they do when we have to speak in public. Thank you very much.

TM

Answer

Dear TM,

Speaking publicly might seem like an unsurmountable feat. Some people feel as if they were standing up in front of people without any clothes on. A common fear is that audiences will be judgemental?they may think of the speaker as a stupid, ugly fraud. Anything can happen when the speaker is "performing". S/he might get dazed and confused, get lost, make "mistakes," be boring, drool, get cotton mouth, or even worse, not know the answer to a question. However, the speaker also might deliver the presentation of the century.

When it comes to why our bodies react to public speaking in ways that make us uncomfortable?often very uncomfortable?reality has little to do with it. Notice all the "mights" and possibilities mentioned above; it's the fear of what we think may happen and of all the unknown "d-day" factors that send us into fight-or-flight mode. Our brains and bodies are literally preparing us to confront or run like an Olympic athlete from this impending "threat." Necessary for these actions are multiple stress responses, including increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, rapid, shallow breathing, elevated hormone production, and boosted nervous system activity. These physiological changes add up to anxiety, sweating, indigestion, stomachaches, difficulty sleeping, shaking, trouble thinking, dry mouth, headache, and constipation, just to name a few symptoms. Just reading about these bodily responses might make you want to run out of a room full of listeners.

The truth is that humans were built with these automatic reactions so that they could do their best to survive animal and human predators. As humans evolved, the "predators" have evolved from carnivorous beasts to things such as presentations and exams. These days, the potential "victims" are now our egos and self-esteem.

Fortunately, there are many ways to reduce the fear, panic, and sheer horror that public speaking produces for some people who are about to step up to the mic. More good news: many of these strategies are housed right here on the Go Ask Alice! site. Please welcome:
• Fear of public speaking [2]
• Athletic performance anxiety [3]
• Wedding bell butterflies [4]

Check out the related questions on more tips and resources on how to reduce the panic and fear associated with public speaking!

[5]

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [6]
Stress & Anxiety [7]

Related questions

Dry mouth when public speaking [8]
Managing stuttering [9]
Terrified of speaking in class [10]
Concerned about my lisp [11]

Published date:
Nov 10, 2000
Last reviewed on:
Jul 15, 2015

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/why-does-public-speaking-produce-panic#comment-0

Links