



**PUBLIC
SPEAKING
ANXIETY**

“THE MIND IS A WONDERFUL THING - IT STARTS WORKING THE MINUTE YOU’RE BORN AND NEVER STOPS UNTIL YOU GET UP TO SPEAK”

As a student at Anglia Ruskin University you may be required to give an oral presentation as part of your course work. The thought and the reality of this may be scary.

Public speaking anxiety is very common among students and the general population. Students who are very anxious about public speaking may avoid modules where this is required, rarely speak in seminars, or decide against certain careers which require occasional speaking before a group.

The good news is that public speaking anxiety can be alleviated. Some nervousness is necessary. You need to be nervous but not overwhelmed by nerves. Think in terms of an “adrenalin thermometer” where the reading is not too high or too low. You can also see nervousness positively, as excitement/arousal rather than as anxiety.

Practical exercises and information are offered in this booklet for coping with excess nerves before and during a presentation.

Mental, behavioural and physical techniques can help you manage nerves. Equipped with these, taking a role and ‘having a go’ will not seem so daunting. Jumping into the pool with ‘psychological armbands’ - as one student put it. Confidence develops from doing things and being open to learning from mistakes.

Transferable skill being able to manage anxiety level is a very useful skill, transferable to other situations e.g. exams, interviews, as well as life beyond University.

WHAT IS PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY?

Public speaking anxiety often involves a central fear of being scrutinised and judged unfavourably by others. Students who are very anxious about presentations often say that they fear being the centre of attention and will feel self-conscious and embarrassed when they speak. Some worry that they will “look stupid” to others,





make a mistake or be judged unattractive. Others may express a belief that what they have to say is not worthwhile as no one would be interested. It is easy for such worries to spiral into negative thoughts such as “I’m a failure”.

Negative, unhelpful thoughts can build out of all proportion and affect feelings, behaviour and physical symptoms.

Catastrophe scenario - anxiety about giving a presentation may be traceable to a previous negative, humiliating or distressing experience - perhaps at school or college - and you may be predicting that future presentations will not go well. This is a prediction not fact.

Perfectionism - self-imposed pressure to do the perfect presentation (something not reasonable or expected) may also fuel anxiety, particularly if this is your first time of doing one at University.

Physical symptoms of anxiety often include racing heart, blushing, shaking, dry mouth, sweating, dizziness, being tongue-tied, butterflies in stomach, rapid breathing. These are normal physiological reactions to fear linked with the body pumping out too much adrenalin.

WHAT CAN I DO?

STEP 1

BEFORE THE PRESENTATION

Ask yourself “what am I really afraid of?”

Naming a fear sometimes helps to diminish it. You may also gain a more realistic view of what is expected or not expected.

Ask yourself “what is the worst that could happen during a presentation?”

Looked at calmly, the ‘catastrophe’ may not be so bad after all.

What can I do about the ‘catastrophe’ if it does happen?

What are my strengths as a public speaker?

It is easy to overlook these if you are focused on your perceived limitations.

STEP 2

Recognise your negative self-talk which is anxiety generating. Practise challenging and then changing negative thoughts into positive ones.

Negatives	What is the evidence?	Positive
1. They know more than me	1.	1.
2. They think I’m nervous	2.	2.
3. I’ll go to pieces	3.	3.
4. They won’t listen	4.	4.
5. I’ll fail this presentation	5.	5.
6. I’m no good at this	6.	6.
7. Other	7.	7.

STEP 3

MANAGING PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

Learn and practise the skill of physical relaxation. Relaxation techniques can help you to reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety. If practised regularly, which is important, the overall level of anxiety can reduce. Being able to release bodily tension and achieve a relaxed state can also be mind calming. This will help you to feel more in control, better able to concentrate, and remember what you want to say.



Nervousness will not necessarily go up when you give your presentation, but if it starts from a low level it is much less likely that it will go too high - remember the adrenalin thermometer.

Remind yourself not to overdose on caffeine - tea, coffee, fizzy drinks etc.

STEP 4

CONTROLLED BREATHING

Breathing is one of the activities of the body where there is conscious control and automatic activity. Most of the time we do not give much thought to how we are breathing. Altering the way we are breathing can be the most single effective way of achieving a calm relaxed state and remaining calm in a stressful situation.

BREATHING AWARENESS

Next time you are very anxious notice how you are breathing. It may be shallow, rapid, irregular or you may be holding your breath, not exhaling or inhaling fully. In a situation of threat, real or imagined, this type of breathing is likely. Physical exertion also tends to be characterised by chest breathing.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

When we are resting breathing tends to be deeper and slower from the diaphragm. This type of breathing is easily observable in a sleeping baby - the tummy moves outwards with each in-breath and inwards with each out breath.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

This is conventional good advice for calming down the nervous system, though sometimes easier said than done.

BREATHING EXERCISES

- Focus your attention on your breathing. Become aware of how fast or slowly you are breathing, whether you are breathing shallowly or deeply.
- Now put one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach just below your rib cage. Relax your shoulders and hands.
- As you breathe out let your stomach flatten. As you breathe in through your nose allow your stomach to swell.
- Try to keep movement in your upper chest to a minimum.
- Slowly and evenly breathe through your nose.
- Allow your breath to become smooth, easy and regular.

VISUALISATION

- As you breathe in, imagine you are drawing a half circle with your breath and as you breathe out, you complete the second half of the circle.
- Imagine being on a swing, breathing in as you go up and breathing out as you go down.
- Regular diaphragmatic breathing requires around 8 - 10 breaths in a minute, breathing in and out counts as one breath.
- You might also want to try the breathing exercises.
- Find what works for you.

STEP 5

PRESENTATION PLANNING

Careful preparation of your talk is essential if you are to feel confident about what you have to say and that you can do it. Lots of advice is accessible on planning a talk, structure, notes and cards, choosing visual aids.





A SHORT GUIDE ON PRESENTATIONS

REHEARSAL

Each practice helps you to know your material, check on your timing, and experiment with getting your message across e.g. voice level, speed of speaking, conveying interest/enthusiasm.

You can:

- Practise out loud by yourself.
- Tape yourself and give yourself constructive feedback - don't do this if you think it will make you more anxious.
- Give your talk to a friend or friends. If a friend cannot be cajoled, a Counsellor will be an audience.
- Familiarise yourself with where you will speak, e.g. stand at the front of the classroom.
- Know and rehearse well the beginning of your talk so that you can confidently get going, anxiety is often highest at the start.

Think about what would help you in giving your talk, e.g. sitting rather than standing.

You might want to let your module tutors know that you are very nervous. They might have helpful suggestions.

ON THE DAY

- Use your preferred breathing and relaxation exercises to calm you.
 - Think positively, challenge negative thoughts. Say to yourself "I can do this, I am well prepared."
 - Picture your audience as friendly - they may well be pre-occupied with their talk to you.
 - Talking informally with your audience, or members of it, before you start your talk can help to defuse anxiety, e.g. "Can you hear me?"; "Is everyone here?"
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- Physical movement helps to discharge anxiety, prevent ‘freezing’, e.g. walk around, shake your hands and arms, screw up your face and relax it.
- Use physicality to support you, e.g. perching on a table, sitting on a chair.
- Take a few deep breaths as your turn approaches, letting go of as much tension as possible, letting your shoulders drop and relax. When it’s your turn, use the adrenaline rush to feel alert and enthusiastic about what you have to say.

Do not concentrate on yourself as you give your talk, e.g. “do people think I’m nervous?”, “how do I look?” Focus on the important information you want to give to others and how it will interest them.

If worrying thoughts creep in during your talk, say to yourself firmly STOP - take a deep breath in and out. You can mark your work with a red dot to remind you of your stop message.

Blushing? Ignore it. Remind yourself that it will die down, and you will not be marked down for turning pink.

Keep your breathing going - out and in regularly. You can only speak on an out - breath (Try it!).

Slow down your speaking if you are speeding, as this will help you to feel more in control. Again you can mark your work to remind you.

Remember - you never look as nervous as you feel.

AFTER THE PRESENTATION

Give yourself appreciation for having done it. Don’t berate yourself for mistakes. You can think realistically about what you will try differently next time. You might even enjoy giving a talk!





APPENDIX 1, PRESENTATIONS

PLANNING A PRESENTATION

- Make sure you know the requirements of the presentation: time allocation, content and purpose
- Prepare carefully, research thoroughly, and structure with an introduction, middle section and conclusion
- Don't read out an essay
- Use headings, bullet points and keywords
- Prepare brief notes for each heading on numbered cue cards
- Decide on appropriate visual aids
- Keep text clear, simple and in an appropriate font size
- Do not use too many visual aids
- Display key points for the audience and as prompts for yourself
- Familiarise yourself with the material and the equipment
- Rehearse 'authentically', using all the equipment and material you intend to use
- Stand back to check the appropriateness of your visual aids
- Time yourself and be prepared to edit, both in rehearsal and on the day
- Make sure you have the necessary equipment set up and working, your overheads, hand-outs and cue cards

INTRODUCTION

- Make a conscious effort to relax
- Look at the audience
- Smile

- Speak clearly and audibly and maintain eye contact
- Briefly outline what you are going to talk about

MIDDLE SECTION

- Go through the main points one by one with a logical, coherent progression
- Don't overload the audience with facts and figures
- Don't just say everything you know about the subject
- Speak to the audience, not the board
- Avoid blocking the view of your visual aids

CONCLUSION

- Summarise the main points and draw a conclusion
- Invite questions

APPENDIX 2, BREATHING EXERCISES

THE THREE PART BREATH

- Can be done anywhere.
- Do it each time you look at your watch or the clock.
- Before you answer the telephone or whenever you feel pressurised. Empty your lungs and imagine a conical shape.
- First fill the top third of your lungs, the apex of the cone, breathing in slowly and steadily through your nose.
- Then fill the middle third.



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- Continue breathing - push out your stomach and fill the base of the cone.
 - Then exhale through your parted lips like a sigh.
 - Imagine as you let all the air out of your lungs that you are letting out all the tension and pressure. Visualise a black cloud of tension drifting away with your breath.
 - Let your lungs completely empty and go on with your work.
 - Do this breath as often as possible during the day.

THE CIRCUIT BREAKER

Use whenever you feel the symptoms that bother you, e.g. butterflies or panic feelings when the pressure is too great or you feel stressed. Use in traffic jams, at meetings or before attempting something that is difficult for you.

- Breathe in through your nose
 - Breathe out through your mouth
 - Breathe very calmly and gently
 - Imagine a feather about 12” away from your lips. You must not disturb the feather with your breath.
 - Count between breaths.
 - Count more quickly each time so that there is no pressure on your breathing.
 - Close your eyes and relax (where appropriate).
 - Breathe in through your nose. Out through your mouth (not disturbing the feather).
 - Count one.
 - Breathe again. Count two. Breathe again, count three, and so on up to ten.
 - Repeat the one to ten circuit three times.
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- You will find this very calming and refreshing, and after three circuits feel quite tranquil.
- If you can't do three, one circuit will help in emergencies.

WORRIED ABOUT EXAMS?

Anxiety is a normal reaction to a stressful situation. Most people experience some anxiety and tension about preparing for and sitting exams. A certain amount of adrenalin flowing is useful and appropriate, a spur to being alert, to concentrating fully and to performing well. Too much anxiety, however, can be debilitating and accompanied by unpleasant feelings, sleep disturbance and physical symptoms such as headaches, sickness, shakiness.

Noticing these symptoms might add to your worrying, which can also use up a lot of energy. The good news is that you can learn to manage anxiety more effectively and to strengthen revision and exam skills.

LEARN HOW TO RELAX MIND AND BODY

Using relaxation skills and breathing techniques can help you before and during the exam to keep calm, be alert and to think. Altering breathing can also optimise oxygen uptake, helping the brain to be alert.

You may find it helpful to picture an adrenalin thermometer and that you can keep the reading low by using relaxation techniques when you need to. Learning how to relax may also help with sleep difficulties, allowing the mind to 'switch off' and quieten prior to sleep.

OTHER SOURCES OF HELP

S.Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and Do it anyway*

H.Kennerley, *Overcoming Anxiety - a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques*

D.Brookes, *Breathe away stress*

J.Van Emden and L.Becker, *Presentation Skills for Students*



