
5

Managing Communication Anxiety

Action Steps You Can Take

With Corey Goldstein, M.D.

In this chapter, you will learn six action steps you can take to help manage stressful communication:

Action steps you can take

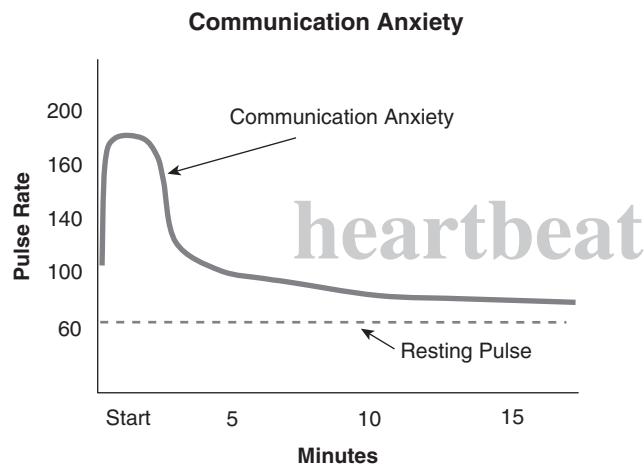
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| Action Step One | Ride it out, it will pass. |
| Action Step Two | Say, "I'm excited." |
| Action Step Three | Manage your metabolism. |
| Action Step Four: | Fill your mind with positive thoughts. |
| Action Step Five: | Know your topic. |

Action Step One: Ride it out, It will pass

A picture of communication anxiety—Your pulse rate is a good measure of communication anxiety. Researchers—led by the internationally recognized communication scientist Dr. Theodore Clevenger—measured hundreds of speakers' pulses: executives, students, and top television performers. Speakers were evaluated in business meetings, in classroom speeches, and on nationally broadcast television shows. A clear, consistent pattern emerged.

The picture of a speaker's physical change during communication anxiety is shown in **Figure 5.1—Speaker's Pulse Rate While Presenting**. As you can see, the pulse first soars to levels usually associated with intense physical exercise; then, after 3 to 5 minutes, it lowers to 90 to 100 beats per minute (bpm).

Figure 5.1 Speaker's Pulse Rate While Presenting



In the graph (see **Figure 5.1—Speaker's Pulse Rate While Presenting**), the speaker's pulse rate is on the vertical axis, and time is represented on the horizontal arm. The first thing you notice is that, even before they get up to speak, speakers begin their presentations with an already elevated pulse rate of 90 to 110 bpm. The typical resting pulse rate is 50 to 60 beats per minute (bpm) for trained athletes, and up to 70 bpm for average people. You can see that most speakers

start their presentations with an elevated heart rate (90 to 110 bpm). Your heart rate will begin to increase in the minutes before you speak. After they start talking, the pulse accelerates rapidly. Similarly, when it's your turn to speak, as you walk before the audience, or when you are ushered into the boss's office, your pulse might climb as high as 170 bpm.

In these initial minutes, you may feel as though you're temporarily insane, because catecholamine is released into your body and brain. You hear your pulse pounding in your head from a major artery passing near your ears. Your body is demanding lots of oxygen to service your runaway metabolism. Even though your body badly needs more oxygen, you can't take a deep breath, because the intercostal muscles between your ribs are tense and tight. You get light-headed. Your "fighting muscles," used in hand-to-hand combat, become tense, making it hard to move your upper back, neck, and arms. Your field of vision may narrow. You feel slightly nauseated from the adrenaline flowing in your blood. This adrenaline is causing the butterflies you feel in your stomach. But now, as all this is happening, you need to appear poised and cool, and deliver a smooth presentation. Good luck!

A short ride that's soon over—Notice that after 3 to 5 minutes, your body begins to settle down and your pulse drops dramatically. It doesn't return to a normal resting rate, but it feels more normal compared to the runaway freight train you've been riding. Your task is making it through the first few minutes of your presentation, when you'll experience the most intense communication anxiety.

When to take control of your body and mind

When you're waiting to speak, feeling anxiety surge through you, take positive steps to manage your metabolism and reduce your anxiety. Remember the graph of how your pulse rate changes during a presentation? The most challenging part happens at the beginning—right before and immediately after you're introduced—when your initial pulse rate is the highest. As you begin to feel your anxiety growing, it's time to work on a plan to lower your pre-talk metabolism. Controlling your metabolism, at this stage, will make the opening of your talk much more enjoyable for you and your audience—and reduce your feelings of anxiety.

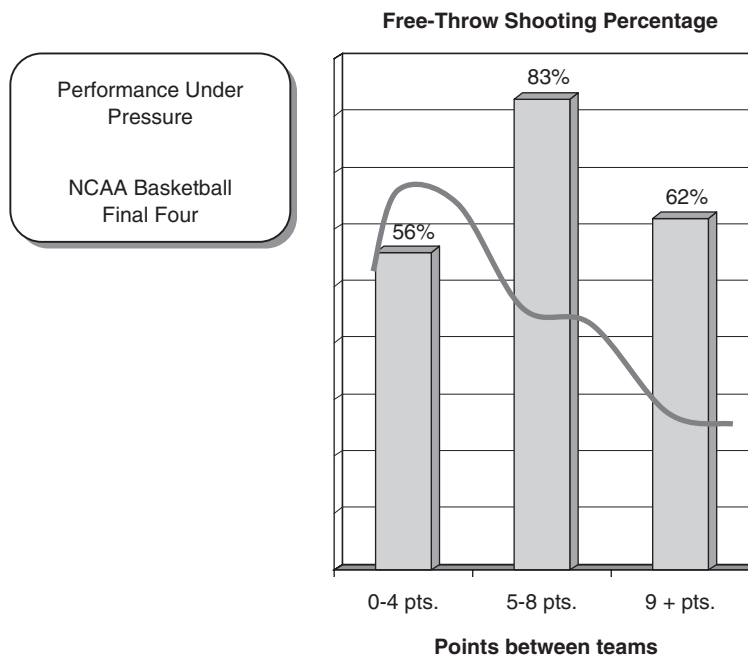
Some anxiety is good

The right amount of anxiety can be a good thing. It makes you feel alive and sharpens your performance. If you don't care about your listeners, if you have insufficient passion for your message, your communication will be flat and passionless, too.

Of course, too much anxiety reduces your ability to think, and causes your audience to feel uncomfortable. They will confuse the fear they're feeling from you with your message. "Her ideas make sense," they'll think, "but something feels wrong." "She doesn't seem confident." Your anxiety becomes the listeners' concern and doubt.

You can see a compelling demonstration of how too much, or too little, anxiety will inhibit performance in **Figure 5.2—Some Anxiety Is Good: Performing Under Pressure**. In the NCAA Basketball Championship games, the Final Four, players make the most free-throw points when the score is moderately close, and their anxiety is moderately high. Notice what happens to their shooting percentages when anxiety is high because the score is close. Notice too that when the score between teams is lopsided, and anxiety is lower, the players miss more shots.

Figure 5.2 Some Anxiety Is Good: Performing Under Pressure



SOURCE: Center for Performance Enhancement

Action Step Two: Say, "I'm excited"

When you feel that surge of body energy as you're introduced to speak, or you walk into an office to start your job interview, or you're about to meet your beloved's family, tell them right away you're excited to

- Be there.
- Meet them.
- Work on this project.
- Share these ideas.
- Join their lovely family.

Decide: Is it fear or excitement?

Think about it. If you have butterflies in your stomach, the thing you're probably feeling is excitement. You're certainly not afraid. What is there to be afraid of? Probably nothing. You will do well in that meeting: You're prepared, and you know your stuff. This is a special moment for you, so it's only logical that what you're feeling is excitement.

Say you're excited, and people will believe you. And why shouldn't they? You look alive, your eyes are sparkling, you appear to be dynamic. It's one of the gifts adrenaline gives you.

When you tell people you're excited to meet them, and you look excited, it's a high compliment. You'll find that most people are flattered and begin to like you more.

What if you're really afraid?—On the other hand, if you give your feelings and the situation some honest thought, and decide you're really afraid and not excited, then you have a bigger problem.

Problem—You're afraid because you're meeting with nasty people. You expect they will be supercritical of you, demean you, and treat you in a cruel manner.

Solution—Don't go. Why take the meeting? Why do you want to work with nasty people? Life is too short, and the world is filled with really nice people who will appreciate you. Don't take the meeting, or if you do, don't take what they say seriously. Their nastiness says volumes about them, and not a thing about you.

Problem—You're not prepared; you don't know what you're talking about.

Solution—Don't take the meeting. If you do take the meeting, don't set yourself up to lose by pretending that you're an expert when you're not. (Please see **Chapter 4—When You're Afraid to Communicate: *Understanding Anxiety and Fear.***)

Don't try to be cool—you won't look confident

If you try to act cool, as if you're not excited, it's not going to work. People will look at you and think, "Something's wrong with him." Your eyes might dart around; you move awkwardly, your voice sounds funny. You might move too quickly, or the opposite: You may freeze. Unless you explain your odd behavior, your listeners have to decide for themselves what's going on. When you tell them "I'm excited to be here," you make sense, in a positive way. Your audience will like the explanation of your dynamic behavior. You've flattered them.

Burn up the energy juice—Remember, you have lots of chemicals flowing through your body: blood sugar and adrenaline saturate your body and brain. Unless you use it, that stuff floats about causing those rotten, shaky, nervous feelings. If you move, if you say, "I'm excited," and you let yourself act excited, you'll begin using up those chemicals rapidly. You'll return your body to a more normal state. You'll lower your pulse. You'll look and feel more confident. And, as my favorite domestic-goddess felon says, "That's a good thing."

Is it fun or scary?

Think about the first time you went downhill skiing, or skin diving, or rode a roller coaster (or pick your own sensory-rich, rush-producing experience). Did you like it? Was it exhilarating or scary? Were you challenged, or did you feel like a prisoner on a freight train to hell? Did you feel powerful and alive, or frightened and in physical danger? What you thought was fun, your friend may have experienced as scary.

During the first few moments of these experiences you make a decision, an attribution for the profound set of body feelings you're having. If you thought downhill skiing was exciting—one of the most exhilarating experiences you've had—then, when you got to the bottom of the run, you couldn't wait to get on the lift and go again. On the other hand, if you were frightened by the feeling—felt you were out of control and in danger—then, when you finally made it to the bottom of the hill, you

probably kicked your skis off, headed to the lodge, and planted yourself at the bar, vowing never to let yourself be trapped in a situation like that again.

Business communication is like that. You can convince yourself that you like the feeling, that the body rush of adrenaline and the accompanying sensations are the result of power and excitement, rather than uncontrolled danger. You are what you think.

Action Step Three: Manage your metabolism

As you read in **Chapter 4—When You're Afraid to Communicate: Understanding Anxiety and Fear**, when you experience communication anxiety, your body and brain are in a useless, even harmful state. You want to change your body's chemistry from fight-or-flight to energized and dynamic. It's easy; you simply have to trust your brain. Remember, **your brain is the boss**. Whatever your brain is thinking, your body buys into. If your brain thinks fear, your body will begin to be afraid. Remember, fearful thoughts, driven by your amygdala, gave you this horrible, scary feeling. It's your brain and body chemistry making you feel rotten, and worse, look uncool.

Fear control techniques—Now you will learn some techniques to change your body's state from fear to a controlled excitement. These three techniques are easy and effective. They have to be simple because, when you've got it bad, when your anxiety rages like a forest fire, your IQ drops about 40 points. You're dumb as mud. So you need something basic that you can remember and use—and it's got to work. Here are three techniques to tuck into your communications toolbelt:

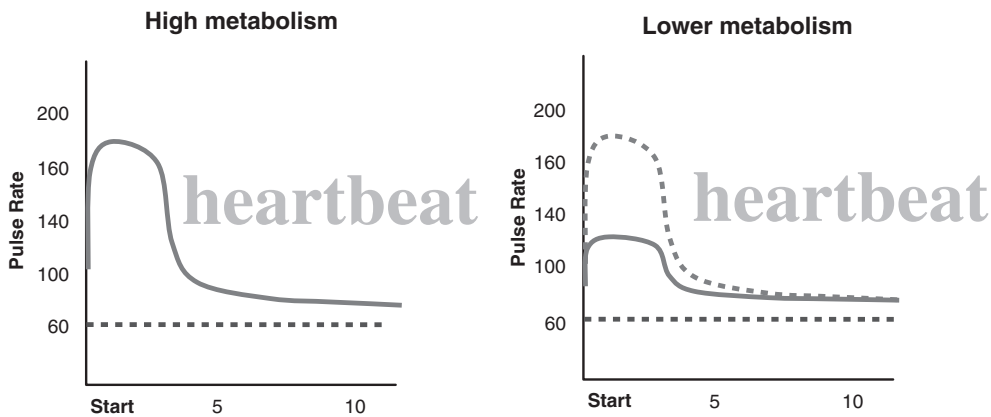
1. *Be Here Now Breathing*
2. *Square Breathing*
3. *Calm Down Breathing*

Idle your engine

Manage communication anxiety—The idea is to lower your run-away metabolism. You're in a high-drive state; your pulse is high, your muscles are tense, you can't think. What if you could slow

things down, take control, and feel better? (see **Figure 5.3—Lower Metabolism & Anxiety**.)

Figure 5.3 Lower Metabolism & Anxiety



Be here now

This tip may sound a bit “groovy”: **Be here now**. As you get ready to speak, think about the present moment. Don’t let your mind wander to the near future, when you’re going to be speaking. Remember, anxiety is your fear of impending danger. If you are literally *live* in the present moment, you will be invulnerable to anxiety. So keep your mind in the present. Think about the things you’ll say; review your speech. Don’t visualize yourself speaking—that will only raise your anxiety and metabolism.

Tip ✓ **Talk to good listeners**—While you wait to speak, find a position in the room where you can see your audience’s faces. Study the audience; pick out people whose faces you like. For some wonderful reason, during the fast, flashing moment of a first impression, some people are more appealing to us. Maybe they resemble others we know and like. Perhaps they seem friendly. As you study the audience, you stay in the present moment, and you take a set of intimidating strangers and turn them into more familiar friends. When you begin speaking, and your metabolism is at its highest level, you’ll want to talk exclusively to the faces you like.

Tip ✓ **It's a snap**—Here is another “be here now” trick that I learned from a gentleman who teaches people suffering from chronic and debilitating fear of flying how to overcome their disability. Harith Razah works as an executive, but he conducts seminars part-time for American Airlines. Mr. Razah suffered from a crippling fear of flying and learned to manage his fear. The trick he uses (among other techniques) is to give a thick rubber band to each of his students. When they feel anxious, they snap it on the tender flesh of their wrist. This sharp blast of pain brings them back to the present moment. They concentrate on the sensation in their wrist, and in those moments of minor pain they get important relief from their escalating anxiety. They think about the pinch of pain instead of all the things that could go wrong with the plane.

Try the wrist snap, or if your metabolism level is not that high, study the back of your hand, your pen, or the paper your notes are written on. These will all bring you to the present moment, where anxiety cannot get you.

Tip ✓ Another idea is to listen to the other speakers. Really concentrate on what they are saying. Do not allow yourself to think about your talk, or what will happen when you get up. Don't worry about being ready when you're introduced—you'll have all the time you need to bring yourself to the peak of performance for your talk.

Be Here Now Breathing

Technique—If you can, get away from people; find a quiet place. Sit down in a comfortable position. Shut your eyes. Take 10 slow, deep breaths, and count them. As you inhale, think to yourself “*One*,” and see a number one on the screen in the front of your mind. The number can be in a Times New Roman or Arial font, or a crayon scribble; it does not matter. Continue to see the number as you slowly exhale. As you take your next breath, say “*Two*,” and see the number two, and exhale slowly. Do this up to the number 10. You'll be amazed at how well this technique works. It's fast and easy. Your anxiety begins to dissolve away like an Airborne tablet in a glass of water.

Now, you may feel a little goofy as you do this, especially if you can't get away from people. You may feel self-conscious sitting with people with your eyes shut. I don't think they will even notice. If they

ask what you're doing, simply smile and say, "I'm thinking." I use this technique right in front of a large audience. Imagine you are with me, minutes before I walk into a big hotel ballroom to deliver a keynote address before a thousand people. The first thing you will notice is that I'm filled with communication anxiety. If you were to ask me a question, I'd look at you with wild eyes and say, "Huh? What did you say? I'm sorry." Then, you watch me walk out on the dais and take a seat. I sit in profile to the audience, shut my eyes, and begin to breathe slowly and deeply, and count my breaths. In no more than a few breaths, my chest and shoulders stop shuddering on the exhale count. By breath 10, I'm really calm—even a little spacy.

Can a space cadet present well?

Are you thinking, "Well Joel, if I'm all blissed-out, how am I going to speak intelligently?" Trust me, Sparky; the moment you're introduced, your metabolism will take off. You'll be really alert, but nowhere near as hyper as you were before you did the *Be Here Now Breathing* exercise.

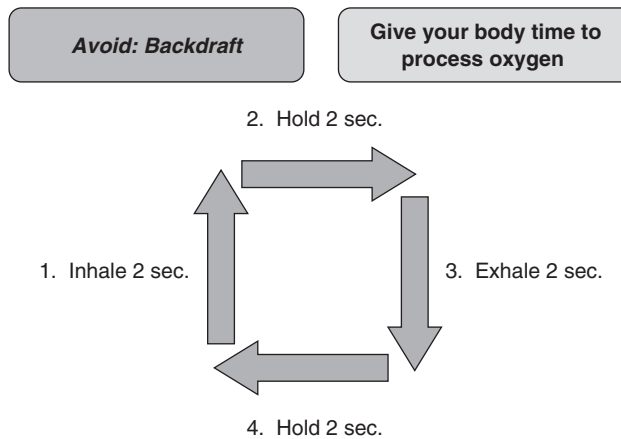
Here are more techniques you can use to reduce the heightened metabolism you experience during communication anxiety. Again, the idea is to begin with less stress, so you'll enter the communication setting with a lower level of tension.

Do stress-reducing exercises to help you relax as much as you can.

Square Breathing

If you don't have time, or don't want to do *Be Here Now Breathing*, *Square Breathing* will ease your anxiety quickly. It's an effective tool that will lower your energy and douse some of the flames in that raging forest fire inside you. Here's how you'll do *Square Breathing* (see **Figure 5.4—*Square Breathing***):

1. Take long, slow, deep breaths on a timed count of two.
2. Take 2 seconds to breathe in.
3. Hold the breath for 2 seconds.
4. Let it out slowly for 2 seconds.
5. Hold for 2 seconds.

Figure 5.4 *Square Breathing*

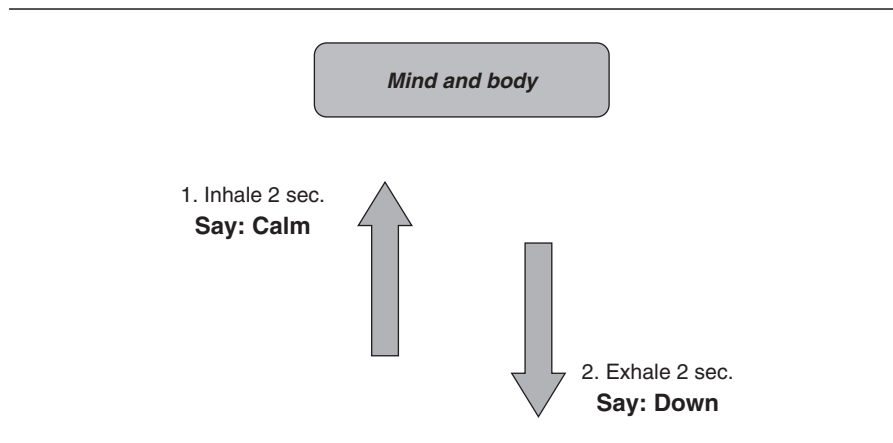
Tip ✓ If nobody is around, make a hissing sound as you exhale.

You may need only five or six breaths before you feel much better. **Caution:** Watch out for hyperventilating. If you take in too much air, too quickly, you could get lightheaded and even pass out. *Square Breathing* gives your body time to absorb the oxygen through your lungs. That's why you pause for 2 seconds at each step. You may need only a few square breaths to get the benefit . . . too many will leave you lightheaded and giddy.

Calm Down Breathing

The next technique is a variation of *Square Breathing* called *Calm Down Breathing*. It's my DePaul students' favorite communication anxiety-busting technique. They like it because it's simple, fast, and effective, and because people can't see them doing it. You keep your confident cool.

Calm Down Breathing is like *Square Breathing*, with the addition of a private message to your mind. The deep breaths address your body. The silent messages of "calm" and "down" soothe your troubled mind. Before you go on stage, take a deep breath. As you are inhaling, say to yourself: "Calm." Hold your breath for a few moments, and then exhale. As you release your breath, slowly say the word "Down." (Please see **Figure 5.5—Calm Down Breathing.**)

Figure 5.5 *Calm Down Breathing*

Stretch away your tension

You'll feel more confident if your muscles are loose and free of tension. When you feel anxious, the blood sugar and adrenaline make your muscles rigid with tension. So do stretching exercises to remove tension from your upper back, shoulders, and neck. This tension makes your throat feel thick and your voice sound funny. Tension makes you look nervous. The Women's Heart Association offers excellent stretches that ease the effects of communication anxiety, and they can help your heart be healthier, too (see **Figure 5.6—Stretch Away Upper Body Tension**).

Tip ✓ You can control your throat tension by **humming forcefully**. As you feel your throat begin to relax, hum more gently. This will relax your throat muscles, and remove any trace of tension from your voice. You will not sound nervous. You'll sound more confident and natural, and speak with greater ease. (Learn more ways to develop your voice in **Chapter 8—Message Delivery—Performing the Presentation**.)

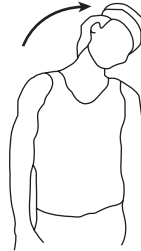
Action Step Four: Fill your mind with positive thoughts

This technique will give you two great benefits:

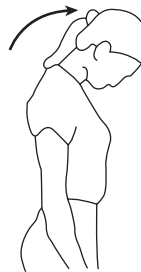
1. You'll be able to reduce your anxiety and fill your body with positive energy.
2. You'll become more powerful. It heightens your leadership quality and credibility. Your audience will sense your positive energy.

Figure 5.6 Stretch Away Upper Body Tension**Stretches side of neck**

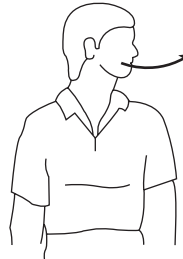
- Sit or stand with arms hanging loosely at sides
- Tilt head sideways, first one side, then the other
- Hold for 5 seconds
- Repeat 1 to 3 times

**Stretches back of neck**

- Sit or stand with arms hanging loosely at sides
- Gently tilt head forward to stretch back of neck
- Hold 5 seconds
- Repeat 1 to 3 times

**Stretches side of neck**

- Sit or stand with arms hanging loosely at sides
- Turn head to one side, then the other
- Hold for 5 seconds, each side
- Repeat 1 to 3 times



Remember, you are what you think—The great author Kurt Vonnegut told us, “We are what we pretend to be.” Your state of emotional well-being, confidence, and dynamism is the direct product of your last sequence of thoughts and experiences. *Your brain is the boss of your body.*

Tip ✓ Test your brain’s power—Next time you lift a heavy object, perhaps when working out in a gym, test the power of a positive mental state. As you lift the weight, say the word “strong” or “power” to yourself. Concentrate on that word. You’ll sense an immediate upward change in your physical power as you exert yourself against the weight.

Next, think the words “weak” or “heavy,” and you’ll notice your power rapidly drops off. If a simple word can change your physical

strength, what do you think profound and detailed thoughts can do? When you think positive thoughts that are derived from your experiences, you can generate a positive push wave of energy. People will follow you and believe the words you say. (See *The Fourth Component of Credibility* in **Chapter 6—Making People Believe You: Persuasive Communication.**)

How to build a list of *Personal Power Thoughts*[®]

Think about things in your life that make you confident and happy; things you've done to help people. Think about the people who love you and trust you. Visualize their smiling, loving faces. Remember the times you've been the big winner—in business, in sports, in love. Recall the time you were hired or promoted, landed a big contract, had your ideas accepted. Were you ever a hero?

If you've competed well in sports, think of a moment when you were playing well, without pressure or fear, when you were happy, in control, and winning. As you visualize this great moment, you will transform your nervous energy into positive energy.

Next, you must record these private moments of victory and accomplishment in a list. You will want to have a set of 10 things that will instantly make you feel good about yourself the second you think of them.

Important—The list must produce strong, positive emotions and tie into visual memory. You must see the event vividly in your mind, so you can really feel it throughout your body. This technique takes the energy rushing throughout your body and turns it into positive feelings of physical and psychic power.

Five things that make me feel good

Write down five moments from your life that make you feel great. Do this now, and you will have a tool you can use to decrease communication anxiety. Also, I'll sell more books. See, once you've written in it, the bookstore's resale value will be lower, so you'll probably decide to keep it, which means there will be one less used book on the market. Thanks for helping me sell more books!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4. _____
5. _____

Think about the positive outcomes

An effective variation on the *positive thoughts* technique is to focus on the positive outcomes of your communication. If you feel anxious, and you insist on thinking about the impending communications event, think positively. Allow yourself to think only about the wonderful, beneficial things that will happen. You'll begin to feel powerful and energized. For example, picture the audience being delighted with your speech. Rehearse parts of your speech, and visualize the positive response that you'll get from the people in your audience. Think about what will happen after you've spoken, and the group adopts your vision. Visualize the benefits you'll accrue from speaking.

Positive thoughts

Technique You can gain control of your mind and metabolism. Think of a place where you feel relaxed, and practice thinking about that place. For example, if your favorite relaxation place is lying on the hot sand at the beach, picture yourself there.

Use each of your senses—touch, taste, hearing, smell, and sight—to remember that favorite spot. For example, you can smell the salt air and the breeze, feel the warmth of the sand and softness of the wind; you can see the bright, light blue sky, and hear the waves and sounds of far-off conversations.

The longer you practice remembering this, the more powerful and automatic it will become. The calming effect is wonderful and will always be at your command.

Taking control of persistent fears

Fear, particularly anxiety over an impending event, is a nasty, annoying emotion to live with. Our brains prefer to think about negative, fearful incidents. Unless you take control of your thoughts, left to its own resources, your brain chooses to pay more attention to fearful thoughts than to positive ideas. Your brain would rather think about the bad stuff that could happen than the good things that probably will happen. Think about all the things you've worried about

over the past few months. Now, how many of those disasters actually happened? Few, if any, I bet. Next, think about the lousy things that did happen to you. How many of them did you anticipate, think about, and develop a nice set of anxieties over? The answer, for most of us, is that 90% of the things we worry about, or even lose sleep over, never happen. And of the things that actually go wrong in our lives, few of them were expected.

False alarms go off in your head

You know that your brain stem does not understand the dangers you face today. When your brain stem comes to your rescue because you feel threatened, or are intimidated, it can make speaking harder.

Here is why—Your reptilian brain developed millions of years ago, when the dangers our species faced were physical. For example, your cave-dwelling ancestors were threatened by saber-toothed tigers or by running off a cliff—not by their coworkers who might laugh and ridicule them when they presented their financial analyses. To protect our ancient ancestors, the brain stem responded to danger by pumping out a rush of chemicals that made our ancestors momentarily stronger and faster, and their bodies better able to stand and fight, or run from danger (fight-or-flight). Unfortunately for us, our society has evolved faster than the human brain stem. The dangers we face today are social, not physical. As you prepare to present your ideas, your brain stem senses your fearful thoughts and “thinks” you’re in physical danger. It rushes in to rescue you; it shuts down the cerebral cortex, and all brain activity is diverted to combat condition red; it reduces blood flow to your extremities, so if you suffer a cut you won’t bleed to death. The brain stem increases your heart rate to pump blood to your upper body’s fighting muscles. Sugar is shot into your muscles. You’re powerful; your arms shake with energy. If your mission was to tear phone books in half, or leap into your audience and kill 20 people, you could. Your body is ready. But your job is not to become a killing machine; your job is to be cool. You are supposed to project a calm, confident, “I’m in control” attitude, to make your audience believe you are in charge.

Protection you could use

If your brain stem were designed to rescue you from the dangers you face today, it would not turn you into a fighting machine. Instead,

it would produce chemicals to heighten your intelligence and charm. For example, if your brain stem were the type of ally you needed during an important business meeting, it would send chemical messengers to relax your muscles, allowing you to move gracefully and gesture smoothly. Rather than making your mouth dry, it would order the production of extra saliva to lubricate your tongue and lips, so you could speak with greater fluidity. The brain stem would release endorphins to give you a feeling of well-being. Other chemical messengers would be released to heighten your intelligence, speed up your cerebral cortex's processing time, and decrease retrieval time from memory, thus allowing you to assess ideas and questions with greater brilliance. Your peripheral vision would be enhanced, so you could see more of your audience. You could read every person's reaction to your ideas. (Now the opposite usually happens: Your visual field narrows, giving you tunnel vision.) And perhaps the brain stem would help you become more socially attractive by releasing a pheromone scent, making you more sexually attractive to your listeners. Now, this is the brain stem you need when faced with social danger—something that will turn you into Cary Grant, not Rambo.

Your brain stem is obsessed with fear

Time and time again, your brain stem makes you miserable. It gives you rotten feelings when you should be feeling excited and powerful. It makes you stupid when you need to be intelligent. You become a klutz when you need grace and charm. Your brain stem can't learn from its past mistakes. It continues on its consistent track record of failure, as it obsesses about things that will go wrong. Fear and anxiety are hard to ignore. Your brain thinks it's protecting you. In reality, it may be harming you with pent-up stress and preventing you from optimal performance.

Action Step Five: Know your topic

Earlier, I made what I hope is a convincing case for mastering your subject matter before you speak. You should demonstrate mastery in the way you deliver your talk. Never read your presentation. You can speak from a bullet point outline using PowerPoint slides or handouts. You will carry on a conversation with your audience, because a good presentation is a lively exchange between you and your listeners.

Never, never, never, never memorize your speech—Note I did not say sometimes, or usually; you should never attempt to memorize a speech. Exception to that rule: If you are so talented that you can take prewritten ideas and deliver them with such elegance and fluidity that your audience is not aware you're speaking canned words, you can memorize what you want to say. But do not waste such a rare and valuable talent by going into business. A fortune and tons of fun await you in showbiz. If you want to stay in business, you can: Be your own manager.

The rest of us cannot take things we've memorized and deliver them in an audience-engaging manner. Sure, you'll get the words out, and if your audience is willing to work hard, they may receive some logical, factual content. But the major message you send them is, "Shut up, don't participate, I'll do the talking, you merely sit there." Your stilted, memorized tone creates a barrier between you and your audience.

The deer-in-the-headlights look

Many people have told me that one of their biggest fears about speaking before important audiences is that they will go blank during the presentation. They imagine themselves standing, speechless, before a group of people who undoubtedly will see them as idiots.

A great reason not to memorize a speech is that everyone goes blank in a presentation; we all forget a train of thought, or lose a word for a moment—it's normal. But if you blank in a memorized presentation, as you probably will, it's like death. You stand there frozen; your mind races, you fight panic. You either stand there repeating the last line you said, hoping to recover the link to the idea you've forgotten, or, like the third grader delivering the Pledge of Allegiance, you have to start over at the beginning. Either way, it's not a pretty sight.

Dealing with blanking out

First, you can expect that you'll go blank at least once during a talk. It's natural, and it will happen. In fact, the better your talk—the more spontaneous, the more involved you are, the more your audience is hanging onto your every thought—the greater the chance. You may fail to instantly find the right word or idea, as you create this lively communication experience. Panic can exacerbate the natural blanking that occurs. If you tense up and panic, you're dead. The audience realizes that something is wrong, and transmits fear back to you.

Stay cool, mon

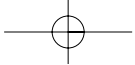
Relax; forgetting is natural, and only lasts a few seconds at the most. See for yourself. Next time you're engaged in a conversation, notice how often you fail to find the right word, or how often you lose your train of thought. My recommendation is to handle it the same way you do in a casual conversation. Just wait, think, and it will come to you.

Two different speed zones— yours and the audience's

Besides the level of tension in you, another factor makes blanking in a presentation especially difficult: *Einstein's Time Shift*® (see **Chapter 7—Message Packaging—Strategies for Formatting Presentations: How You Say It**). The audience and the presenter move through two different time continua. To you, the speaker, time moves quickly. It seems as if you have barely started to talk, when time is up. For your audience, time is moving in the other direction: slowly. When you go blank, you feel as if you've been standing speechless before the audience, sweating bullets, with everyone staring at you for minutes; but to your audience, it's been only the blink of an eye. If you make too big a deal out of blanking, the audience is likely to be puzzled over what you're talking about. To them, you appear to have paused. So relax, take a few seconds to think about what you want to say. Usually your forgotten thought will come to you. Take a nice pause; your audience will believe you're thinking. You'll look smart and in control.

Move to the groove—Use body movement to unstick your memory. If you've waited, and what you wanted to say doesn't come to you, use the same trick that athletes use to get in the groove and improve their performance: Move. Standing frozen in the spotlight makes it worse. By the simple act of taking a step, you will unlock your mind. The same trick works when you're sitting at a table and you go blank. When you shift your body position, rapidly and with confidence, the movement will trigger recall.

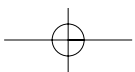
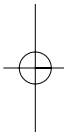
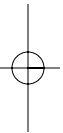
"Look to the Force, Luke"—Use visual cues. You can always glance at your visual supporting aids, such as notes, or much better, the overhead projection of your outline. It's best to have your talk's key words on overheads (see **Chapter 10—Communicating With Tables,**



Graphs, and Charts: *Your Visual Toolbox*, and Chapter 11—Maximum PowerPoint).

Confession is good for the soul and memory

If all the above methods fail you, be honest. Tell the audience you forgot what you were going to say. Your candor will build a bridge between you, enhance your credibility, and bring them closer to your side. And, just as in everyday conversation, soon after you tell your listener you can't remember what you wanted to say, you will remember it.



Know More About How Your Mind Works: *Attribution of Cause*

This popular psychological technique is a rational approach to understanding how we think. Unlike other theories that describe human behavior as driven by internal states or personality, attribution theory starts with the premise that people are thinking, rational beings. People think like scientists, even though they don't have formal scientific training. We watch other people, notice events, and try to make sense of the world. While much of what we see appears to be chaotic, we still try to sort it out and create order.

For example, imagine what chaos business would be if accountants didn't have rules and rational ways of dealing with money as it flows in and out of the firm—or if marketing people didn't have methods of getting money for the accountants and finance people to play with.

Attribution theory—the scientist observes

We watch the world about us, explaining the events we see, why they happened, and assign causes for effects we observe. For example, imagine that you're sitting on the shore of a lake. You watch a sailor in a rowboat move across the lake. You want to explain what causes the boat to move.

As an intelligent person, trained to use attribution theory, you rely on two fundamental rules to explain causes for effects: "can" and "try."

1. **Can**—does the person have the ability to cause the effect? If the answer is yes, he or she may be responsible for causing the

effect. But while necessary, “can” information is not sufficient. The person has to try, too.

2. **Try**—did the person exert effort?

Together, “can” and “try” evidence are excellent explanations for responsibility.

As you look at the sailor and the boat, what “can” and “try” information do you have?

Test One Does the sailor have oars or sails? (can)

Test Two Is the sailor working the sails or pulling on the oars? (try)

If you answer “yes” to Test One and Test Two, you will attribute cause to the sailor. The sailor is responsible for the boat’s progress across the lake.

However, if the answer to either the “can” or “try” test is “no,” you’ll make attribution to forces outside the sailor: For example, the passive sailor in the powerless boat may be moving because of the wind or current.

Attribution principle—internal or external locus of control

The locus of control is the source of power, or force, that causes things to happen. It’s the mojo that moves people, places, and things; it empowers actions and causes results. We have two loci of control: internal and external. The power resides or originates either within or outside the person. If you believe that the motivation comes from within the person, you’ll make the attribution that he or she is the cause, and is responsible. On the other hand, if you believe that forces outside the person were the cause, you would not hold that person responsible.

It’s a foul assignment and your name is written all over it—(See Table 5.1—Attributions Why Your Supervisor Gave You a Dirty Job.) For example, consider the internal forces that would cause your supervisor to give you an undesirable assignment. You receive a voice-mail from your superior assigning a nasty, bothersome little project that no one in his or her right mind would want. What caused her to give it to you? Here are two lists of possible causes. The first list contains all internal motivations. The second is a set of external attributions you could make to figure out your supervisor’s actions.

Table 5.1 Attributions Why Your Supervisor Gave You a Dirty Job

Internal attributions: Why you	
<i>Internal attribution</i>	<i>What it means</i>
She thinks you're intelligent and have expert skills.	She knew you handled messy projects well.
She's prejudiced.	She thinks people of your gender, racial, or national characteristics or sexual preference like this work.
She's selfish and greedy.	She will look good in the eyes of her superior.
She knows your disposition.	She knew that you wouldn't turn her down or fuss too much.
She wants to promote you.	Her desire to see you succeed; while undesirable, this project will show how tough you are and spotlight you to others in your organization.

If you believe any of the above reasons were deterministic in her giving you the assignment, you would blame her, thinking she's at fault.

Now, consider this list of external attributions for cause:

External attributions: Why you	
<i>External attribution</i>	<i>What it means</i>
Other people were not acceptable.	Your supervisor expressly suggested you be given the assignment.
Everybody else was sick.	You were the only one available.
It's the company's operating policy and procedure.	As part of your company's policy, miscellaneous assignments are given in strict rotation, according to seniority and the last project assigned. Your name came up.

If you make the attributions for the cause behind your supervisor's assignment to be external forces, you'll be far less likely to blame her.

Law and Order uses attribution theory

Juries make decisions of guilt or innocence using attribution theory. If they believe that a defendant's motivation was due to internal forces, they deliver a guilty verdict. If the defense can successfully

demonstrate to the jury that external forces were at work, the defendant is pronounced innocent.

For example, imagine that you're on a jury that must decide why a wealthy young man killed his butler.

External: The butler went berserk, and attacked him with a lead pipe in the library. Your verdict: not guilty, self-defense.

Internal: The butler was blackmailing him with candid photos that showed him committing adultery. Your verdict: guilty, murder.

In a personal injury case, the jury decides why the patient died. They determine if the doctor was at fault.

External: The patient had a rare fungus that quickly enveloped his body; there was no known cure. Verdict: not guilty.

Internal: The doctor was drinking, ingesting prescription medications, and misdiagnosed the case. Verdict: guilty, responsible for the patient's death.

How to use the power of attribution theory to manage speech anxiety

Just as you assign causes for other people's actions and the outcomes of events, we use attribution to explain why we feel the way we feel at any given moment.

Humans experience a wide range of emotions: anger, fear, love, passion, envy, desire, greed, anxiety, elation, and more. As an adult, you have become sophisticated in detecting the various types of emotions you experience at any given moment. While you may feel an extensive set of emotions, the physical feelings you have are quite limited. In fact, the same chemicals flow through your body during most emotions. Emotion is rather simple chemically, but is a complex attribution. You use external cues to make complex explanations for a limited set of physiological responses and feelings. You use information from your environment to explain your feelings.

For example, imagine it's late one night; you've just finished shopping at the mall. As you walk to your car from the mall, suddenly, in your peripheral vision, you see a stranger jump out from a dark corner. You take that set of information: human form; sudden, aggressive movement toward you; and the fact you're in a vulnerable

situation; and you make the attribution that the sudden rush of feelings you are experiencing is caused by fear.

Now, change the setting in your mind to a romantic, softly lit watering hole. You're sharing a lively, loving conversation with a person of the gender you prefer. This person is attractive and charming, and you begin to experience a slowly building set of physical feelings. When they reach their peak, these feelings are almost identical to the body chemical you generated when the stranger startled you in the mall parking lot. The same set of chemicals produce the same body feeling. One feeling is unpleasant and frightened you. You hope in your heart of hearts that it never happens again; the other is a moment you wish could go on forever, one you'll choose to return to again and again in your memory.

Situational information determines your feeling

If you get a letter from the IRS, you might label your feelings as anxiety or fearful expectation. Should you find yourself speaking before an audience, you could attribute your enhanced physical state to the fact that you're about to seize a thrilling opportunity—one that will confirm your exalted status and knowledge. Or you could decide to believe that you are a victim trapped in a frightening experience, one that will mean huge risk, probably failure, and humiliation. How do you decide? Do you realize the attribution you make is entirely up to you? You pick the one you most believe. That will determine how you feel, and it will regulate how you speak.

What is the cause of these feelings?

During significant business communications, your body is alive. Adrenaline is flowing, your blood pressure is up, and your heart is pumping. How do you explain these symptoms? Possible attributions could include that you're weak and vulnerable. Or you could choose to attribute the feelings to excitement and power: You sense that the audience loves you, and you feel totally alive. That second set of attributions—the feelings of excitement and power—is what successful business leaders make, it's what they tell themselves. And they really believe it.

Seven Keys to Managing Communication Anxiety

Here is a list of seven practical keys that will help you manage yourself through communication anxiety.

Key One The natural chemicals flowing through your body and mind, as a result of your excitement, give you a case of “temporary insanity.”

Insight into attribution for feelings

Let me share some objective scientific evidence that will clearly demonstrate how people label their body feelings based on information about the settings they are in.

In these psychological studies at a leading university, undergraduate male students were given heavy, soundproof headsets to wear, like the headsets that airport ground crews wear as they wave your plane into the gate. The experimenters convinced the young men that what they were hearing in the headsets was their own heartbeats. The young men were given an album filled with photos of nude women. As the subjects looked at certain preselected photos, the experimenters turned up the subjects’ “heart rate.” At the end of the experiment, the men were encouraged to select one of the photos (their choice) to take with them as a reward for having participated in the study. Each time, the young men selected the photo that accompanied the faster “heartbeat.” What made it more interesting was that the photos were pre-rated for attractiveness by a panel of judges. The experimenters had increased the heart rate for the photos that were consistently rated as less attractive. The subjects made the attribution: “I liked her best.”

If you found the first experiment interesting but of questionable ethics or taste, wait till I tell you about the second experiment that was conducted. Everything was the same as before: young man listening to

headset with “heartbeat,” looking at nude women. But this time, a picture of a nude male was inserted in the middle of the album. Guess which picture the experimenters increased the heartbeat on this time? Right you are. And guess what reaction these young men had, at an age when much of their sexual identity was being established? Subject after subject began to believe that he was gay, though his sexual orientation was heterosexual. The experiments went into greater ethical jeopardy, because the researchers did not adequately debrief the subjects and explain what they had been through. This series of studies profoundly demonstrates the power of attribution. If young men can be convinced that they have an attraction to another person based on heart rate information, you can convince yourself that your heightened metabolism is the result of excitement and power, not fright. This is exactly what I recommend you do—convince yourself that you’re excited, and tell your audience you’re excited to be speaking with them.

- During the opening part of your talk, you’re under exceptional stress and have an elevated pulse rate. You may not remember what you were going to say. You’ll feel as if you’re riding on a runaway freight train.

Use the *Question Opening*® technique (**Chapter 7—Message Packaging—Strategies for Formatting Presentations: *How You Say It***).

- Know the first 30 seconds well. After you get through the beginning, you’ll be fine.

Key Two Let your heightened metabolism work for you.

- It’s energy, so use it. Move, be dynamic; be excited. Tell your audience you’re excited to be speaking to them. Elaborate, and tell them why. Your ideas are superior, and you have found solutions; or better yet, because they are impressive, important people, and you realize the magnitude of the honor bestowed upon you by being invited to speak to this esteemed group. Remember, you must be sincere. If the listeners believe you’re only stroking them, they will have to hose you off the sidewalk. You’ve killed, or badly wounded, your credibility.
- Don’t try to be cool, whatever you do. Your body is alive with power and energy. Your muscles are filled with adrenaline and sugar; they shake with strength and drive. Your breathing rate is faster and deeper, as your body demands more oxygen to

maintain this heightened metabolism. You'll only increase your stress if you try to stand still and look cool. If you're taking small, cautious breaths, you're not feeding the animal you've become. Breathe deeply; drink in the oxygen. Move, too.

Key Three If you think your excitement is showing . . . tell your audience you're excited to be speaking to them.

- They will attribute your obvious agitation to your excitement, and they will be flattered. One result: The audience will like you better, and you'll build credibility.

Key Four Remember, the audience is on your side.

Especially during the opening moments of your presentation, your audience wants you to speak well. Have you ever listened to someone and thought, "I surely hope this speaker is boring?" Your listeners want an entertaining, informative presentation.

Think of your listeners as partners in your presentation. It's as if you're at the same party. Everybody wants to have a good time.

Key Five Try to meet the members of the audience before you speak, shake their hands, and look them in the eye.

- Tell them you're one of the speakers. Thank them for coming. This human contact will greatly reduce your anxiety over being a stranger in the room. Even if you know the audience, and work with them every day, a couple of moments of human contact will greatly enhance your sense of ease, and their sense of participation in the talk. Together, you'll have a better communication experience.

A tip for meeting strangers is to look in their eyes. See if you can guess what type of people they are—friendly, serious, analytical, humorous? See if you like them or feel an affinity toward them. Most of us make a rapid, if not accurate, determination during the first few moments when we meet somebody. We either like the person right away, don't like the person, or find it hard to get a reading on the person. Perhaps the person reminds you of someone in your family, someone you work with, or someone you have met before. If you begin your talk with a handful of people you like, you're way ahead. You will focus your attention on them initially. There's more on this technique in **Chapter 8—Message Delivery—Performing the Presentation**.

Key Six Just before you're introduced, study the faces of your audience. Look for friendly faces.

- This is an application of the “meet the audience” technique discussed above. You’ll find that some people are naturally better listeners. They give feedback; they look at you with expressions of interest and liking on their faces. If you try to talk to the people who have blank or hostile faces, or who are looking down, you’ll find it disconcerting. But by focusing on the good listeners, the people you get a good feeling from, your own attitude will be positive and confident as you begin to speak to these better listeners.
- As you begin to hold these individual conversations with the good listeners, the others will start tuning in, and become part of the communication experience. Focusing on the bad listeners, or the people tuning out, will distract you by giving you false feedback. Talk to the good listeners in the audience.

Key Seven Focus on the audience and your message.

- Concentrate on your ideas, not on yourself. If you’re aware of how you are gesturing or of your physical symptoms, you heighten the communication anxiety reaction. You’ll get nervous if you think of yourself too much. Think hard about how to best express your ideas.
- Look at the audience one at a time: Hold brief conversations with each person, moving from one good listener to another.
- Forget about yourself. You don’t have to spend your limited mental awareness and thinking ability worrying about how you’re conducting yourself. You have been beautifully reared and have fine business manners. Your natural gestures, the ones you make in a presentation, are fine.
- What counts most in a business presentation is a communication with the audience of facts and emotion, spontaneously delivered, by a well-prepared authority on the topic: you.
- Great speakers are hungry to share their ideas with the audience; they really don’t think about what their bodies are doing. Their motions and gestures become automatic. Train yourself to avoid “self-monitoring behavior.”

Speech anxiety: Barrier to success

What keeps people from finding success and recognition in their business lives? Is it too little planning? Bad luck? Not enough effort? Is it lack of capital? Sure, these reasons have been the cause of business failure and lack of advancement. Think about yourself and your career. Like many people, you may find that speaking anxiety has held

you back. Not because you got cold feet at the prospect of addressing the 5,000 national sales representatives and distributors at last year's national meeting. That would scare anybody. I am talking about the times when you did not speak up at a meeting, when you were held back by anxiety, or by an unfocused, confused mind. How often have you not made or returned a phone call because you did not want to speak to another person? Perhaps you were afraid of some unknown factor. How often, after the meeting was over, perhaps at your desk or riding in your car, have you kicked yourself for not having spoken up? We regret the things we did not do . . . not the things we did.

Advanced Fear Management

You must make an extra effort to deal with these pesky, anxiety-creating fears—Do you have recurring thoughts of fear and anxiety? Do you find yourself revisiting fearful visions or recollections during the day? You can rid yourself of these negative, energy-draining moments by taking yourself through a systematic analysis. At the end of this process, you'll find that your fears will be greatly reduced, and better yet, they won't recur as often, if at all. This technique has been known to rid people of their nagging fears forever. If you like, practice this technique by thinking about a moment that will put you into a state of speech anxiety. For example, visualize yourself blanking out in front of an important audience and having people laugh at you. The more vividly you recollect the fear, the more you'll experience this technique.

Step One: Sense fear and its cause—Visualize the fear, the negative, clearly. You want to really feel the anxiety.

Step Two: Write down or say aloud exactly what you think will happen—Describe the disaster in clear terms. HINT: You must not merely think about the fear. The fear must be brought out into the clear light, where you can examine it, by writing it down or saying it aloud.

Step Three: Rank the magnitude of fear on a scale of 1 to 10—Assume that your worst fears come true. How bad would that be? Or how severe a fear is it? Let 1 be hardly any fear at all, a minor fear, and 10 be the end of your world as you know it, the worst outcome you could imagine.

Step Four: Reassess fear and the likely, realistic outcome—Next, revisit the potential situation that is causing the anxiety. Describe, either by saying aloud to yourself or by writing down, what realistically will probably happen.

Step Five: Re-rank magnitude of fear on scale of 1 to 10—Finally, sense your fear level, and re-rank the magnitude of your anxiety. You'll find fears that started out as an 8 or 9 have dropped way down to a 2 or 3. You'll find that they aren't worth thinking about.

This technique allows you to put fears under the microscope. Fear is sneaky. It lurks in the background, in the shadows, whispering at you. So your fears may be hard to grasp and deal with. To take back control, you must bring your fears out, one by one, on center stage. Put fear in the spotlight, and give it a microphone. In that cold, rational light, fear can be dealt with.

Give this technique a try. Return to that list of negative outcomes you put together earlier in this chapter. Pick a really ugly, scary fear and use these five steps to whittle down that redwood of a fear to a toothpick.

Getting more help

All forms of anxiety, including communication anxiety, are serious problems that require serious remedies. If you feel that the ideas and techniques you've read in this book don't help you enough, you may say, "Joel, I need more help." Trust your senses: You're right, you do need more help, and the better news is that you can get effective help. Be sure to read the special section below by Dr. Corey Goldstein, a renowned physician and authority on psychopharmacology at Rush University Medical Center. Dr. Goldstein is an expert at helping people manage their communication anxiety with medication and therapy.

More tools to fight anxiety—Millions of people experience anxiety that can't be controlled by breathing and positive thoughts; they need medication and more aggressive, intensive treatment. Physicians trained to treat anxiety have a host of medications they can prescribe for you. And therapy has taken leaps and bounds in effectiveness, from cognitive therapy to Eye Movement Desensitization and Reintegration (EMDR). Help is waiting for you. Please don't suffer from the effects of anxiety anymore.

Contact the **Anxiety Disorders Association of America**, a fantastic organization (www.adaa.org/). They will help you find a trained professional in your area who can help.

This next section will open the door to breakthroughs in medical science that can give you more potent tools to deal with communication anxiety. You'll learn from Dr. Corey Goldstein, who has helped thousands of people take greater control of their lives.

Medical Management

Corey Goldstein, M.D.

Performance-based anxiety is common. Millions of people suffer profound anxiety when doing important, day-to-day things. Public speaking anxiety is even more common. While the techniques outlined above are useful for reducing communication anxiety in the majority of people, some people will not respond to them. In fact, many of these “non-responders” are so anxious that the thought of even trying to practice a breathing exercise, or trying imagery, is paralyzing. Fortunately, most people have to speak in front of others only rarely. However, when you are faced with a mandatory public speaking event, one you can’t avoid, you can have a debilitating problem.

A good example of a familiar speech that is frequently overwhelming is the toast to the bride and groom, traditionally given by the best man at a wedding reception. The best man’s anticipatory anxiety can overwhelm his life, and these feelings begin weeks in advance. His anxiety often overshadows what would otherwise be a joyful event. As the wedding draws near, the event itself is relegated to the backseat, while his speech becomes an intrusive thought. Even after he has given the toast, the best man can be plagued with doubt as he replays his behavior during the speech. What a horrible way to enjoy a loved one’s wedding.

I have seen many professionals avoid public speaking, to the detriment of their careers. The effect of this avoidance is twofold:

1. You deny yourself a potentially rich, rewarding career path.
2. You lose the chance to learn and grow by exposing yourself to an anxiety-provoking situation that could improve with repetition and practice.

What to do when communication anxiety is overwhelming

What can you do if you fit into the “severe” public speaking anxiety category? Well, you can always avoid speaking. This is certainly not a bad tactic, especially if you can afford to use it. After all, humans have limitations, and acceptance of our limitations is not necessarily a bad thing. However, if you cannot rely on avoidance because of career, social, or personal pressures, you can take helpful steps.

Professional help—Seeking help from a professional is the first step; enlisting an expert is a good idea. Almost every community has primary care physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and other psychotherapists who are familiar with the treatment of severe communication anxiety.

You can expect the physician to begin with a thorough evaluation of your overall mental health. I believe that taking a complete history is absolutely essential. It’s true that severe communication anxiety can be isolated—that is, a problem unto itself. However, communication anxiety is often an extension of another problem. For example, people who suffer from extreme communication anxiety may be suffering from *generalized anxiety disorder*, *social anxiety disorder*, or *attention deficit disorder*. I have even treated patients that suffered from clinical depression, who, once their depression was managed, enjoyed the added benefit of a significant improvement in their communication anxiety. While you may want to get the “cure” immediately, and feel that having a thorough evaluation is overkill, professionals see this as an essential step to finding the starting point for treatment.

Non-pill relief

If your severe communication anxiety seems to be isolated, and is not part of other life and personal problems, I generally recommend nonmedical treatment as the best first route to relief. For example, *cognitive* and *behavioral techniques* can work wonderfully and quickly, not only for communication anxiety, but also for life problems in general. These treatments include gathering ideas and beliefs you may have about a particular problem. Over time, these beliefs are evaluated and challenged to reduce the undesired physical and emotional responses.

Exposure techniques can sequentially reduce a patient’s debilitating symptoms through repeated, step-by-step practice. With professional guidance, you trace what is running through your mind prior to, during,

and after the communication event. Working with your physician you learn to question: “Are my thoughts consistent with *reality*?” and “Is there evidence to support my thoughts?” and “Is it possible that I’m jumping to conclusions, or *catastrophizing*?” A good coach or psychotherapist can help you to slowly chip away at the problem with small steps, meant to eventually minimize anxiety.

Pet the barking dog—Repeated exposure can be used to your advantage. For some people, just getting up in front of others and speaking is a major step. Before such a patient can apply more advanced speaking techniques, the first step could be to write out the entire talk, as well as answers to potential questions. This is the “get through it this time and read less the next time” strategy. You come to recognize that failure to be perfect is simply a reality of being human. The next time you may rely less on notes, but have them in front of you as a safety precaution.

Think about your speaking experience—As part of this treatment, you should take some time before and after to evaluate your thoughts and feelings. In addition, remember that negative thoughts often produce additional negative thoughts, eventually leading to despair and anxiety. So don’t forget to challenge those thoughts. At every possible opportunity, introduce a new communication anxiety technique, as they will become increasingly useful once your mind reduces anxious barriers. (See **Chapter 4—When You’re Afraid to Communicate: Understanding Anxiety and Fear.**)

A pill may help

What can you do if cognitive and behavioral techniques do not work for you? Or what help can you get if you have only 2 days’ notice prior to a public speaking event and you are freaking out? Once again, avoidance is always an option, and again, not a bad one, but this “technique” is not always available. This is the point where medications are a good option.

Keep in mind that medications are often used as a helpful adjunct to all the techniques mentioned above, and only as a short-term solution. In addition, they are most useful when some anxiety remains intact, in order to facilitate learning—this is where a good, experienced prescribing physician comes into play. Too much medication can be a barrier to learning new and useful techniques for improvement. You can make informed, positive decisions with your health

care provider about whether or not medication may be an appropriate option for you.

As with psychotherapy, medications need to be placed in the overall context of the situation. Symptoms can often be part of a larger process. Dealing with this process may indirectly improve communication anxiety. Again, it is essential to seek the help of a good, experienced physician. Never attempt to self-medicate.

Medications that ease communication anxiety

Caution—Some physicians use these medicinal options heavily. Please note that few studies have been completed on this subject; the scientific evidence as to their efficacy is lacking. Therefore, what I will be discussing should be thought of as guidelines that may help some individuals based on my experience, and discussion of cases with other physicians. As with treatment of any problem, the goal should be to maximize benefit, while minimizing the “cost.” Every medical plan has potential adverse effects.

Prescription beta-blockers—Many physicians have found that the class of antihypertensive medications called *beta-blockers* can be useful, while creating only minimal problems. Beta-blockers are most commonly used in the treatment of cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure. Today, only limited data support their usefulness in easing communication anxiety. *Propranolol* and *atenolol* are two medications in this class that can be quite helpful in reducing the common physiological symptoms of communication anxiety, such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, reddening of the skin, tremor, and voice quivering. Most prescribing physicians generally use small doses of beta-blockers, compared to those necessary for the treatment of cardiovascular disease. The net effect is often a moderate reduction in overall anxiety with minimal problems. The logic of using these medications is that if one can reduce physiological symptoms, then a lessening of mental symptoms will follow. These medications may have an additional effect directly on mental symptoms, but for now, we will go with the “indirect” effect.

Prescription propranolol—I generally prefer 10 to 20 milligrams (mg) of propranolol because of its short duration of action—about 4 hours. For lengthy periods of exposure, I will either ask the client to repeat the propranolol dosage as directed, or use atenolol, which has a longer duration of action. Propranolol is also available in a longer-acting,

“sustained-release” formula. I have found these medications to be the least intrusive in terms of learning new anxiety management and reduction techniques that, hopefully, will eventually preclude the need for medication. Some patients experience a minimal sedation, but the sedative effect is usually countered by the energizing nature of delivering the presentation. Occasionally, blood pressure can decrease, resulting in lightheadedness or dizziness. Obviously, the lower the dose, the less likely this is to happen. I always have people take a test dose prior to their public speaking event to ensure safety. Suffering severe anxiety in a public forum is bad; passing out in front of the group is worse. During the test dose, most people report no effect either way—this is a good thing. Oddly enough, this intervention—for this specific purpose—seems to only work when the pressure begins, when the performance takes place.

Prescription benzodiazepines—Many physicians go for a more “reliable” strategy in the *benzodiazepine* class. Examples are *clonazepam*, *lorazepam*, and *alprazolam*. Brand names are *Klonopin*, *Ativan*, and *Xanax*, respectively. While there are many other options in this class, the majority of physicians prescribe these specific drugs because their relatively short duration of action lowers the chance of adverse effects.

Benzodiazepines act in an opposite way to the beta-blockers. Benzodiazepines are meant to reduce psychological anxiety first, and possibly, the physiological symptoms indirectly. An obvious downside is that they can produce a state of being a little too relaxed, thus reducing the likelihood of learning taking place. In addition, in some people, benzodiazepine medications can alter cognition, or patterns of thinking. Therefore, the likelihood of reduced mental alertness and sedation may be slightly greater than with beta-blockers. As with propranolol and atenolol, benzodiazepine medications can be used in small doses that only “take the edge off,” as opposed to completely reducing, anxiety, in hopes of minimizing adverse effects. When necessary, I usually prescribe lorazepam. Because of its relatively short duration of action, the likelihood of abuse is reduced when compared to others in the class. My consistent strategy is to prescribe limited quantities of small doses.

Prescription antidepressants—Communication anxiety may be linked to clinical depression. For many patients, the use of antidepressants—in the treatment of another problem, such as debilitating *generalized anxiety disorder*, *social anxiety disorder*, or *depression*—gives

the secondary benefit of reducing performance-based, or communication anxiety. While this is usually not the primary goal of treatment, patients enjoy this additional benefit. It should be noted that many of the so-called “modern” antidepressants are quite effective in reducing the symptoms of anxiety disorders.

Help is available

If you’ve tried to lower your metabolism before speaking, and done your best with the positive visualization exercises you learned in **Chapter 4—When You’re Afraid to Communicate: *Understanding Anxiety and Fear*** and in this chapter, you may want to ask a qualified physician for help.

Chapter 5 Summary

Managing Communication Anxiety: Action Steps You Can Take

Key Ideas

- 🔑 When you get speech anxiety, your pulse soars to intense levels, as it does during heavy physical exercise. After 3 to 5 minutes, your body begins to slow down, and your pulse drops dramatically to 90 to 100 beats per minute (bpm).

Physical symptoms

It's as if you're temporarily insane.

- Your brain releases catecholamine into your bloodstream.
 - You hear your pulse pounding in your head.
 - You feel your body demanding lots of oxygen.
 - You have trouble inhaling.
 - Your field of vision narrows.
 - You feel nauseated from the adrenaline.
 - Your stomach has butterflies caused by the adrenaline.
- 🔑 Your brain is the boss. Your body is your brain's audience. Whatever your brain is thinking and feeling, your body will feel too.
- 🔑 *Einstein's Time Shift*
 - For the speaker, time moves quickly.
 - For your audience, time moves slowly.
 - When you go blank, it seems as if you've been standing for minutes. To your audience, it's only the blink of an eye. To them, you've just paused.

Managing Anxiety

Communicator's Checklist

Action steps you can take

- ❑ **Say "I'm excited."** You will make sense to your audience, in a positive way. You've explained your behavior, and you have offered a flattering explanation.
- ❑ **Be here now.** Do the wrist snap, or study the back of your hand, your pen, or the paper your notes are written on.
- ❑ **Fill your mind with positive thoughts** (vivid memories). Build a list of personal power thoughts. Think about positive outcomes.
- ❑ **Be Here Now Breathing (five steps)**
 1. Find a quiet place.
 2. Sit down in a comfortable position.
 3. Shut your eyes.
 4. Take 10 slow, deep breaths, and count them.
 5. See or visualize each number as you count to 10; feel your breath.
- ❑ **Square Breathing**
 1. Take long, slow, deep breaths on a timed count of two.
 2. Take 2 seconds to breathe in.
 3. Hold the breath for 2 seconds.
 4. Let it out slowly for 2 seconds.
 5. Hold for 2 seconds.

Caution: Watch out for hyperventilating!

❑ ***Calm Down Breathing***

1. Inhale—say, “Calm.”
2. Exhale—say, “Down.”

❑ **Stretch away your tension**

- You’ll feel more confident if your muscles are loose and free of tension.
- Tension makes you look nervous.
- **Voice:** Control your throat tension by **humming forcefully**.

❑ **When you go blank, do this:**

1. Relax.
2. Take a few seconds to think about what you want to say.
3. Use body movement to *unstick* your memory.
4. Glance at your slides.

If that does not work, tell the audience you forgot what you were going to say. You will then remember it.

Keys to managing anxiety

- ❑ Use the question opening technique.
- ❑ Move. Be dynamic; be excited. You have energy, so use it.
- ❑ Don’t try to be cool, whatever you do.
- ❑ Tell your audience you’re excited to be speaking to them.
- ❑ Remember, the audience is on your side.
- ❑ Meet the members of the audience before you speak, shake their hands, and look them in the eye.
- ❑ Look for friendly faces. Hold conversations with the good listeners.
- ❑ Concentrate on your ideas, not on yourself.
- ❑ Look at the audience one person at a time; hold brief conversations with each person.