

Corralling Your Nerves

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.

Speaking publicly to a group can be traumatizing. In fact, Jerry Seinfeld, comedian extraordinaire, joked about preferring to be in the coffin than to be the person giving the eulogy. If you are one of those people that find themselves anxious, here are some tried and true tips.

1. **Start by acknowledging the source of your anxiety.** Is it a fear of failing, not having time to prepare, a worry that the audience won't like you? You can better tackle a problem by knowing what causes it and seeing your anxiety for what it really is. A lot of our reasons may not be logical.
2. **Take the time to prepare.** Don't wait to the last minute. The higher the stakes the more time you need to prepare. Learn all you can about your audience by talking to others or researching them on the web. Understand what their concerns are about your topic or their pressing issues. As you prepare your content, double check to be sure you have addressed all points. Being confident about your content reduces stress.
3. **Don't discuss too many points.** The tendency is to want to tell people everything you know. Resist. Three key points are plenty. Five are max. Too much detail makes it harder for you to remember. It also makes it more difficult for your listeners to keep the information straight.
4. **Plan for moments of interaction.** Asking people for their input takes the pressure off of you. You will feel you are having a conversation instead of making a formal presentation. The more open ended your questions, the more dialogue you will have.
5. **Don't try to memorize.** Inevitably, you will forget a sentence or a point and that will derail you. Instead, know the main ideas you need to cover and the transition statements that will take you from point to point. If you have a limited number of key points, this will be easy to do.
6. **Practice.** Saying your content out loud will help you to hear your explanations. It will allow you to be more fluid when you actually do speak. Practice in the shower, in your car and in front of a mirror. Practicing out loud 5-6 times will be enough for you to internalize your message. Do some of your practices in front of a mirror. Place post it notes on the mirror and pretend they are people in your audience. It will get you comfortable looking at your listeners instead of reading from your notes.
7. **Be sure to practice with your slides.** It affects your timing. Know ahead what statement you will make as you transition from slide to slide. Number your slides and print off a copy. In the event that you are asked to re-explain a point, you can easily navigate to a slide by typing the number of the slide and then Enter.
8. **Anticipate questions.** Sit down with paper and pencil ahead of time and brainstorm the questions you might be asked. Consider the title or function of your listeners as you prepare your answers. Create some slides in reserve to assist with your explanations.
9. **Pick your outfit carefully the night before.** Make sure the outfit is comfortable. If you have gained a few pounds over the holidays, resist wearing something that is too tight or constricting. Make sure the outfit is complete with the right jewelry, tie or scarf. Don't forget to polish your shoes. Feeling good about how you look will help you relax.
10. **Apply a relaxation technique.** Researchers tell us that anxiety can be reduced significantly with relaxation tapes, soothing music and even a pleasant fragrance. It puts your mind at ease.

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11. **Take deep breaths.** Deep breathing forces adrenalin through the blood stream and out of the body. Repeat the process four or five times and you will be good to go.
12. **Arrive early.** The extra time will help you to visit with people and to check your equipment. This in itself is affirming.
13. **Envision success.** Before you begin, picture yourself hitting a home run. Remember a time when you were wildly successful. Enjoy the accolades for a moment. Keep that picture in mind as you begin.
14. **Look people in the eye and smile.** This is a tip that a lot of people forget. Maintaining strong eye contact with your listeners will make you feel you are having a series of one on ones. It will relax you when you see them nodding or agreeing. When you smile, people typically smile back. Getting a positive response early on will definitely reduce anxiety.
15. **When something goes wrong, make a joke or laugh.** No one is perfect. Things happen. Computers fail. Coffee gets spilled. Don't get thrown. People are on your side. They know problems occur. How you handle them is what makes a difference.
16. **Let "YOU" out.** Let yourself be seen as real or authentic. Don't try to be other than the person you are when you are with friends and family. People want to see that side of you.

Overcoming anxiety about presenting may take some time. Don't make the mistake of trying to avoid speaking. Repetition helps. The more you do something, the more those jitters will evaporate. Look for low stakes opportunities to help you build confidence. Good luck as you slay the dragon!

Question: *Think about those times when you have been extremely nervous before a presentation. What additional tips do you have? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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