

# CONFIDENCE-BUILDING GUIDE: RESOURCE 13

## Embracing Social Fears and Anxieties

### Leaders do not have to be fearless.

In fact, personal experience with anxiety and vulnerability is important to developing a sense of empathy and connection to the experiences of others. Leaders who are empathetic are able to encourage growth in others and are humble enough to know that they are not perfect themselves. Embracing imperfection and discomfort keeps us human and ultimately results in an authentic communication style that is much more effective than any overly polished, perfectly choreographed speech can ever be.



The pressure to be perfect only increases the fear of public speaking, regardless of a speaker's experience level. For students developing their communication skills, I consistently observe students go through two rounds of stage fright and anxiety. The first round comes when students are first learning new skills, where fear stems from the uncertainty and lack of familiarity they feel with speaking for an audience. The second round comes much later, after students have had some success with their public speaking. This fear emerges when students feel pressure (either from themselves or from others) to measure up to their past success and maintain their reputation as an effective speaker. I have watched champion high school debaters drop out of the activity because they don't think they'll be able to win anymore. And I personally know what it feels like to be positioned as someone who should speak to a high standard (I am a public speaking coach, after all!) and feel paralyzing worry that I won't reach that standard this time and others will judge or think less of me.

### Tip #1: Value your connection to the audience.

All the anxiety-coping strategies in the world will not help until a speaker personally reframes the goal of public speaking. When the goal is still to "get through the speech unscathed" or "deliver a presentation without any mistakes" or "deliver everything perfectly from memory", the irony is that speakers are much more likely to be nervous and unsatisfied with their performance. Instead, public speakers need to frame goals that prioritize the effect they want to have on their audience. For instance, public speaking goals such as inspiring connections, communicating content that people remember, and encouraging follow-up conversations do not depend on perfection. Rather than having goals that are all about you, effective communication should value connection over seamless presentation.

### Tip #2: Expect and embrace discomfort.

Aside from a rare few, public speaking is always an uncomfortable and somewhat unnatural experience. Many speakers and performers use visualization techniques, where they prepare themselves by imagining the result they want. Instead of imagining situations where you don't feel any nerves at all, it can help to imagine the jitters you might have at the start and then imagine them disappearing as you sink into the moment and connect with your audience. It can also help to embrace the reality that public speaking will sometimes feel awful, but also that the discomfort won't last forever -- sometimes, it is only a few minutes.

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### **Tip #3: When you can, always speak about what excites you.**

Given how fearful and anxious some people can feel about public speaking, the discomfort is only worthwhile if your message is personally important to you. Sometimes, when I am faced with a speech that is particularly nerve-wracking to me, I will say to myself, “right now, this work is more important than my fears.” While it is always useful to think about what your audience might want to hear, at the end of the day, every speech should always derive from content that drives, motivates, and excites you. When you talk about what genuinely interests you, it is easier to get lost in your message and drown out evil voices of self-critique and doubt. The byproduct is that your speaking delivery will automatically be better because you are speaking from the heart instead of from a place of stress.

When I interview my students about their growth and confidence, it always surprises me that they never say that their nerves have gone away. Even the most advanced students say that the fear is always there, but that they have learned to embrace it. In the words of one of my high school students, who was a champion public speaker and state champion finalist, “So I’m still kind of afraid of talking in front of people and I try to avoid it as much as possible or get other people to go before me, but I’m just kind of on terms with it now. I can choose to rise above it rather than let it inhibit me.”

