TAME THE ANXIETY BEASTWith a bit of effort, we can manage our spontaneous speaking anxiety sothat it doesn’t manage us. Peeling onions almost always makes me cry,  
but there was a time long ago when an onion caused a very different  
emotional response—sheer panic! I was interviewing for a job as employee  
number ninety-nine at an **up-and-coming software company**. I made it  
through several rounds, and the last step was to sit for an interview with  
the CEO, who prided himself on personally meeting everyone before they  
were hired.

When I arrived at the appointed time, I found the Big Boss already waiting  
for me. That threw me a little—in my experience, senior executives were so  
busy that they usually arrived late. But I was about to field another, more  
substantive curveball. Just a minute or two into our conversation, the CEO  
posed a question I never could have anticipated (it turned out he was famous  
for asking open-ended questions to test how people would respond under  
pressure). “If you were an onion,” he said,  
“and I peeled back the first three layers, what would I find?”

Um . . . okay. I was expecting to talk about topics such as my **educational**

**credentials**, my past experience, my goals, and the reasons I believed I was

a good fit for the company. Why was he asking me about onions?

Despite all the practice I had with spontaneous speaking growing up, I

now experienced the kind of **fight-or-flight response** most of us struggle

with in such situations. My shoulders tensed. My throat went dry. My brain

was overloaded. I felt **jittery** and hot. I really wanted to ace this interview,

but my nerves were **getting the better of** me. I had no idea what to say.

To improve at spontaneous communication, or frankly any kind of

communication, we must first learn to manage the intense anxiety that can

arise. As I’ve suggested, an attack of nerves can overpower us, consuming

our attention, energy, and ability to execute.1 We can even become caught

in what we might call an **anxiety spiral**. Our anxiety leads us **to fault**

ourselves and lose confidence—we feel alone, disempowered,

**marginalized**. That produces still more anxiety.2 At the extreme, this spiral can cause us to choke when put on the spot. Our anxiety overwhelms our

ability to cope with it.

The good news is that we can adopt techniques to reduce our anxiety,

becoming more comfortable communicating ideas in any situation without

our anxiety kicking into high gear. We can also become more compelling to

others.

The goal isn’t to eradicate anxiety but rather to prevent it from hampering

us. Some situations will always freak us out. And that’s actually okay—a bit

of anxiety is a good thing. Too much stress impedes us from completing

tasks successfully, but experiments have suggested that a certain amount of

it helps to motivate us. When we feel moderately stressed or fearful, our

bodies become energized and primed for action, our minds become more

alert and focused, and we become more attuned to others around us.

Research with rats suggests that acute stress can improve memory by

causing new nerve cells to form in the brain.

In my experience, the best way to tame the speaking anxiety beast is to

take **a two-pronged approach. First, tackle the symptoms of anxiety that pop**

**up in the moment. Second, address anxiety’s underlying sources**. **In this**

**chapter, we’ll focus primarily on symptoms**, while later in the book we’ll

discuss some of anxiety’s sources. When it comes to symptoms, some

simple techniques can help. Mobilizing these techniques in the moment and

in advance of anticipated spontaneous speaking situations, we can feel far

more comfortable and confident, and we can respond more effectively. The

next time we’re in a job interview or some other spontaneous speaking

situation and we’re surprised with a proverbial peeling-back-the-onion

question, we’ll be in a far better position to handle it.

Know Your ABCs

I’ve noted in passing many of the symptoms people often feel when anxious.

It turns out we can group these into a few simple categories— what we can

call the **ABCs of speaking anxiety**

When others put us on the spot, we experience **affective symptoms**, those

relating to our mood or how we feel. People under the spotlight often feel

stressed, pressured, or **lacking in agency**. They feel vulnerable,

overwhelmed, and frightened.

We also experience symptoms that are behavioral or physiological in

nature. We sweat. Tremble. Stutter. Our heart races. Our voice shakes. Our

breathing becomes shallow. Our speech becomes faster, more jittery. Our

faces become flushed. Our mouths go dry.

A third and final category of symptoms are cognitive. We become

flustered, blanking out or forgetting what we want or need to say. We fixate

on our awareness of others watching us and can’t focus on our audiences

and their needs. We experience negative thoughts or self-talk, a little voice

in our heads that tells us we’re not prepared, we’re likely to fail, others are

better than us, and so on.

Mindfulness Matters

Let’s explore how we might tackle these symptoms, starting with the

affective ones. A powerful way to address unhelpful or negative feelings that

arise in the moment is to practice mindfulness.7 Notice and acknowledge the

unpleasant feelings, don’t ignore or deny them, and don’t berate yourself for

experiencing them. As you’re experiencing these feelings, affirm their

inability to define you as a person. As Stanford professor S. Christian

Wheeler relates, “There’s me and then there’s this anxious feeling that is

going on in my body. That amount of psychological distance allows you to

observe it without becoming attached to it.

••• TRY IT•••

The next time you feel a negative emotion like anxiety, remind yourself that

you and the emotion are not the same thing. Imagine you were someone else

observing you experiencing the emotion.

Greet your feelings head-on, reminding yourself that it’s normal and

natural to feel anxious and that most people in your situation would, too.

“Right now, I’m nervous,” you might tell yourself. “I’m nervous because

this is high-stakes for me. My reputation is on the line. This reaction makes

sense and is normal.” Permitting yourself to notice and identify how your

mind and body are behaving can help you to regain a sense of agency or

control when you would otherwise feel lost and distracted. By affirming that

your negative feelings are normal and natural, you prevent the emotion from

sweeping you away. You give yourself just a bit of space to break free and

help yourself—by taking a deep breath, perhaps, or by imagining how you

might respond to what someone next to you just said.

As you become aware of your feelings, you can go further and reframe

them in more positive ways that energize rather than **stymie** you. People

who become anxious before speaking often think they must try to calm themselves. Some make use of alcohol or other substances;

others focus on

visualizations like the famous Brady Bunch advice to imagine your audience

“**Sitting in their underwear**”. These measures often do more harm than good

because they can leave you mentally fuzzy or distracted.

As my friend

Professor Alison Wood Brooks suggests, a better strategy might be to

reframe anxiety as excitement. In a series of experiments, she showed that

people who told themselves that they were excited (by stating “I am excited”

out loud) before public speaking improved how they did. They also came to

feel more excited and to see their speaking as an opportunity rather than a

threat (more on this later).

It turns out that anxiety affects your body in much the same way as

excitement does. Both put us in a state of “very high alertness.” Like

mindfulness, reframing anxiety as something you are excited about affords

us a sense of agency. We can’t control our basic physiological response to

the perceived threat posed by speaking, but we can control how we

understand and label it. Feeling that sense of control shifts our experience

of speaking and helps us to do better at it.

Slow Down, Cool Down, and Dampen Up

To address behavioral symptoms, one **tried-and-true method** is to focus on

your breathing. Take some deep, long belly breaths, the kind you would do

if you were practicing yoga or tai chi. Really fill your lower abdomen. As

you’ll find, breathing in this way allows you to feel calmer and slows your

heart rate as well as the pace of your speech.

As you breathe, focus on the relative length of inhalations and

exhalations. I was privileged to have the neuroscientist Andrew Huberman

appear on my Think Fast, Talk Smart: The Podcast.

As he observed, the

magic of deep breathing when it comes to alleviating anxiety is in the

exhalation. When you exhale, you’re reducing carbon dioxide in your lungs,

which in turn calms your nervous system.

A good rule of thumb—or should

I say, rule of lung—is to make exhalations twice as long as inhalations.

Count to three as you inhale, and exhale over a count of six. Studies show

that deep breathing of this sort starts to calm your nervous system in a matter

of seconds.11 Run through this pattern of breathing just two or three times

and your heart rate will begin to slow.

You’ll find that the rate at which you speak will slow as well. Speaking is

all about breath and breath control. The faster you breathe, the faster you

speak. Slow your breathing, and your speech also will naturally slow.

If you’re a fast talker, you might find that deep breathing alone doesn’t

slow you down. In that case, try slowing your movements—your hand

motions, the nodding of your head, the twisting of your torso, and so on. We

tend to synchronize our speech with our gestures. Fast talkers gesture

quickly, using swift, jerky motions. Slow down our movements, and our

speech will slow as well.

As part of the fight-or-flight response, our bodies release **adrenaline**, a

hormone that prompts us to move away from a threat and toward safety.

Adrenaline causes our heart rate to rise and our muscles to tighten and

become shaky.

Turning our bodies to address a different side of the room or

making small hand gestures can help to dissipate shakiness by fulfilling our

need to move.

If you’re giving an impromptu **toast** at a wedding, try

walking slowly from one side to the next as you speak (ever notice that

attorneys on TV always seem to do that when handling questions from the

judge or addressing the jury?). You don’t want to distract people by pacing

too much, but taking a few steps in one direction as you shift between points

can ease any shakiness you may feel.

What can you do about the blushing and perspiration unleashed when

you’re put on the spot? Quite a lot. When you’re under stress, your core

body temperature rises. Your heart beats more quickly, your muscles tense,

your blood vessels constrict, and your blood pressure and body temperature

rise. All of this causes you to sweat and blush, just as it does when

exercising.

You can counteract these effects by cooling your body. Focus here on your

hands. Just like your forehead or the back of your neck, your hands serve to

regulate your body temperature. Have you ever warmed up on a cold

morning by holding a warm cup of coffee or tea? That’s your **built-in**

**thermoregulator** in action. At moments when you’re put on the spot or you

think you’re about to be, try holding something cold in your hand, like a

bottle or glass of water. I do it all the time in speaking situations when I’m

anxious (yes, I sometimes get anxious, too). It really helps.

Finally, let’s do something about that annoying dry mouth that might

arise as you try to communicate. When you become nervous, your salivary

glands shut down. Reactivate them by sipping warm water, sucking on a

**lozenge**, or chewing gum. It’s best not to do this in the moment, since

stuffing up your mouth can make speaking difficult. But if you’re entering

a situation where you suspect you might be called upon to communicate,

taking a moment to prepare in advance by reactivating your salivary glands

is a good move.

Tame Your Brain

Let’s say I’m hosting an important Zoom call with two dozen colleagues

and customers, and the technology fails, cutting off my colleague who was

supposed to be presenting for the next fifteen minutes. Someone has to fill

in the empty space—that would be me, the team leader. But as my body

goes into fight-or-flight, I’m hearing these dark little voices in my head: “I

don’t know what to say. Everybody’s judging me. I’m going to get fired over

this.”

I can banish that nasty little voice and take back control by repeating a

more positive mantra in my head. Professional golfers often do this,

repeating a word like “calm” or “poise” to tamp down negative self-talk. We

can also adopt mantras that remind us of our deeper purposes. In a

spontaneous communication situation, you might tell yourself something

like:

“I have value to add.”

“I’ve improvised my way out of tough spots before—I’ve got this.”

“It’s not about me—my content is compelling.”

Repeating a mantra can allow us to redirect our thoughts, unchaining us

from the doom loop running through our minds.

If you blank out, try going back to go forward. Recall what was just said

and repeat it. Doing this can give yourself a moment to get yourself back on

track. Many people deploy a similar tactic when they lose their keys: they

go back in their minds to every place they might have been, which in turn

might jog their memory of where they left them.

You might think that repeating what you just said is a no-no, as it will

bore or distract your audience. If you do it fifty times in a three-minute

period, that might be true. But in general, repetition is a good thing. When

you repeat a point a few times, you highlight it for your audiences and help

them remember it. Saying something in different ways can help ideas

become more comprehensible and noteworthy. Repetition is okay. You see?

I just did it—I repeated the same idea three times. That wasn’t so bad, was

it?

You can also buy yourself time by posing generic questions that might

make sense given the context. I’ll let you in on a secret. When I teach, I

sometimes lose my train of thought. I teach so many classes that I can’t

remember if I’ve made a certain point in this class or the other one. This

momentary confusion can freak me out, and I feel compelled to respond

immediately lest I look foolish. Typically, I’ll pause and say, “Before we

move on, I’d like you to take a moment to think about how you might apply

what we’ve just discussed to your life.”

Now, I’m fortunate. Because I teach communication, students can in fact

apply much of what I talk about right away. But I’ll bet you could quickly

come up with a generic question that you could ask, one that would allow

you to take a deep breath and reflect on where you want to go next.

In a Zoom call, for instance, you might ask something like, “Can you

think of ways you can share this information with your teammates?” Or

when leading a meeting, you could say, “Let’s pause for a moment and just

think about how what we’ve been discussing fits into our overall

objectives.”

A simple question gets people thinking and lets you off the hook as the

center of attention for a moment so that you can regain your composure. If

you know that you’ll be attending an event (a team lunch, conference, or

wedding) in which you might be asked to speak spontaneously, you might

think of one of these questions in advance and keep it handy just in case.

••• TRY IT•••

The next time you enter a situation where you think you might have to speak

spontaneously, come prepared with a question to ask your audience if you

become flustered.

If the mere thought of blanking out arouses fear in the moment, having

these tools handy can give you an extra bit of comfort and security. You

might also try rationalizing before you get into a likely spontaneous

speaking situation. Ask yourself what the chances are that you really will

blank out. Most people thinking rationally might put the odds that the

situation wouldn’t go well at 20 or 25 percent. But that means you’ll have a

75 or 80 percent chance that it will. I’ll take those odds.