

## Public Speaking: You'll live through it.

Written by Julie Desmond  
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Eat glass, pay taxes, be locked in a box with snakes, or die... these are a few things most people would choose to do rather than speaking in public. Yet, only the most reclusive of us gets through life without ever giving a toast, running a meeting or making a presentation. So, why the irrational fear of speaking in front of a crowd? And how can a person get over it?

Presentation Trainer Olivia Mitchell describes three reasons humans dread the podium: an ancient survival instinct, a personal memory of a botched presentation, and the conscious awareness of what's at stake.

Survival instincts tell us that if we are separate from the group, we might die. In giving a speech, we are noticeably outside the group; see, they are all out there staring, and I am alone up here with my laser pointer.

The best way to train the brain that speaking is rarely a life threatening situation is to speak frequently... without dying in the process. Join a public speaking group and look for other ways to practice. Some people attend open mike nights and take improvisation classes. When public speaking becomes routine, it becomes survivable.

Latent memories of poor performances in the past can trigger nervousness even decades later. Reach back and analyze your particular nightmare. What happened that day? Who was there? How did you react? What happened next? If you surveyed ten people who watched you muck up that speech when you were younger, how many of them will remember it? How many remember you? Every new speech takes you further beyond the first debacle. Focus forward and strive to improve with every engagement.

The third basis for bundles of nerves at speech time has roots in reality. Being fully aware of what's on the line, you know what's yours to lose. It might be a big sale or a lifelong wedding memory. Remember, even if you fail miserably, your life is not on the line. Better, though, to know your stuff and avoid messing up entirely.

A week before a recent presentation, I told someone that I was looking forward to it and that I should probably practice. She raised one eyebrow and asked, "Were you thinking of not practicing?" Practice is the single best cure for pre-speech jitters. Rehearse your speech in segments for confidence at specific points along the way. Even if you stutter through one section, you will be ready with the next segment as soon as you change the slide.

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If, after practicing, you still feel jumpy, take some tips from public speaking pros.

Choose your topic with enthusiasm. Know your material better than anyone else so you can communicate with passion and authority.

Know your audience. Think about what this group would want to know and how they would like to receive the information. Whenever possible, mingle with the crowd prior to speaking. Casual conversation will ease tensions - yours and your audience's.

Never apologize for nervous twitches. Your audience doesn't notice or care.

Say what is on your mind. Look out on a crowd and say, "Whew, big crowd tonight," to release pressure and become more real to your audience.

With practice, anyone can become an effective public speaker. While imagining people naked rarely brings the desired comfort level, another positive idea will: remember, when you look out at that expectant audience, most of them would rather eat glass than do what you are about to do. Cheers!

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