

Managing stress for Oral Presentations

22 tips for managing oral presentation stress

Much stress is caused by not feeling in control of a situation. The following tips and ideas are aimed at giving you a greater sense of control over the oral presentation context.

'Get to know your presentation. The more you get to know it, the more comfortable you'll feel presenting on it.'

Pre-presentation

Here are some things you might try before presenting – most of these things can be done well **before** you actually get up and talk in front of an audience.

1. Know your material

Read it, practise talking about it with people. The more you get to know it, the more comfortable you'll feel presenting on it. When you know it more, you'll care more about it and become *passionate* and 'feel' the content – that's when great presentations happen!

2. Purposefully practise the skills

Oral presentation skills revolve around *voice* (tone, pace, pauses, word stress), *language* (content, functional), *body language* (gestures, face, movement) – they all affect engagement and message. You can specifically work on these things. If you speak too fast, practise slowing down purposefully; if you are monotone, then purposefully practise over-toning.

3. Know your audience

Think about who they are and what they expect to hear from you; adjust accordingly. A lot of audience satisfaction comes from the perception that you have met their expectations.

4. Confidence

Take confidence in knowing that the audience members *want* to be there; they want to listen to you – they are interested. Also take confidence from their perception of you – they see you as the expert on what you are presenting on, or at least knowledgeable. You are starting from a positive position.

5. Perspective on nerves

Change your perspective on how you are feeling from nervousness to excitement – enjoy this! People are coming to listen to you! It can even be enjoyable!

6. Develop positive thinking and visualisation skills

Turn negative to positive thought, e.g. '*This will be terrible!*' to '*I'm going to do the best I can.*' Visualise the room, see yourself talking to them, the audience smiling, see yourself happy as you finish.

7. Preparation

Be ready – have your slide advancer, USB, water, notes, handouts all ready to go. Visit the venue early, see the presentation area, make sure it's ready and you can use the technology. Know what to do if things go wrong (e.g. screen goes off – don't panic; the USB can be faulty – email yourself the presentation).

8. Relaxing activity

Do something you know relaxes you and puts you in a happy zone. E.g. put some headphones on and listen to music you like, read a book, play a game you like on your phone.

9. Minimise stimulants

We tend to go to things such as coffee or energy drinks when we're feeling down, tired or stressed, but these are counter-productive in this situation. Some nerves are actually good (See Tip 16 *Accept some nerves*), but when stressed, we are *over-stimulated*. We want to be in control, not *even more* over-stimulated, so avoid these 'energy boosters'.

10. It's not all about you

It may help you to realise that the main thing is actually not *all* about you, it's *the message* that people are coming to hear – focus on that. They're not there to judge you, they want to hear what you have to say.

11. Chunking

Break down the task. Treat the presentation as a series of small chunks or parts, not a single big thing. This helps you to focus on smaller, more manageable sections, and helps you with pacing and sequencing.

Physical techniques

These can be tried at **any time**, including during the presentation.

12. Slow Breathing

Try focused slow breathing technique. Breathe in, hold for three beats, breathe out slowly, think only about the breathing. Do this until your heart has calmed.

13. Diaphragmatic Breathing

Sit comfortably or lie down. Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Slowly breathe out through your mouth, then slowly breathe in through your nose, concentrating on keeping your chest still while expanding your stomach. Again, this is a concentration and focused-breathing calming exercise.

14. Muscle rolling

Exercise different muscles especially around the neck, shoulders and back to relieve tension. Roll your shoulders to loosen the muscles, gently swivel your head in circles, first one way, then the other.

15. Aromatherapy

A couple of drops of natural lavender on your wrists provides a calming feeling and is a recognised stress relief.

16. Accept some nerves

There is a thing called 'performance anxiety' – we actually need some nerves to perform well – entertainers and athletes are great examples. Accept that you will have some nerves and that's not a bad thing. If the anxiety becomes excessive (i.e. it blocks the message), then you need to try some of the things listed here.

'Accept that you will have some nerves and that's not a bad thing - we actually need some nerves to perform well.'

In-presentation

These strategies are things you might do as you are presenting.

17. Focus on positive audience members

You need to monitor that the audience is with you, but try to use the people smiling and nodding their heads; don't focus too much about the person in row 3 who looks bored.

18. Keep going

If you make a mistake, stop, take a breath and re-start. If you miss something, you don't need to say anything, just pick it up later or leave it out (9 times out of 10, the audience don't even know).

19. Biofeedback

Learn to read the signs that you are getting too tense – shaking, fast-breathing – try one of the physical techniques, even if just for a few seconds, to come back to a calmer space.

Post-presentation

Here are a couple of things you might do **after** the presentation is complete. They relate to actively thinking about what you have done.

20. Act on feedback – purposeful practice & overloading

You don't need to listen to *everything* that is said to you about your performance, certainly, but if you keep getting repeat messages (e.g. you're speaking too fast, too monotone) then *you need to act*. See Tip 2 'Purposefully practise skills' – if you are speaking too fast, then *purposefully practise* speaking more slowly; if you are monotone in your voice, then *purposefully practise* speaking with more tone – over-tone in practice – this is called *overloading*.

21. Reflect

Sit down somewhere quiet after the presentation and deliberately think about how it went. What went well? What didn't? Why? Be honest with yourself. Analyse performance and be willing to change. If it is possible, or appropriate, ask someone to give you feedback. If you can analyse parts of the presentation that give you most anxiety (e.g. answering questions, a particular transition) then purposefully practise those.

22. Practise mindfulness

As part of reflection now focus on the *positives* of the presentation – be aware or 'mindful' of *what* went well, *why* it did and *how* you will do that again next time. Write down these things, affirm your own performance. Extend this to other parts of your life.

Trying some of these things might actually help you enjoy presenting!

Further Resources

<https://www.youtube.com/user/UoMAcademicSkills> - go to the Speaking and Presenting playlist

<https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-management-relieving-stress#1>

<https://bebrainfit.com/stress-management-techniques/>

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentations/stress-mgt>

<https://hbr.org/2015/08/6-ways-to-reduce-the-stress-of-presenting>