Terrified of speaking in class [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.

? Can't Speak in Class.

Answer

Dear Can't Speak in Class,

Although many people have a fear of public speaking, it sounds like the anxiety you experience could be affecting your grades and career goals. You've already gone through the hardest step: admitting that this nervousness thing isn't working out for you. Luckily, because so many people share your anxiety, there are lots of options to help deal with public presentation panic.

As a student you're a hop, skip, and a jump away from a whole slew of resources. One organization dedicated to helping people, like you, build communication skills and confidence is Toastmasters International, which probably has local meetings in your city. For more information, visit Toastmasters International [2]. Another option is to take a public speaking course. If you're worried about getting a poor grade, drop by your professor's office during office hours to talk about your concerns. Or, you can speak with your advisor about the possibility of auditing the course, taking it at another college, or other ways to deal with your anxiety.

You describe your anxiety as getting worse and affecting you in more situations; you may benefit from meeting with a therapist who can help you develop strategies to deal with your anxiety. All of these options are available to you, and you shouldn't feel the need to limit
As you think about what the next step should be, it's important to 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 think of times when you've spoken in front of a group without feeling as edgy? 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 therapist to devise ways to alleviate your anxiety.

It really seems that you're concerned with how your fear of public speaking has affected your life. At the same time, you also have an eye to the future. Many people have been in your shoes, and many still wear them, but it's comforting to know that there are many ways to get help.
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