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~ SPEAKING OUT ~ “You’re Next!”

By Gloria Lazar

Have you ever had that moment of panic, with sweaty palms and your heart thumping wildly in your chest, knowing you’re the next one to speak? It could be a presentation in school, at work, even answering a question in front of a group. People are looking at you, judging you. For most of us, at some point in our lives, speaking in public has felt like jumping off a high wall.

Now that the Fall season is upon us, students have packed their book bags and entered the structured days that have replaced the summer break. The French call it “le rentrée,” a good name for what is essentially a return or re-entry: students to school and adults to work after summer vacation.

Many adults tell me their memories of being in school include the moments of dreading being called on or waiting for their turn to present in front of the class – and the fear of what would come out of their mouths.

Clearly these feelings never subside for some people: consider the popularity of Toastmaster’s courses on public speaking, and the newest trend of personal presentation coaches. Whether you are a child or an adult, there are strategies that everyone can use for speaking in front of other people.

Perhaps the best way to reduce your anxiety about speaking in public – and here I’m referring to speaking, not reading a written text – is to know where you’re going. Before you speak, rehearse the opening phrase in your mind. Our thoughts travel through the synapses in our brain much quicker than our mouths can form words so, before you start to speak, prepare yourself, much the same as a runner positions himself.

Okay, you have your opening idea and the words that will lead you into that first sentence. Next, focus your thoughts in a logical way. Where will your first sentence or phrase lead you? Don’t let your mind wander to what’s happening in the back of the room, the noise outside and, most importantly, the sweaty palms, thumping heartbeat, or any extraneous thoughts. If you focus on making your listeners follow the path you set out, your anxiety will drop away like the other distractions that can divert you from what you want to say.

Of course, the usual preparation techniques can help you speak successfully. For students, planning out what they want to say, making notes on an index card, even practicing at home in front of someone will make those waiting moments less stressful. And for adults, planning a presentation with PowerPoint, or writing key points on a white board ahead of time, even

a pad with written notes you can refer to, will give you the assurance that you won’t freeze and forget what you want to say.

But what if you’re called upon to speak in a group without any time to prepare? The best strategy for a spontaneous response is to remain confident. If you focus on what you know, and you think in a logical sequence, the words will come out because, even at an early age, we have an innate language ability that allows us to string together words and phrases in established patterns in our brain.

And, very importantly, don’t forget to breathe. Most of the nervous symptoms people fear are a result of holding one’s breath. Take a deep breath before your first word and speak while you exhale. Be sure to pause briefly at the end of the phrase or sentence for another breath. Don’t be afraid to pause as you’re formulating your ideas and words; that pause can help fix your listeners’ attention as well as give you time to think. Since the mind can work more rapidly than the mouth, the actual time you stop to refresh yourself is probably much shorter than you imagine.

When people ask me whether they’ll ever get over their nervousness, I tell them that a little apprehension is healthy; it keeps them stimulated and makes their presentation more interesting. And when they ask me how they can become better speakers, I always give them the answer to the question, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Practice, practice, practice. ♦

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