



If public speaking terrifies you, you're not alone — but there's plenty you can do about it

ABC Radio National By Anna Kelsey-Sugg for Big Ideas

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First my mouth dries up. I forget what I want to say and my heart beats so violently I wonder if this is what a heart attack feels like.

Then my eyesight fails me. A crowd of people agglomerates into one blurry mass.

I'm in a panic, and it comes every time I have to speak in public.

On this occasion, it's at an award ceremony of about 100 people. All I have to do is say a few prepared lines and hand over a certificate, then I can make for the bar.

Yet my body is displaying signs my life is at threat.

I realise I need some help. I find a local speech trainer online and we begin one-on-one coaching sessions, which feel a bit like therapy.

She gently challenges me: "What are you so worried about?"

I don't really know. That everyone will notice my terror and think I'm an idiot?

Enter the trainer's lesson number one: in almost all audiences, people will have my back. They want the best for me, not the worst, she explains.

Together we record and dissect videos of me delivering speeches. My trainer points out that with confident body language, I can trick myself into feeling as self-assured as I appear.

She teaches me the value of deliberate movements, slow breathing, faultless preparation. I heed her biggest piece of advice: practise. Practise, practise, practise.

Every opportunity that comes up to speak publicly, I grab it, despite my instincts still telling me I'm making a huge mistake.

Over many weeks, the trainer is my rock, and with her guidance my confidence, and ability, grows.

London Business School professor Alex Edmans says it's a common misconception that if you're not a natural speaker, there's no point working on it.

Today he speaks regularly and confidently, but says he's come a long way since he started out.

And he has plenty of tips for others who, like him — and me — aren't natural public speakers. Here are some of them.

There's no such thing as a born speaker

Only slowly, and with time and practice, did Professor Edmans become the accomplished speaker he is today.

"For many people public speaking is a real struggle and it really was for me for many, many years," he says in a speech broadcast on ABC RN's Big Ideas.

"Public speakers are made, not born.

"I was not a natural. The only way that I was able to give a semi-competent talk was by putting a lot of work into it and working hard."

Don't expect quick change

Progress is gradual in the land of oration.

"With public speaking it might be that you put many months in with no discernible progress and then you suddenly make a step change," Professor Edmans says.

"If you don't see any immediate results, please keep at it, because the way that progress works is not in a straight line."

Don't just practise — intentionally practise

Professor Edmans says practising isn't just about putting in the time, but deliberately focusing on improving in a particular area.

When we do practise, it needs to be "intentional", he says.

"It might be that you're practising a speech, and you're saying, 'This time I'm going to work on my body language.' Or maybe, 'I'm going to practise a speech and I'm going to work on vocal variety.'"

Try recording yourself

When my speaking coach suggested this, I wanted out of the whole training regime. Professor Edmans says in baulking at the concept, I'm not alone.

"Many people don't like this. One of the most unpleasant things to do is to watch yourself speaking," he says.

Ultimately, I found it incredibly useful, and you might too. And again, intention is important here.

Professor Edmans suggests that when you record yourself, try to focus on different areas you want to improve — your stance, your hand movements, your pausing — then watch back with those things in mind, to track how you're doing in those specific areas.

It might be tough, he says, but it's "something which is going to see advances".

Observe other good speakers

In other words, learn from the best.

"Study a talk from somebody you really admire and look at what she is good at when she gives her speeches, and then try to incorporate that into your own talk," Professor Edmans advises.

You don't have to give a speech to practise

You can chip away at the skill of public speaking in different contexts.

It could be through student council, sports coaching, simply presenting work to your boss, or asking a question when you're in the audience of a conference.

"The very first times I went to an academic conference and I asked a question, my heart would pump and pump when I was about to ask it, because I thought I was going to make a mistake," recalls Professor Edmans.

"I would have to script the question down sometimes on a piece of paper. But then the more and more times I did this ... the nerves would go."

Know how to use your hands

This is one of the hardest parts of public speaking. Some people over-gesticulate and others might keep their hands in their pockets.

If the former is your challenge, you could hold something, like notes or cards, to keep your hands occupied.

But Professor Edmans says this is a "short-term bandaid".

He says it's better to practise having your hands free for pointed, deliberate gesticulation, and otherwise keep them out of the picture.

"The default position should be around elbow or waist height, and keep them open," he says.

Don't fear silence

In overcoming nerves, "never underestimate the power of a pause", Professor Edmans says.

"Sometimes if people are nervous, that will cause them to speak very quickly, and they want to get through. But pausing can be really powerful," he says.

It can delineate a point, and make it clear where one point ends and another begins. A pause also gives you, the speaker, time to "reset".

"It's a way of slowing things down, keeping things under control, and overcoming nerves. It just shows some confidence," Professor Edmans says.

Learn speech techniques

Strangely, one of the most useful things I gained from my speaking training was distraction.

The more I had to consider my hands, my breathing or the pauses between my sentences, the less I could focus on the fear my world was about to collapse.

Professor Edmans recommends these techniques, in moderation, that you can distract yourself with too:

- "Signposting" your key points with pauses
- Changing your pitch or speed
- Shifting your stance
- Highlighting key points by repeating a sentence or by saying, for example, "This is my main point"
- Using rhetorical questions to get the audience thinking and engaged.

It's important to remember that slowly, it gets easier.

Over time, I calmed the farm.

And every now and then, while speaking, I think I might even be having fun.

Alex Edmans' speech, 'Public Speaking Without Fear', was delivered at Gresham College in London. It was broadcast by ABC RN's Big Ideas program.

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