

## Public Speaking – You Can Survive, and Even Grow to Like It

Public speaking is a really weird thing. Look at it – you’re talking, in public. What on earth could be so hard, right? Yet most people rank their fear of public speaking higher than their fear of death. So, as Jerry Seinfeld once quipped, “People would rather be in the coffin than delivering the eulogy.”

Even big, tough professional football players get really nervous about this. Remember, these guys go out and get hit by other big, tough players who aim to hit hard and cause pain. The Carolina Panthers’ coach decided that each week, one of his star players should give a rousing pep talk to the team right before the game starts. One of the players was recently quoted saying that he was more nervous about the brief public speaking gig than he was about the whole game!

What is it about public speaking that makes people want to faint, run away, or worse? It’s the spotlight factor – when you’re up front, you can’t avoid being the center of attention. You sweat, they’ll see. You fumble, stutter, or completely forget what you were supposed to be talking about, and there’s nowhere to hide. It’s the fear of complete and public humiliation.

Yet if we look at the situation a little more closely, it’s really not as daunting as it seems in the moment. Really, what are the odds you’ll actually pass out? And if you did, don’t you think people would probably assume you’d had some major medical problem, and not just that you were nearly scared to death to talk to them? And if you manage not to faint or get sick, and you still bomb completely, do you think you’d be the first speaker ever to stink? And, worst case scenario, you actually drop dead in the middle of your speech. Well, at least you’ve moved from your worst fear to your second worst fear; and there’s no chance you’ll be asked to give the eulogy.

Public speaking is a skill, just like any other. If you’re naturally good at it, you might just be a ham. And speaking as someone who’s suffered as a captive audience member one time too many, listening to a ham isn’t much better than banging your head on a desk. If you’re just naturally comfortable in the spotlight, make sure it’s not because you crave the attention.

Since it’s a skill, it’s something anyone can learn. You may never be a silver-tongued orator, but you can certainly improve your abilities to the point where there’s not so much fear. Here are three tips that’ll get you through your trip to the podium in one piece.

- **Practice.** Seems like this should be obvious, but practice is the surest way to get over your fear. Some people dislike practicing their delivery so much that they decide to just wing it when they get up front. This is a disaster waiting to happen. You see, if you practice in the safety of your own head, everything comes out beautifully. If you stumble, your brain says it’s fine, because it knows what you meant to say. Actually vocalizing the words you plan to say means you’ll know for real whether you know how to pronounce everything you’ve written. Until

you practice, you don't know for sure whether you've built any tongue-twisters into your speech.

If you'll run through your speech several times – out loud, and standing up – then you'll take advantage of all the physiological voodoo that your body performs to help you. By delivering the speech just as you plan to do it, you build muscle memory, you rehearse in a powerful way, and you begin to really imprint your speech upon your mind. It becomes more a part of you, and this means you'll be able to deliver it far more naturally than if you've never run your lines.

- Speak often. Sounds like the verbal equivalent of getting desensitized to snakes by touching them, but it really works. If you speak in public often, the stakes go down for each speech you give. If you mess up, and you know you'll be speaking again next week, it's embarrassing, but you dust yourself and get back on that horse. If you mess up during your once-a-year holiday toast, you've got all year to relive the agony. You've got a whole year to replay your dismal failure on the screen in your mind. The best way to get better at public speaking is to do it every chance you get.
- Like your material. You'll do a much better job if you're speaking about something that really gets your juices flowing. But sometimes it's not a matter of liking your topic; the tough part can be deciding which part of your material you'll present at any given occasion. For instance, if you're talking about your business – even for the typical 30 – 60 seconds allotted at most Chamber of Commerce events – there's probably a lot more you'd like to say than what you've got time to say. You've got to make a decision, and like what you've decided enough to stick to it. You can't say it all every time, so you've got to commit, love the speech you've got, and go all out with it. If you don't commit, you're going to look undecided, sound a little confused, and find yourself feeling like you knew so much yet delivered so little.