

SPEAKING WITH CONFIDENCE

At university there are many times when students have to speak in front of others – e.g. when giving a presentation, conducting a seminar, participating in group discussions, or answering questions in class.

While a bit of nervousness is sometimes unavoidable (and may even be helpful), too much nervousness can make speaking in front of others one of the most difficult situations a student has to face!

Becoming more comfortable with speaking may take some **practice**. To help, here are a few ideas for engaging your imagination, thinking, physical responses, and other actions to promote more confidence when speaking in front of others.

IMAGINATION: Anxiety can hijack your imagination and present all kinds of “worst-case scenarios”! Here are some ways of harnessing imagination so that it works for you. You can try developing a:

- *Positive image* of doing something that you feel good about (e.g. exercising, cooking, gardening, biking, etc.)
- *Symbolic image* (e.g. the room bathed in soothing light, being a fire-breathing dragon, being a circus juggler, etc.)
- *Supportive image* (imagine someone supportive being alongside you)
- *Positive rehearsal image* (seeing yourself presenting just as you wish)
- *Positive outcome image* (imagining in detail a picture of the future after you’ve successfully spoken in front of others)

THINKING: Negative and self-sabotaging thinking can create conditions in which anxiety thrives. Recognising and changing this kind of thinking can be done in a number of ways:

Catch negative thoughts when they begin to intrude. Examples of these kinds of thoughts include:

- global labels (“stupid”, “incompetent”, “I blew it”);
- generalising (“I always...” “I never...”);
- minimising/maximising (“nobody is interested”; “all eyes are upon me”);
- alarmist ideas (“Oh no!! I’ll be floored...”);
- absolute requirements (“I must...” “I should...”);
- negative comparisons (“they’re so much brighter than me...”);
- deterministic ideas (“I can’t...” “They make me...”);
- questions (“what if?...” “Will they?...”)

Instead, practice constructive self-talk to counter negative thoughts. Examples of constructive self-talk include:

- My material is interesting
- I give myself permission to...
- I can return to my train of thought after interruptions

- I'm going to be all right
- It's easier once you get started
- It's O.K. to make mistakes
- I can only do my best

Plan for the "unpredictable". Thinking about the context of your speaking opportunities and expectations etc. can help make these situations more manageable. Some questions to help focus your thinking include:

- What is the physical space like? Can I access the room in advance?
- Who is my audience? What can I expect of them? Who can be an ally?
- What are the conventions? Do people come and go?
- What do I expect of me? What are reasonable limits to my expertise?

PHYSICAL RESPONSES: Often the physical effects of anxiety make speakers extremely uncomfortable. Here are some ideas for physically "grounding" yourself before and during speaking:

- Practice taking deep breaths, lowering your shoulders while you slow down your breathing
- Muscle relaxation before speaking – tighten a group of muscles for about 20- 30 seconds, then consciously tell yourself to relax those muscles while breathing slowly. Take your time and move slowly up your body, tensing and relaxing each set of muscles from your feet to your shoulders and head.
- Comfortable postures while speaking – find a position that's comfortable for you – e.g. planting your feet solidly on the ground, standing upright, moving your shoulders a bit to keep them loose and flexible; shifting your posture as needed to prevent getting "frozen" in one position...

OTHER ACTIONS: Trying out different ideas will help you learn what works best for you. Here are some ideas for practising:

- Rehearse in an empty room. Often it is helpful to walk around while you talk.
- Time your speech if necessary and practice with any notes or tools (overheads, powerpoint, etc.)
- Talk in front of friends and/or relatives and get feedback
- Talk in front of a mirror, in the car, in your room, etc. (get used to the sound of your own voice)
- Practice making mistakes and trying out various ways of dealing with them
- Consider attending a Toastmasters group (there are two groups on campus. For information refer to: <https://4974.toastmastersclubs.org/>)

NEED EXTRA HELP?

Counsellors at ANU Counselling are happy to help, and the service sometimes runs a free *Speaking with Confidence* group program.