

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My boss has asked me to give a fifteen-minute presentation at a regional meeting in three months. Speaking in public terrifies me, and I want to tell my boss to ask someone else to do it. But my wife says it will be good for me, and my career. She's right. My boss could have asked any one of several people to give this talk, but he picked me. But I wake up in a sweat when I think about being in front of 200 people. Any advice?

-- Bob E.

Dear Bob,

You are not alone. Fear of public speaking ranks high on the list of things that terrify people. In one survey I read it even ranked higher than the fear of death or devastating disease, not to mention snakes and extremely high places!

If you're one of those who is afraid, it's hard to believe that some people actually enjoy – get charged up-- by speaking to an audience. And guess what? You may become one of those people after you give this talk!

I agree with your wife that you should try to meet this test rather than giving in to your fear.

You will grow -- as a person and a professional -- by meeting challenges rather than running from them. In fact, the only true path to becoming a confident and self-empowered person is by looking our fears right in the face, and going forward in spite of them.

Remember this Spanish proverb: "A life lived in fear, is a life half-lived." You can do this!

Rather than burning up all your energy in night sweats and worry, here are some practical strategies you can focus on over the next few months.

Recognize that fear is nothing more than an uncomfortable feeling. It can be really uncomfortable, for sure. But, like Nietzsche said, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

You very likely have better communication skills than you give yourself credit for. Start thinking confidently, like a champion. When you hear that inner voice that says, "Yowza! That talk is coming up in a few months and I'm scared to death," say instead, "I can do this. It's no big deal."

Know your stuff. Become comfortable with the material for your talk. Consider using visual aids – like PowerPoint or slides – if you are going to speak about complicated ideas, or concepts that would be more easily understood if they are presented visually as you describe them.

Don't overload your audience. Fifteen minutes might seem like a long time to speak to a group, but it is really only enough time for two or three main points. Be organized in the way you present your material. Prepare the audience by giving an overview, and at the end summarize the most important things you said. Great speakers

know that there are three components to an effective talk: Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you just told them.

Start with a funny story or an anecdote that breaks the ice with the audience. You may even want to tell them about your nervousness. What?! It may sound crazy to announce your anxiety. Won't that just make you more nervous? No. Making this kind of statement has enormous power in reducing anxiety. Remember, most of the people in your audience can identify with a fear of public speaking. Humility and humor go a long way with an audience.

Practice. Give your talk to small groups. Start with your wife and family or a few close friends. Hey, start with your dog if that feels easier. Most importantly, practice your talk out loud, to others before you actually present it at the meeting. Ask for feedback, and then listen carefully. Change your talk if you believe that feedback improves it.

Remember, at any point before or after this talk, you can build up your skills by seeking out other public speaking experiences. Speak up at other meetings or your church or civic group. Join a Toastmasters Club (a great organization for people who want to hone their presentation skills as well as reduce anxiety about public speaking – check it out at www.toastmasters.org).

Try out for a role in your community theater. If you are really serious about improving your skills and reducing anxiety for the future, you might consider taking a drama or public speaking class where you'll pick up lots of tips, and your fear will evaporate through practice and experience.

Bob, this is not going to kill you. It's going to make you stronger. Allow yourself to be surprised: you may truly enjoy this experience. Confronting and overcoming fear can be exhilarating.

Good luck!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

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