



Stress Management

# 6 Ways to Reduce the Stress of Presenting

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**In the past 30 years, I've given** more than 3,000 speeches to audiences across the world. Presentations have been such a central part of my work that many who know me best have been surprised to learn how much anxiety they used to cause me. After my fourth root canal, my dentist pointed out that I appeared to be grinding my teeth at night. He suggested a mouth guard. Over the next few years, I ground through three of them. Fortunately, materials science advanced faster than my grinding and I eventually received a more durable one. Still, I had almost resigned myself to the fact that fitful sleep, restless legs, and a variety of aches throughout my body were the price of the career I had chosen.

I knew I had turned a corner 10 years ago when I was invited to speak to a prestigious business audience at Radio City Music Hall. I slept peacefully the night before. And when I stepped through the crimson curtains to face 6,000 nattily dressed executives, my former panic and dread were replaced with a sense of exhilaration and gratitude.

As I came to realize that presentations would be a permanent facet of my career, I began accumulating tactics to increase my pleasure while reducing the pain. Here are six that have made an enormous difference for me:

**1. Bless, don't impress.** I discovered that much of my stress was more about my motive than the event. I would fret and stew more about what I imagined people would think of me than whether I would effectively serve them. I was most stressed when my motive was more about looking good than doing good. I recall pulling to the side of the road in the hills above Silicon Valley on the way to a retreat with a tech executive team that I was especially worried about. I asked myself, "Why am I doing this?" As I looked out at the Valley, the tightness in my chest disappeared. A sudden clarity overtook me. My errand was not about me — it was about them. I focused on the important ideas I hoped to share. I no longer cared if I did it perfectly — I only hoped I would do it well enough that they would be blessed by the experience. My stress subsides when my motive is to bless rather than impress.

**2. Rehearse, but don't obsess.** I've learned to discern when over-rehearsing is counterproductive. I provoke more stress in myself when my preparation moves past the point of diminishing returns. When it's an obsession, not preparation, it's time to simply disconnect and engage in some distracting activity. If I am giving a new presentation I will practice it three times: Once when I finish preparing it, again the day before, and finally a few hours before I go "on."

**3. Create rest stops.** For three weeks prior to my first three-hour-long presentation, I could hardly digest my dinner. How could I possibly avoid losing my place for so long? I later discovered that while a 180-minute presentation can seem like an uncrossable minefield, a series of 10 minutes chunks feels more doable. I began to organize my material in smaller chunks that built logically on one another.

**4. Make it a conversation.** A related discovery that brought relief was that audiences hate protracted monologues almost as much as I fear giving them. Audiences disengage when your monologue yawns

on. There are hundreds of clever ways to engage the audience that amplify the persuasiveness of your presentation, relieve the tedium of a lecture and reduce your anxiety by giving you rest stops. I combined this and the previous insight by breaking all of my lectures into small chunks separated by brief, relevant and topic-appropriate involvement activities.

Involvement activities can invite participants to **think** with you, **feel** with you, **help** you, or **try** something with you. For example, you could share data and invite the group to make sense of it with you (think); show a brief video that provokes relevant emotion on your topic (feel); ask someone to read a pertinent quote from an expert and comment on it (help); or attempt a skill you're teaching in a safe and structured way (try). I'm often told that "sophisticated groups" don't want to be involved. That's baloney. They don't want to be involved in silly or worthless ways. But they love a structured task that is relevant to the topic that makes them feel smart and respected.

For example, when I'm teaching the skills of our [Crucial Conversations Training](#) to an executive team I start out by pairing them up and asking them to show how they'd respond to an abusive physician in a brief video clip. I limit their response to one sentence, so they don't feel they have to take on a dramatic role — and allow them to be playful if they prefer, rather than serious. That interaction anchors the subject I want to involve them in and warms up the room immediately. It also takes the pressure off of me for a moment while I get my bearings.

**5. Know thyself.** There's nothing intrinsically stressful about a presentation. The stress is usually self-induced — often because it triggers some trauma you carry from a painful life experiences (i.e. the audience snickered when you squeaked rather than sang during a choir solo in third grade) that your mind conjures a connection to. Over

time, I became aware that my self-imposed demands for perfection and craving of universal approval were my primary generators of anxiety. As I've developed sources of peace and a sense of worth that are independent of these unattainable goals, I've found it easier to focus on *blessing* and surrendered the need to *impress*.

**6. Breathe.** Psychologist Amy Cuddy gave me a very practical stress-reduction tool. In controlled experiments, she demonstrated that before entering a high stakes meeting, you can substantially reduce stress hormones in your blood by simply breathing deeply and slowly while assuming a powerful pose (think Wonder Woman or Superman). When last minute jitters take over, I've found a bathroom stall and used this one to great benefit.

Over the years, these tactics have helped me learn to connect in a meaningful way with groups, turning once-stressful presentations into some of the most gratifying experiences of my life. As I've learned to get out of my own head, ground myself in more intrinsic sources of worth, connect to my deeper motives for sharing, and just *breathe*, the experience of standing in front of an audience is no longer a curse, but a blessing to me.

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