



What's the source of your shakes?

Know Thy Fear

By Matt Abrahams

Toothpaste is the root of all evil. At least, it seemed so when my wife and I first began to share our household. You see, my wife is a roller, and I'm a squeezer. She is meticulous in her delicate rolling of the toothpaste tube, where I strive for the speediest delivery. Now, I grant that the tube looks nicer and she maximizes its output, but squeezing just feels right to me. The simple solution to our problem was for each of us to have our own tube, which is what we did.

However, our next problem quickly arose – an up or down toilet seat. Our toothpaste and toilet traumas caused us to question if there was some deeper, underlying

issue causing these bathroom conflicts. And of course, there was. We each wanted the other to respect our own way of doing things. Until we addressed the respect issue and developed specific remedies for it, we were simply finding fixes for the symptoms and not for the cause.

In my experience as a public speaking instructor, I find that most presenters fall victim to this same problem when dealing with speaking anxiety. Specifically, they develop techniques to manage their *symptoms* of anxiety without focusing on the underlying cause. Speakers may find workarounds for specific symptoms – like a jittery stomach or forgetfulness – but

because the underlying causes have not been identified, their fears simply reappear as new symptoms, such as profuse sweating or repeated “ums.” As with my journey toward marital harmony, calm, confident speaking can only occur if speakers first identify the true reasons for their nervousness and then address those issues.

Thankfully, research into speaking anxiety (known also as communication apprehension) can provide you with useful insights into the sources of your distress. In addition, these studies offer targeted anxiety-management techniques that help you reach into the center of your fears and conquer them.

Sources of Speaking Anxiety

Communication researchers have identified three types of speaking anxieties that are related to a speaker's environment. Most speaking anxiety originates from one or more of the following sources:

■ The first source is your situation.

The setting and audience size may cause your anxiety. For example, you might be passionate about recycling, and you might think it is extremely important to recycle. When you talk about this topic with friends at the dinner table or a coffee shop, you're not nervous at all. But when you have to stand in front of many people in an auditorium and give a presentation on recycling, you're nervous. In this case, the situation or context in which the communication occurs causes the anxiety.

How do you manage it? The technique found to best manage this type of speaking fright is called "reappraisal," which means reframing the speaking situation as a conversation rather than a performance. It's just a conversation where you do most of the talking... and your audience responds with nonverbal feedback.

So how do you reframe the situation as a conversation? First, when you begin to practice, don't stand up and practice in front of a mirror or video camera. Practice by sitting at a coffee table or at a coffee shop with supportive friends or family to talk through your speech. Your rehearsal and practice become a conversation, thus short-circuiting the source of your anxiety. After many conversations about your topic, then and only then should you practice more formally.

Another reframing technique is to use the word "you" frequently when speaking. When you are engaged in a conversation, you personalize your speaking to your audience. Using "you" or the names of some of your audience members keeps you conversational.

Finally, hold your eye contact a little longer with members of your

audience. Conversations are all about connection, and eye contact is the primary way in which you establish and maintain that bond with individual audience members.

■ The second source of speaking anxiety is your audience.

Who are those people? Their status, expertise and attitude might ignite this fear. You might not have any trouble speaking in front of your peers or family members, but speaking to your superiors or potential customers might cause you great trepidation.

How do you manage it? Visualization is the most therapeutic management technique for anxiety caused by your particular audience. It effectively extinguishes the stress brought on by power and status issues. You probably already know how to use visualization techniques.

During this visualization process you don't want to focus on the speech itself. Avoid thinking of the specific words you plan to say. Instead, focus on your entire speaking experience, not any one particular element of it; try to relax and visualize positive things happening. You can improve your skills, reduce your anxiety and increase your confidence just by visualizing a successful speaking experience in this way.

■ **The third source is your goal.** What are you trying to accomplish? For example, you might be able to talk to your boss and colleagues about your work progress or even the latest football score without a problem. But when you need to ask for more resources or have to explain a failure, you become nervous. It's the goal you're trying to achieve that

"Is your anxiety caused by your audience, your situation or your goal?"

If you've ever played a sport, your coach might have told you to imagine yourself doing whatever that sport requires - maybe kicking the ball into the goal, having the bat hit the ball or making the ball go into the basket. Research from sports psychology shows that the best way athletes can improve their skills is to practice. The second best is to visualize.

Visualization requires that you find a quiet place and time to reflect on your upcoming speaking event. After some deep, relaxing breaths imagine a successful speaking experience. Feel yourself as calm and confident. See your audience responding positively and being engaged. End with a positive affirmation - a short statement you say to yourself - that summarizes the success you just envisioned. This entire process takes only a matter of minutes and should be repeated several times, beginning a few days before your speaking engagement.

makes you nervous. In other words, your fear originates from your concern about potentially negative future outcomes, such as not getting the needed resources, losing your job or not getting the promotion.

How do you manage it?

Since your fear is a result of potential future outcomes, an effective management technique is to focus on the present and avoid thinking about the consequences of your actions. Having a present-oriented experience, sometimes referred to as a *flow* experience or paying rapt attention, means you're so involved in the present that you lose track of time, external stimuli and your overall self-awareness. You have likely had moments of extreme present orientation in certain situations, like when you play a sport or musical instrument, or when you engage in a deep conversation with a loved one.

Many techniques are available to help you become more present

oriented. Being physical is one technique. I know a professional speaker who deals with his nervousness by doing 100 pushups immediately before he speaks. After this speaker completes his pushups, he jumps up and then steps on the stage to speak. He carries his present orientation with him, along with a little sweat and tingling shoulder muscles. When you're challenging yourself physically, it's hard to think about the future.

Listening to music can also help induce a present-oriented perspective. Find a song or a play-list that you find engaging and practice becoming absorbed in it.

Using humor can also be a fun way to become present oriented. Watch a funny video clip, listen to a comedy routine or engage in a humorous exchange. Enjoying a good laugh often involves being "in the moment." The ability to live in the present and not worry about

future consequences not only helps your speaking anxiety to abate, but can make speaking fun.

As you prepare for your next presentation, I recommend that you think about the source of your speaking anxiety (situation, audience or goal). Knowing about the cause of your anxiety can help you develop targeted anxiety-management techniques such as reappraisal, visualization and present orientation. With these tools at

hand, you'll conquer your speaking fear and enjoy more calm and confident speaking. **T**

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The Science of Shyness

The three kinds of speaking anxieties based on situation, audience or goal are also called "state-based" communication apprehension by researchers. A more internal kind of anxiety, known as "trait-based" communication apprehension – better known as shyness or extreme introversion – has also been studied. However, a relatively small percentage of any population is clinically shy. According to the Stanford University Shyness Clinic, only about seven percent of those living in the United States suffer from trait-based communication apprehension.



To order *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out: 25 Techniques for Confident, Calm, and Competent Presenting*, please go to www.kendallhunt.com/abrahams

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