



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

PRESENTATIONS

Student Life - Counselling Support

Are you **terrified of tutorial presentations**? Frozen by public speaking panic? Do you agonize for days or weeks beforehand, fearing that you will say things wrong, have a shaky voice, blush, forget what you were going to say, or otherwise experience total disaster?

Well, so do many other people, including some very successful ones. The fear is so common it's even got a name - "**performance anxiety**" - and many of the world's best performers, including star athletes, musicians and actors, have had to deal with it. So you can, too.

What's going on?

It can help to understand what's going on, so that we don't feel that our reactions are so totally out of control. What's happening is that when we get nervous or anxious, we switch on (without meaning to) the body's stress response, the 'fight or flight' response. This is fine, up to a point - the stress response pushes us to get going and do something - but if we get too stressed, it works against us. That's because the stress response is an old biological survival mechanism which is preparing us to do something fast and physical, which it does very well, starting with a rush of adrenaline that gets the body all charged up.

But too much stress is not much help for clear thinking and memory. If we are too tense or worried, we may forget things or feel uncomfortable physical reactions such as pounding heart, shaky voice, etc. Just what you don't want, right? Then it's easy to get into an unpleasant feedback loop - worry and anxiety set us up to feel tense and uncomfortable, which can affect our performance, so that next time we're definitely going to feel more worried and anxious, which can make us feel more tense and uncomfortable, which can make it even harder to speak, and so on, and on, and on..... So all you have to do is - calm down!

How???

It is possible to break that loop, and change it for a better one, so that it gets easier to speak, and so you don't worry as much, and so you don't get as tense, and so it gets even easier to speak! Here are some steps you can take.

Do enough preparation - but not too much

We all have to learn how to prepare for a talk. Just a couple of points to remember:

- The more prepared you are by knowing your content well and having the Power Point or any visual aids prepared well in advance, giving you time to practice running it through, will help you to feel more in control. Don't prepare too much - there's a limit to how much you can say in a given time.
- Preparing 'extras' - handouts, overheads, etc. - gives the audience something to look at besides you!
- Practice your presentation a few times – maybe in front of family and /or friends.
- Trying out the physical environment and equipment not only makes sure that things work and you know how to use them, but also helps you calm down because you're more familiar with it.
- Stop frightening yourself!

How we think makes a difference

Our brains are fantastic! We can frighten ourselves into a complete panic, just by what we are thinking. We do this by thinking very negatively about what might happen, what might go wrong, what went wrong once in the past, what a disaster it will be if something does go wrong, etc.:

"What if I make a mistake? They'll think I'm an idiot!"

"My voice will shake - I'll make a fool of myself!"

"I can't do this - I know I can't!"

When we scare ourselves, we switch on the stress response - and there we go, back in that feedback loop. (By the way, notice how a lot of this kind of thinking is either exaggerated - "If I make a mistake, they'll think I'm an idiot," - or imaginary - "What if ...?" It's often completely unrealistic.)

So - make sure you are thinking realistically and positively –

"Everyone makes mistakes - it's no big deal if I make one occasionally."

"So what if someone guesses I'm a little nervous? Most people are."

"I can do it - it's just communicating some information to other students like me."

"I'll feel good when I've done it."

Learn how to slow down and calm yourself

When we're stressed we rush, and that often makes it harder to speak clearly. Taking some simple steps to slow things down also helps us to calm ourselves down. Thinking positively is an important part of this, but there are also some other strategies:

1. Get there early enough so that you're not rushing
2. Sit down for a minute before you go in - and do a simple exercise:
 - Breathe slowly
 - As you breathe out, remind yourself: "Relax," or "Slow down"
 - As you breathe out, let your muscles relax and loosen up
3. Take a few slow breaths just before you start
4. Take enough time to arrange your materials comfortably before you begin to speak
5. Purposely start speaking at a rather slow pace.

Remember 3 basic steps: PREPARE, THINK REALISTICALLY, AND SLOW DOWN. This will work for most of us most of the time. But if you are feeling stuck and silenced, there is more you can do about it - talk it over with a counsellor to see what might work more effectively for you.

Counselling Support is available to assist students with personal difficulties that are affecting their study.

The service provides:

- Individual Counselling by appointment
- Telephone Counselling by appointment
- Mental health emergency response

Counselling Support

Ground Floor, Horace Lamb Building

The University of Adelaide

Ph: +61 8 8313 5663

After hours support: 1300 167 654 or sms 0488 884 197

This pamphlet was written by Flinders University Health and Counselling Services and has been reprinted as part of a collaborative project between the counselling services at Flinders and Adelaide University. Modified by Student Life Counselling Support.

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