



Managing Emotions When Speaking in Public

Emotions do not mean that you are unprepared. They mean that what you are doing is important to you.

Fear of public speaking is very common, even among experienced speakers. The goal is not to eliminate emotions completely, but to learn how to manage them so that their energy helps you rather than holds you back.



1. Understand What Is Happening to You

When you speak in front of an audience, your brain may interpret the situation as a social threat. The brain's alarm system becomes activated, and your body enters a state of alert.

You may notice:

- your heart beating faster;
- sweaty or trembling hands;
- shallow breathing;
- muscle tension;
- a shaky voice;
- the feeling that you have forgotten everything;
- difficulty concentrating;
- the urge to finish as quickly as possible.

These reactions do not mean that your speech will go badly. A certain level of arousal can actually increase your attention and energy.

You do not have to “defeat” the emotion. You need to be able to speak while the emotion is there.



2. A Few Days Before Preparation Reduces Uncertainty

Toastmasters recommends practicing out loud, not just mentally. Recording your speech and rehearsing it under conditions that are as close as possible to the real situation can increase familiarity and confidence. Also, practicing in front of a supportive and encouraging family member or friend is one of the most effective ways to reduce initial nervousness by half.

Practice Mistakes Too

Don't just rehearse the perfect version. Anticipate problems that may arise.

During a rehearsal, intentionally stop, lose your train of thought, or mispronounce a word, and practice recovering from it. For example, you can use a joke to ease the tension.

This teaches your brain:

“I can make a mistake and keep going.”

Not just:

“I must not make a mistake.”

Don't Memorize Every Word

For many speeches, it is more useful to know your ideas and structure very well than to try to reproduce every sentence exactly.

You can memorize the beginning and ending more carefully and deliver the rest more naturally. **Toastmasters recommends this approach precisely because trying to memorize a speech word for word can increase pressure and make it more likely that you will forget it.**



3. Before the Meeting

Get Familiar with the Space

If possible, it is recommended that you arrive a little early.

Take note of:

- where you will sit;
- where you will go to deliver your speech;
- where the audience members are;
- the microphone and projector (these should be tested before the speech);
- any materials you need to use.

Reducing last-minute surprises can help reduce anxiety. **Go up on stage as if you were giving your speech, so you can get a feel for the view and avoid being caught off guard.**

Move Your Body

When you are very nervous, your body has a lot of mobilization energy.

A short walk, stretching your arms, or a few light movements may be more useful than sitting still and analyzing your anxiety.

The idea is not:

“I have to get rid of the adrenaline.”

But:

“I am giving my body something to do with this energy.”

Toastmasters recommends movement as a way to transform nervous energy into useful energy for your presentation.



4. 1–2 Minutes Before

Breathe More Slowly

When we are anxious, our breathing tends to become shallow and rapid.

Try:

inhale → brief pause → longer exhale

For example:

4 seconds in

6–8 seconds out

Repeat several times without forcing your breathing.

Toastmasters repeatedly recommends slow breathing, with a longer exhale than inhale, to help the body move toward a calmer state.



5. When the Speech Begins

Shift Your Attention From Yourself to the Audience

One of the most useful mental shifts is:

✗ “How do I look?”

✗ “Is my voice shaking?”

✗ “Can they tell that I'm nervous?”

instead of:

✓ “What do I want to communicate to them?”

✓ “What do I want them to feel or understand?”

✓ “Who am I talking to right now?”

Toastmasters recommends directing your attention toward the needs of the audience, as this can reduce excessive self-focus.

Your speech is not an exam about you. It is an experience that you create together with the audience.

6. If You Feel Your Anxiety Increasing During the Speech

Don't speed up.

When we become anxious, we tend to:

- speak faster;
- breathe more shallowly;
- skip pauses;
- try to finish as quickly as possible.

Instead:

Take a Pause

One second of silence can feel enormous to the speaker, but to the audience it is usually just a normal pause.

Breathe in.

Look at the audience.

Continue.

Toastmasters explicitly recommends using a pause as a way to reset when you lose your train of thought or feel a wave of anxiety.

7. If You Lose Your Train of Thought

Don't panic immediately.

You have several options:

Pause

Stop for a few seconds and reconstruct the idea.

Repeat the Last Idea

Repeating an important idea can give you the time you need to find your next point.

Look at the Structure of Your Speech

If you have notes, look for the next idea, not the next sentence.

Keep Going

The audience does not know the speech you prepared.

If you leave out a sentence, an example, or even a small section, it is possible that nobody will know something is missing.



8. Don't Try to Appear Completely Emotionless

A realistic goal is not:

“I want to be completely calm.”

It is:

“I want to be able to feel nervous and still communicate.”

Sometimes, trying to eliminate anxiety can create a second problem:

“I'm nervous → I shouldn't be nervous → I have to calm down → Why can't I calm down?!”

This can create anxiety about your own anxiety.

Some Toastmasters materials even recommend reframing physiological arousal as energy and excitement, since the physical sensations of anxiety and excitement can be similar.



9. Change Your Definition of Success

A successful speech does not necessarily mean:

- zero trembling;
- zero mistakes;
- zero pauses;
- zero emotions;
- perfect memorization.

It can mean:

“I was nervous and I kept going.”

or:

“I forgot an idea and managed to return to my structure.”

or:

“I was afraid, but I stayed connected to the audience.”

These are real forms of progress.



10. Most Importantly: Repeated Exposure

The brain learns from experience.

If you speak repeatedly in a safe environment, the experience can gradually become more familiar. Toastmasters describes repeated practice and gradual exposure as central elements in reducing the fear of public speaking.

Therefore, progress does not necessarily look like this:

fear → no fear

It looks more like this:

fear → I can speak

fear → I can stay present

fear → I can improvise

fear → I can recover from a mistake

fear → I can even enjoy myself



Mini Checklist for Speech Day

Before

- ☐ I practiced out loud.
- ☐ I know the main ideas, not just the words.
- ☐ I know how it begins and how it ends.
- ☐ I checked the room and the equipment.
- ☐ I moved my body a little.

- ☐ I breathed slowly.

During the Speech

- ☐ I speak slowly enough.
- ☐ I take pauses.
- ☐ I look at people, not just at my notes.
- ☐ I focus on the message, not on my own performance.
- ☐ If I make a mistake, I keep going.
- ☐ If I lose my train of thought, I pause and reorganize.

After

- ☐ I don't judge the speech solely by how nervous I felt.
- ☐ I write down one thing that worked.
- ☐ I write down one thing I want to improve.
- ☐ I ask myself: "What did I learn for my next speech?"

The goal is not to stop having emotions.

The goal is to become a speaker who knows what to do when emotions arise.