

by Mike Hawkins



John was an executive at a mid-size construction company. He had been promoted several times in his 20-year career from which he started directly out of college as a project engineer. John was smart, hardworking, and conscientious about exceeding expectations. Yet John had a career-limiting shortcoming—he had [glossophobia](#). He was fearful of public speaking. He did okay speaking in small informal meetings, but when attending larger meetings, he was quiet. And when asked to make a stand-up presentation to an audience, he was terrified.

There are many people like John. Some don't like to make presentations of any kind. Some only like making presentations to small audiences on topics they know well. Some don't speak much in 1on1s or in team meetings. Studies on the fear of public speaking find that some people would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy at a funeral.

People with a fear of speaking up and making presentations limit their career as well as other areas of their life. For anyone aspiring to have a voice in their community, business, or family, the importance of being able to speak to groups of people can't be overstated. If you have to avoid all presentation opportunities in life, you miss out on so much. You won't make toasts at your family celebrations. You won't speak at your children's weddings. You won't present at your municipal government hearings when they try to push restrictive policies on you. You won't present new ideas to your boss or clients. If you are a manager, you won't effectively lead your employees.

No one wants to be fearful of public speaking. People with glossophobia don't want it. They hate that part of themselves, but they don't know where it came from or how to get rid of it. It is as debilitating and frustrating as any shortcoming a person can have.

There are many reasons people are afraid of public speaking. Contrary to what some think, it is not merely a genetic shortcoming. There can be a degree of heritability in it as with any fear, but how we were raised and past negative experiences have the primary influence. Some grew up in environments where they were constantly told to be concerned about how they look, behave, and speak. Others had a really bad experience in a school play, speech class, or other speaking event. So, through nurturing and past events, people become extremely conscientious and fearful.

Whatever the cause, there is only one place to blame. Our fears and excess conscientiousness reside in one place—our brains. Our brains create and react to our fears. From a neuroscience perspective, there are two small almond-shaped parts deep in the back part of our brain called amygdala that create most of our fears. Our senses like our eyesight send signals to the amygdala that automatically sense danger and cause our bodies to automatically react. Like putting your hand on a hot stove, our hand senses heat, sends a signal to our amygdala which then automatically tells our hand to move off of the stove. There is no deliberate thinking involved. Our fear of speaking resides in our subconscious.

So, like a hot stove, when people are on a stage, or asked to speak, their brains immediately sense danger and they start to react. Some people sweat. Some blush. Others tremble, lose access to their memory, or feel sick in their stomach. Some actually get sick.

However, there is hope. In fact, there is great news. Our brain isn't limited to automatic thinking and responses. There is another much bigger and more powerful part of our brain called our pre-frontal cortex located in our forehead. This is the part of the brain we control. It is our thinking brain. With our thinking brain, we can override our automatic amygdala responses. We can intercept our automatic reactions, reframe them, and control them.

Overcoming the Fear of Speaking Up and Presentations

There are many “experts” who provide advice on how to overcome glossophobia. If you’ve tried their advice and it works, keep using it. Advice includes getting rid of your excess energy before a presentation by running, biking, or going to the gym. Advice includes thinking less of your audience so they don’t intimidate you. Some suggest you rehearse your presentation to the point that you memorize it. Other suggestions include making eye contact with your audience, have confident body language, visualize yourself making a great presentation, eat foods that calm your body, use presentation aids that take the focus off of you, medicate yourself, breathe and speak from your diaphragm, wear your “confident” clothes, and reframe your anxiety symptoms.

From my own extensive personal experience in overcoming glossophobia, some of these practices can help, but they miss the most important and fundamental issue causing this fear—we care too much about what others think. Our fear of being evaluated and judged is the root cause underpinning most people’s fear of public speaking. Psychologists call this [Social Evaluative Threat \(SET\)](#).

The key to embracing public speaking is to not care so much about what others think and the key to not caring so much about what others think is to accept ourselves. Yes, if you want to not only survive public speaking but look forward to it and thrive in it, you must accept yourself as you are. Let yourself and others think whatever they want. Truly accept that you are not perfect and it is okay. You will make mistakes and it is okay. You may stammer, blush, tremble, and feel butterflies in your stomach, and it is okay.

Guess what happens when you stop caring about making a mistake and looking foolish from others’ perspectives? You stop making mistakes and looking foolish.

This may be counterintuitive, but when you stop caring about making mistakes, you make fewer mistakes. When you stop caring if you sweat and blush, you stop sweating and blushing. When you stop caring if your voice trembles, your voice will stop trembling. You are essentially telling the automatic part of your brain that what people think is no longer a threat to you and you are going to ignore it. You are not going to react to it. Then the automatic part of your brain starts calming down. When it realizes that the people in your audience aren’t a threat, it stops overreacting.

When you don’t care about what your audience thinks, you become more confident. You give less energy to your fear and more energy to delivering your message. You still care about your message, you still prepare prior to your presentation, and still strive to be the best you can be, but you don’t worry about it. You don’t get anxious. You strive to give your current best and truly believe that your current best is good enough.

When you think about how much pressure you put on yourself to perform, it makes little sense. Sure, a little insecurity makes you prepare more and keeps you from getting too comfortable on the stage, but the rest of the impact of being insecure is all negative. It makes you overreact. It makes you over prepare. It makes you nervous and creates all the physical baggage that comes with anxiety.

What is perhaps most ridiculous, when we place our self-confidence in the hands of others by depending on their evaluation of us, we are co-dependent on them, many of whom we might not even know. Therefore, we over function. We fear they will think negatively of us or give us poor feedback. We are so sensitive that we take their thoughts extremely personal ... as if we are supposed to be perfect. By the way, they are not perfect either. No one is.

Another key to overcoming social evaluative threat is to realize you are unique. You are intentionally different so don’t compare yourself to others. See yourself as a wonderful blend of unique DNA, nurturing, education, and experience. You are one-of-a-kind, so why would you feel inferior to others? Or want to be like others? Yes, in a specific area of life, someone is better than you. It’s okay to respect their ability and strive to improve your own, but don’t let being less skilled, knowledgeable, or capable in a given area bother you. You have skills that others don’t have. You have a blend of attributes that no one else has. In your own unique way, you are actually perfect. Either accept that you are perfect overall in who you are, or that you aren’t perfect when compared to others in certain areas and it’s okay.

Overcoming the Fear of Speaking Up and Presentations

You may never become a natural performer, but you can become comfortable with speaking up and public speaking. You can actually become really good at it. Here are ten basic best practices get you started:

1. **Accept yourself.** Don't take yourself so seriously. Know that you are not perfect, you will make mistakes, and it's okay. Don't outsource your self-esteem to the opinions and whims of others. Don't worry about what others may think.
2. **Give your best and accept that it is enough.** You can't give more than what you can give. Do what you reasonably can to prepare and present, then accept that you are doing enough. Continue to learn and strive to do better next time, but accept that this time you can only do what you can do.
3. **Know your audience.** Before preparing your content, know your audience's interests, needs, drivers, and current level of knowledge. Know the degree to which they want detail verses concepts. Know their expectations in areas such as wanting theory vs practical application.
4. **Have a structure.** Put your content into a structure like the [why, what, how framework](#). Repeatedly using a structure allows you to always know where you are in your presentation. You will no longer get disoriented or confused about where you are.
5. **Include engaging content.** Use visual aids in your presentation such as props, pictures, videos, and charts. Make your key points interactive where possible. Use online tools that allow you to capture audience input like [Mentimeter](#).
6. **If needed, write out your entire presentation.** Having a full script provides a reference during preparation and something on which to highlight for real-time reference. However, try not to rely on reading a script word-for-word as it reduces audience participation and engagement.
7. **Create a reference.** Create notes or a handout to reference as you present. Powerpoint is perhaps the easiest reference to use, but when over-relied on such as when bullets are read, it can also reduce engagement.
8. **Practice.** Rehearse your presentation so that you become comfortable with the flow. Memorize it in its entirety if appropriate, but more importantly, memorize the key points to make and the transitions between them.
9. **Know your venue.** Well before your presentation, check out the room shape, size, and seating configuration. Test whatever resources you plan to use such as the audio, video, conferencing, amplification, and projection systems.
10. **Capture feedback.** Feedback is a gift. Through surveys or questions, ask your audience for insight into what worked well and didn't. Use these insights and lessons learned to enhance your future presentations. Remember, don't expect or require all positive feedback. You are not perfect and its okay.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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