

How to Transform Fear into Fuel for Dynamic Public Speaking

Whether you call it speech anxiety, stage fright or communication apprehension, fear of public speaking can ruin an otherwise positive experience. But it does not have to be that way. No one escapes the rush of adrenaline that accompanies giving a presentation before an audience. But when you learn to accept, analyze and use fear, you let it work for you like great speakers do. Accepting your fear is probably the biggest help in overcoming it. What troubles you is your fears about the fear that interferes with your performance. A lot of new speakers worry that fear is a sign that they are not meant to be public speakers or that they will do a terrible job. Those fears are simply not valid. Fear is nothing more than your body's natural response to unfamiliar situations. It's a state of heightened alertness and energy, just in case you are in danger. Feeling fear in a new situation is not a bad sign. It means you are healthy and normal. The more you speak, the more you will train your body to recognize speaking as a familiar and safe situation. Until then, you can manage the fear that accompanies the unfamiliar. Accepting your fear helps you not make it worse, analyzing your fear is what begins to help make it better. Most fears fall into one of three categories: fear of having nothing worthwhile to say, fear of displeasing your audience and yourself. For now, let us assume you have already planned wonderful content, so the first fear is not a problem. Fear of displeasing others and yourself are closely related. If you are a person who criticizes yourself harshly, you will pay more attention to critical expressions in your audience. If you are your own best friend, you have the ability to find friendly and supportive people even in the toughest audiences. Being your own best friend is a nice catchphrase, but most people have not been trained even to be polite, much less to be their own best friends. So what would that look like? Well, what do you do when a good friend does something new and brave like public speaking? Do you greet her backstage with a list of everything she did wrong or could have done better? No. You congratulate her on breaking through her fear to take on the world. You talk about your favorite parts. You point out all the places the audience applauded, laughed or looked thoughtful. If you have some suggestions for improvement, you save those for the next day or so, when she has calmed down. But right after that talk, she knows she can count on good words from you. You can make a decision in any situation, to be that kind of a friend to yourself. Once you know you can count on yourself to focus on the positive, you can use whatever bit of fear you have left over. The way you use fear is to change the way you think about it. You smile when you feel that rush of adrenaline. Instead of naming it fear, you call it excitement. You will suddenly realize that this energy is nothing to be afraid of. It gives you the power to grab the attention of your audience and carry it throughout your presentation. That wave of excitement is the creative power that makes a speaker dynamic. It is the electric force that connects you with your listeners. You do not have to conquer this feeling. You can say, Yes! to it. Instead of resisting fear, accept it. Analyze it. Use it. Your audience will feel that Yes in you, and they will say, Yes to your message.

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