

# Coping with nerves

Extracted from *Brilliant Presentation*

**C**ontrolling your nerves (if you have them, and nearly everyone does) is the biggest step you can make towards being good at and enjoying presenting. To control them you must understand them and realise that nerves are normal. You must also realise that controlling them is a 'must do' for anyone who aspires to brilliance.

## Nerves are normal

I am putting this subject right up front because to many people the whole business of doing a presentation, or indeed any solo performance in front of an audience, causes physical anguish so great that it is disabling.

I heard of one female executive who lost it so badly that she froze and stared manically at the bemused audience, screamed 'Stop it! Stop it! Just stop looking at me like that . . .' before rushing off. Poor thing – she had acute 'presentationitis' which, while not life threatening, is definitely career threatening and very, very nasty.

There is little point in talking about the finer points of presenting if the prospective presenter wants to get it over and done with before making a dash for it, bursting into tears or worse. So how do we cure this?

## Be honest with yourself

You have to start by being totally honest with yourself and others.

- How bad is your problem? Write it down now in detail.
- Describe how really awful you feel when it's at its worst.
- What is the worst it's ever been? No, confess to really the absolute worst.
- Analyse how you felt – top to toe and top to bottom. How was your mouth? voice? knees? face? stomach? vision? head?
- How did you feel about the situation you were in?

Just facing up to all this will make a huge difference to you and stop you hiding from the problem.

### **What is actually going on?**

These acute attacks of nerves have been described and analysed in great detail by squads of experts. The symptoms include shaking, a racing heart, sweating, difficulty catching breath, chest pain, dizziness, tingling in the hands and nausea, or more extremely a palpable, screaming fear rising inside you.

What actually happens? The brain has a small structure called the amygdala which can act like an ‘anxiety switch’ that flips on only when anxiety seems necessary – when you face a tiger, a raging torrent ... or the prospect of a presentation.

No I’m not joking – presentations are one of the commonest reasons for the switch being turned on. When it is turned on adrenaline and serotonin are released making the body – going back to our primate beginnings – ready for escape.

Adrenaline is also known as the ‘fight or flight’ hormone. It speeds everything up – the heart beats faster and blood is redirected to the muscles, making you better able to fight or run away. In addition, the brain shuts down – in a life or death crisis you need instinct not brains.

The problem is that the reverse is desirable during a presentation – you need your brain to work for you.

Serotonin is much more complex and in the most extreme situations can kill you. It passes around your system very efficiently and quickly creating euphoria, over-reaction of the reflexes and a happy drunken state. If you are lucky this makes you feel ready to take on the world, but if you are unlucky it can make you feel as though you are about to die of a heart attack.

So now we sort of know what is going on let’s do something about it.

### **Ten top ways of helping to control your nerves**

1. Practice breathing in and out – big breath in, count to four; then breath out, count to eight. Repeat this four times. Critically the breaths out are twice as intense as those in.
2. Sing your nerves away – anyone who has been unfortunate enough to have had a stutter knows only too well that this affliction happens when talking and never when singing. Try going into to your bathroom and belting out a big song, or your presentation message to some kind of rap beat.
3. Externalise – this was the single trick that got me off the ‘if-there-was-only-a-hole-to-swallow-me-up’ feeling. I did a little con trick on myself and said ‘imagine I could fly out of myself’. So I did a little psychological flight up into the roof

beams and looked down at myself. Watching me down there put everything into perspective. I felt quite cheerful – and I performed well.

4. Feel comfortable – if you feel good you will generally do well. You simply feel in charge of yourself and those around you. Ronald Reagan may have been just a 'B' actor but he was an undoubted 'A\*' when it came to confidence. It was said of Ronald that 'he felt comfortable in his shoes'. Next time you present, make sure you wear your comfiest shoes – and I do mean your comfiest and not your smartest.
5. Practise in the nude – David Heslop is the ex-CEO at Mazda and Expotel and this is his idea. The idea is that you get a full length mirror, strip naked and practise your presentation in front of it. Now David is really quite a large man but that merely adds weight to his argument that if you can do something as embarrassing as this with a straight face then a full auditorium will be nothing in comparison.
6. Think about your audience – the certain knowledge of what the audience might think about you may shape your content, your delivery and certainly your confidence. Try this exercise. Imagine that you have to go into two separate rooms – a blue room and a red room. You have a presentation to deliver entitled 'How I learned to become a confident presenter'.
  - In the blue room is an audience comprising the most intimidating teachers from school and also your current and all (yes all) your previous bosses, and anyone else in your life who has intimidated you.
  - In the red room is an audience of relatively well-behaved eleven-year-olds whom you don't know, but you do know that they have been told that you are a nice person.

Now I want you to work out exactly how and why your performance will be different in front of the two audiences and why the eleven-year-olds may see you differently from the historic ogres. The difference in your feeling from each audience may help unlock your inbuilt 'confidence machine'.

7. Preparation creates the confidence of the professional presenter – when you watch a brilliant presenter at work and wonder how he does it, you need to remember that he has probably worked much harder at putting it all together than you could imagine. As a rule of thumb assume you are a senior manager planning an important presentation:
  - the initial writing should take about 3 hours
  - the refinements about the same 3 hours
  - your stage one slide construction 2 hours
  - examining the slides you have had done professionally (it's worth it) 2 hours
  - the rehearsals and rewrites another 3 hours
  - going back to the drawing board and consulting with colleagues 3 hours
  - coaching on performance 3 hours.

Does 19 hours seem too long? It isn't – ask a professional. What all this preparation does is enhance your confidence and your chances of success hugely.

8. Don't drink before you present – I'm told a 'shot of vodka' is the answer. It isn't. Don't do it – ever. Any more than you'd expect your surgeon to drink ('just to steady my hands') before an operation. While it might seem the answer for this particular presentation, in your stoned state you won't learn why what went well went well, and why what didn't didn't.
9. Lying down and other exercises – if you get those dreadful 'Why am I doing this?' 'May the world swallow me up' feelings do the following:
  - slow down
  - breathe deeply, 4–8–4–8
  - lie down . . . this can really help
  - practise lip manoeuvres to loosen your mouth muscles
  - visualise yourself on form and doing well
  - lie down again – close your eyes and breathe like you've never breathed before
  - do voice exercises to get your vocal chords working
  - make sure your mouth and lips are moist.
10. You are not going to die – Lucy Kellaway wrote about cycling to work in the Financial Times on July 3rd 2006, 'Despite the risk I hardly ever feel frightened on my bike. I feel alert and alive but not scared. Recently I was cycling out one hot evening to give a speech to some business people. I was feeling fine about the ride but not about the impending talk. On the way I was nearly hit by a passenger door being flung open, I swerved and narrowly avoided a van. I put the thought to myself "how come I'm not frightened of being crushed to death but I'm terrified of minor humiliation in front of a small audience of civilised people". Suddenly I wasn't frightened any more. On the stage sweaty palms are no longer a problem.'

Everyone has nerves. Once conquered, those very nerves that disabled your earlier performances can turn you from novice to master. Controlling nerves and using the tips above will help you learn how to do astonishing and exciting stuff. And yes it's a bit uncomfortable, but boy, doesn't it make you aware of your own body and your own mortality.

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## WHY BE AN AVERAGE PRESENTER WHEN YOU COULD BE A BRILLIANT ONE?



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Presenting is a core business skill and you are expected to be good at it. Whatever presenting stage you are at, this book is packed full of tried and tested techniques from putting the nuts and bolts of a presentation together, to the art of presentation performance.