

**Public Speaking Anxiety: Understanding to Overcome**

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## **Public Speaking Anxiety: Understanding to Overcome**

Public speaking is a part of everyday life. For some, speaking in large groups comes naturally while for others, it is something that they avoid. However, communication is important in this world and overcoming this fear would help improve interactions in personal, work, and social life. Public speaking is a common issue that many people, especially students struggle with, and it is a skill that can be improved by better understanding the issue and developing skills in order to better effectively communicate in large group settings.

### **Public Speaking is an Issue:**

While some people may argue that anxiety from public speaking does not exist, it is a common weakness. Public speaking can occur in various forms. Whether it's for an introduction, presentation, eulogy, tribute, training session, education, report, or via electronic means, public speaking is a major part of everyday life. This mode of communication allows an individual to share their message with others. It is common for people who have a fear of speaking to shut down when speaking in front of a group is required. However, when someone develops this fear, the anxiety they experience acts as a roadblock which prevents the message from being received as intended. I have struggled with speaking in public throughout my life, especially during presentations in large group events such as a speech in front of a class or giving a talk in church. While I have had good ideas, my fear of public speaking prevented me from sharing my thoughts in the most effective way possible.

### **What makes Public Speaking an Issue?**

Communication competence (CC) can help overcome anxiety of speaking in front of others. According to *An Introduction to Communication Studies*, the text refers to CC as “the knowledge of effective and appropriate communication patterns and the ability to use and adapt to that knowledge in various contexts,” (Ch. 1.4). In order to gain more knowledge of effective and appropriate communication, an individual can observe how others speak and develop skills that are successful in those speeches. The next step is to be able to use these skills. Even with practice and mastery of these strategies, public speaking anxiety can still occur and prevent one from effectively using skills. The textbook explains that a person’s physiological and psychological characteristics can affect competence, along with the level of communication apprehension, which is the level of anxiety regarding communication.

Communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety experienced by a person due to actual or imagined communication with another person(s). While this includes numerous forms of communication, public speaking is the most common. Research done by Jennifer Priem and Denise Solomon informs that “public speaking is the number-one fear of the majority of people,” (Priem & Solomon, 2009). Priem and Solomon conducted a study where they collected saliva to test the cortisol levels of students at two different times of the day, once during their class which they had to speak in. They found that cortisol, which is a reliable measure of stress, showed that participants giving the speech experienced more stress (Priem & Solomon, 2009). This helps emphasize that public speaking is a problem for many.

Research conducted by Graham Bodie explains that there are three ways to address the issue of public speaking that includes desensitization, cognitive restructuring, and skills training. This anxiety is common, but not for all people. Within his study, Bodie discovered that general

social anxiety can later be associated with public speaking, (Bodie, 2010). This helps explain how people that experience social anxiety are more likely to also develop a fear of speaking in public.

Fear of public speaking can also correlate to the lack of communication skills. Lisa Breakey, a speech-language pathologist explained that her clients reported having negative public speaking situations. She explained that “their experiences were negative because their presentation skills were weak, and they are in fact poor public speakers,” (Breakey, 2005). People can develop anxiety when faced with public speaking due to a lack of skill. One strategy Breakey mentioned to improve public speaking is to use self-examination to pick and work on specific problems. Gaining insight and improving on strategies to become a good communicator can help overcome the fear of public speaking.

While every person has their own challenges with public speaking, preparation can positively impact the success of one's speech. A study showed that “the quality of speech performance correlated positively with cumulative grade point average, total preparation time, time spent preparing visual aid, number of rehearsals for an audience...” (Menzel & Carrell 2009). Preparing for a speech can happen in various ways, including rehearsing aloud and in front of others. Anxiety can negatively affect the quality of a speech, however, setting aside more time to prepare can increase the quality and success when public speaking.

### **Steps to Overcome Public Speaking Anxiety:**

It is important to understand that public speaking is a skill that can be developed and improved. While some people are naturally good at communicating with large groups of people,

others are not and instead of being ashamed, realizing it is an issue and working to improve will help decrease the fear.

The first step to overcoming the fear of public speaking is to understand the issue. After gaining knowledge of what the fear of public speaking is and if it is a relevant problem, the next step is to find solutions in order to overcome it. The textbook gives ten ways to reduce speaking anxiety. Some of these tips include remembering that it is a common anxiety, to have confidence, and to practice.

Realizing it is a common problem helps provide comfort when speaking in front of others. The chance that peoples in the audience have also experienced anxiety when having to speak is high, which means they can be more forgiving as they know what the speaker is going through. It is easy to feel alone and embarrassed when facing anxiety, however knowing that I am not alone and that it is okay for me to make mistakes will help calm my nerves.

Confidence is a key part of overcoming a fear of public speaking. Anxiety often is thought of to be negative, however, it can be used as a way to know you are being pushed out of your comfort zone and progressing. Although speaking in large groups can be scary, I will gain confidence by taking deep breaths before to calm my nerves and get in control. I will also trust in the work that I have put in to prepare for the speech and trust in myself.

The last step that I am going to work on to overcome my fear of public speaking is to practice and improve my weaknesses. Specifically, self-examination is a useful tool to better improve public speaking and overcoming the fear associated with it. This includes recording presentations and rewatching them to find specific points of weakness to work on. Spending time on those weaknesses can help the overall presentation improve and become more natural, which can help decrease my anxiety.

### **Conclusion**

Public speaking anxiety is an issue that many people, including me, struggle with. However, public speaking is a skill that can be improved by remembering that it is a common fear, to have confidence, and to practice. Gaining a better understanding of what causes public speaking anxiety and developing skills will result in being able to better communicate in large group settings. Public speaking is a key part of this life, by mastering it we can improve how we speak to others which will only enrich our lives.

## Citations

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