

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Presentation? - How the Pros Make Nervousness Their Friend

by Mary Sandro

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“There are two types of speakers. Those who get nervous and those who are liars.”

-Mark Twain

Everyone is afraid of a presentation, physiologically. Toastmasters International reports that the following professionals have admitted to feeling nervous when speaking in public: Mark Twain, Ronald Reagan, Carroll O'Connor, Barbara Streisand, Anthony Quinn, Garrison Keillor, Sally Struthers, George Burns, James Taylor, Liza Minelli, Joan Rivers, and... Mary Sandro. I couldn't resist adding my name to such a star-studded list!

Many presenters fight their nervousness. They deny it or use it as an excuse for not presenting. The first step to making nervousness our friend is to accept that it is normal. I dare say, the more nervous we are, the better a presenter we can be. The rationale for this seemingly ludicrous claim lies in the physiological understanding of nervousness.

Making a presentation is an opportunity and a challenge. Any time we are faced with a challenge, our bodies produce adrenaline. Psychologists refer to this as the “Fight or Flight” response and there is no way to stop it. It is wired into our genetic makeup and our bodies have been producing adrenaline for thousands of years.

Adrenaline is a fancy word for energy. When we are faced with a challenge, like making a presentation, our bodies produce energy. That almost sounds helpful, doesn't it? In fact, from this point forward we will never call it nervousness again. We don't get nervous; we have excess energy! All of those nervous symptoms we experience like dry mouth, shaky knees, hyperventilation, and butterflies are nothing more than excess energy getting the best of us. Now, what if we could take that energy and get the best of it?

Energy is a necessary ingredient for a successful presentation. Nervous presenters have a lot of raw energy available to them, which is why I claim they can become great presenters. This is also why I disagree with the advice most often given to nervous presenters, “Just relax.” This advice is counterproductive and almost physically impossible to execute.

When was the last time you went into a performance or a competition relaxed? Maybe the last time you didn't perform very well. We need energy. Some call this energy the competitive edge. Some call it inevitable. It's very difficult to fight thousands of years of evolution. If we think a presentation is a challenge, which it is, our bodies are programmed to produce adrenaline or energy. Instead of trying to fight this natural, helpful phenomenon, why not use it?

The difference between a polished presenter and one who seems to be having a nervous breakdown is not that one is nervous and the other is not. Physiologically they both are producing excess energy. The difference is how they use the energy. Polished presenters use the energy positively. Historically nervous presenters can too.

In general, things exist in pairs, on a pole as opposites. For example, there is hot and cold, light

and dark. Things on the same pole can be changed into one another. Light can be changed into dark and hot can be changed into cold, but cold cannot be changed into light. The same is true with emotions.

Emotions exist in pairs, on a pole as opposites. For example, there is happy and sad, love and hate, anxiety and anticipation. Happy and sad are of the same pole and can be changed from one to the other. The same is true with anxiety and anticipation. Nervous presenters allow their energy to manifest as anxiety, while polished presenters channel that energy into anticipation.

The same energy that creates nervousness or anxiety can create anticipation or excitement. There are many strategies for shifting the energy to the higher end of the pole. The most helpful are mental strategies. To keep the energy anticipatory and exciting, focus thoughts on positive aspects of presenting. Visualize only success. Imagine the benefits of presenting and focus on the opportunity rather than the challenge.

Another strategy for shifting the energy is to get in touch with the physical feeling of anxiety in our body. Where is the feeling centered? Is it in the gut, throat, or somewhere else? Once located, move it up one inch higher and notice how the emotion changes. This mental and physical relocation will shift the emotion to the higher, more positive pole of anticipation or excitement. Do this exercise anytime nervousness strikes, even just before the presentation.

To summarize, everyone gets nervous when they present, even the pros. Nervousness is nothing but excess energy that we can use to generate an emotional state of anxiety or anticipation. Be gentle with yourself and make friends with the energy by focusing on the positive aspects of presenting. Know that the energy can propel you to great presentations by giving you the necessary competitive edge.

About the Author

Mary Sandro helps companies and professionals achieve results through effective presentations exceptional customer service and innovative hiring techniques. She is available to speak on these topics. For more information visit <http://www.ProEdgeSkills.com> or call 800-731-0601.

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