

Confidence Building Strategy Activity: Minimize Visible Signs of Anxiety

1. Sweating: Keep some paper towel or even a small hand towel available to blot your hands or forehead before you get up to speak, where nobody can see. Don't use tissues or toilet paper, which are likely to disintegrate into unattractive small paper blobs that will attach themselves to your skin. Try to avoid wiping your palms on your clothes, which can leave a wet stain. Use clinical-strength antiperspirant and deodorant, wear dark shirts or dresses, and keep an extra layer handy in case you need to cover it up. Make sure not to put that extra layer on until you need to use it to cover something up – otherwise your back-up suit jacket or sweater will get as sweaty as the rest of you.

2. Stomach pain or noise: If you know that you run the risk of this symptom, take preventative measures. Treat this the way you would a bout with a bug: stick to bland foods before you present (choose dry toast over a croissant; tea over coffee; bananas over citrus). Cut out dairy, fried or acidic foods, or any other foods or beverages that you know you may react poorly to, beginning 12-24 hours before your presentation. And if you can't prevent your stomach from making strange sounds, do two things: First, ask someone you trust whether it's audible from where the audience is sitting. If not, don't worry about it. If it is, don't try to hide it – address it head-on in your presentation by saying something like, "Clearly, my presentation is all that's standing between us and breakfast/lunch/dinner, so let's get this show on the road!" Your audience will likely laugh, and you'll feel more relaxed knowing that you don't have to hide it.

3. Feeling faint or lightheaded: In addition to breathing slowly in and out, make sure that you have some healthy sugar in your system (think fruit, not cupcake). When you get up to speak, move very slowly during the transition from sitting to standing. Ideally, you should plan to stand up several minutes before you get up to speak so that you can acclimate to the position change. You can use the side or back of the room for this or the wings of a stage. When you do stand, make sure that your knees aren't locked and your legs aren't pressed together. Take a wide stance, which will help you with your balance. And if you still really feel faint, don't risk it. Ask to present while sitting or to delay your presentation – both of which are better than you passing out and banging your head (and truly scaring your audience).

4. Blank mind or fumbling for words: One might think that the best strategy for this is to memorize your whole presentation, but one would be wrong. Memorizing your entire presentation just increases the anxiety about and risk of forgetting the whole thing. Make sure to have your first three lines completely memorized to get you into the presentation. You might also have notes with your key points in bullets (not sentences), your transitional phrases, and any critical words tag lines or other language that you absolutely, positively have to make sure you say on it. For most people, the security of knowing that the critical points are written down and within easy access can be enough to reduce this symptom. Here's an advanced tip that really works (and I know because I use it myself as a professional speaker): If you really do lose your train of thought, say to the audience, "We're going to see how well you all have been paying attention up until this point. Who here will be the first person to remind me what I just covered? (More often than not, your audience will be able to relate.)

5. Trembling hands: Another counter-intuitive strategy works best here – lead off with big, bold hand gestures rather than trying to hide your hands. The more energetic your gestures are, the less anyone will notice your subtle shaking. Make the movement work for you, rather than against you, by bringing positive attention to your dynamic body language. What doesn't work? Holding a cup of coffee, a pen, a remote slide advancer, a sheet of paper, or anything else that will be shaking in addition to your hands.