

Help Your Students Overcome Public Speaking Anxiety

It's 30 seconds before you begin your performance. Your heart rate quickens and grows with enough intensity that you can hear the pulse in your ears. Your palms are sweaty. As you walk to front and center, you get the idea that your legs don't feel normal. Your arms are stiff and hands are trembling. When you begin speaking there is a quaver in your voice. Daring to look up you see the faces of judgement. You are the embodiment of failure. In this instance, you are suffering what researchers term Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA).

Wait, is this about performance or public speaking?

Some researchers believe that this question gets to the root cause of PSA. In 1994 Michael Motley and Jennifer Molloy wrote about the cognitive orientation toward public speaking. Those that view speaking as a performance have a higher likelihood of PSA than those that view speaking as a means of communicating ideas [1]. To address the problem of PSA, Motley developed "communication-orientation" therapy, which helps the speaker revise their attitudes toward public speaking.

This is one example of what the literature terms cognitive modification, or the process of getting people to think differently about public speaking. Other approaches to reducing PSA include Systematic Desensitization and Skills Training [2].

People can suffer from PSA in a variety of circumstances. I have worked with veteran faculty who have lectured to hundreds of students in auditoriums but get nervous in front of a camera. I have seen students extemporaneously deliver heartfelt speeches during a normal class, only to falter in a similar situation where they know they'll be graded. What can we do as instructors, both for ourselves and for our students? In short: lots.

First, being nervous does not need to be entirely negative. I am reminded about the words of advice offered to me by Bryan Hall (UAF Music) which conveyed understanding and empathy about anxiety associated with public performance: "Good. That means you care."

Students need to know this sort of anxiety is not a problem that they alone need to face. Sometimes students need feedback that leans more supportive than judgemental.



We can help our students who suffer from PSA think more of public speaking in terms of communication rather than evaluation. Providing a series of learning activities that allows for speaking practice gives them a chance to build confidence. Changing the setting from judgement to shared laughter can be accomplished with a borrowed acting technique called "[Doing It Badly](#)" ([teaching tip](#)).

Online discussion gives students more time to craft and hone their message than is generally available in a face-to-face classroom or synchronous online session. Once students get the idea that they can effectively communicate they can start decoupling anxious feelings from expected class work.

The [UAF Speaking Center](#) regularly helps students improve their speaking skills and develop strategies for reducing PSA using a variety of methods. Tori McDermott, acting director of the center, is enthusiastic about helping students improve speaking skills. Anyone at UAF, including online students, can make appointments and get assistance.

REFERENCES

[1] Motley, M. T., & Molloy, J. L. (1994). An efficacy test of a new therapy ("Communication-orientation motivation") for public speaking anxiety. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 22 (1994), 44-58.

[2] Bodie, G. D. (2010). A racing heart, rattling knees, and ruminative thoughts: Defining, explaining, and treating public speaking anxiety. *Communication education*, 59(1), 70-105.