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Improving Presentation Skills & Reducing Presentation Anxiety

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Understanding Presentation Anxiety

Presentation anxiety exists on a spectrum from healthy to out of proportion. It's true that some people in the audience might judge you negatively. But the key message is that you can handle that. It is part of life. You can learn how to deal with it, rather than let it stop you. Recognising this distinction is the first step to managing anxiety rather than being controlled by it.

Presentation anxiety is one of the most common anxieties. There are 2 main reasons for this.
1.Presentation have that natural element of evaluation in them. Both the presenter and the content of the presentation are open to judgement. Fear of negative judgement by others is a somewhat healthy part of being human and living in social communities. However, this should only inspire social awareness and minimal stress at a healthy level. When at work, a job people depend on for providing for themselves and their families, it is understandable the stress can be a little bit higher.
2. Anxiety disappears through repeated exposure. However, presentations don't happen often enough in most people's lives to reach that effect. The time between presentations is too long for the effect of exposure to take hold.

Now, how to get rid of it. Accept that during practise your anxiety at fist will go up. Face your fears. Learn to tolerate the anxiety and do the hard thing anyway. The only way out is through.

Safety Behaviours to Watch Out For

Safety behaviours feel protective in the moment but on the long term make your anxiety worse. They will reinforce anxiety and undermine your presentation. Common examples include:

- Slides full of text
- Reading from a paper or tablet
- Over-practising a rigid script
- Full avoidance
- Hiding behind a standing desk or laptop
- No eye contact
- Speaking too soft, too quick, or rushing
- Sharing too much information
- Using filler words ("uh", "like", "ehm")
- Limiting body movement or fidgeting
- Wearing clothing that makes you invisible
- Skipping Q&A or avoiding interaction
- Overusing visual aids
- Leaving no pauses
- Self-deprecating comments
- Using a "hair-curtain" to hide

Noticing when you reach for one of these habits is often the first step toward letting it go. Take away your safety behaviours one by one.

Building Confidence Through Exposure

Exposure is the only way to reduce anxiety long term. Aim for one presentation per week, small, big, in VR, or in front of a mirror. Embrace the awkwardness; it is irrelevant for the learning effect these exercises give. Record yourself so you can review and refine your delivery over time.

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VR tools such as the "Virtual Speech" app and a simple VR cardboard viewer for your phone can provide a low-stakes way to rehearse in front of a simulated audience.
It also helps to deliberately practise the physical sensations of fear, such as a mental black-out, stuttering, strong sweating, blushing, or a "long" silence. If you have practised presenting with these happening, you know how to best recover and move on. So, they feel less threatening if they occur for real.

Next Step: Skill Building

- Ask tips from pros
- Experiment with different styles
- Seek out opportunities to present
- Create your own opportunities
- Ask for direct feedback ("top-tip, s**t-sandwich" style)

Storytelling helps to keep people's attention.

Share (Limited) Personal Info

A little personal context why you're interested in the topic, or how you got into your field. This helps the audience connect with you as a person, not just a presenter. Give examples and anecdotes to illustrate your presentation.

Have a Clear Purpose

Define the core message: know exactly what you want your audience to take away, and let that message guide the entire presentation.
Consider audience relevance: tailor the story to the interests, needs, and expectations of researchers, clinicians, policy makers, or whoever is in the room.

Set Up a Structured Narrative

- Beginning (Setup): introduce the characters, setting, and the problem or challenge. This is your introduction.
- Middle (Conflict/Challenge): present the main challenges or conflicts, building tension and keeping the audience engaged. This is your (brief!) method and results.
- End (Resolution): tie the resolution back to your core message and show how the problem was solved or what was learned. This is your discussion.
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Create an Emotional Connection

Humanize the story with relatable characters or scenarios to build empathy. Express genuine emotion in your tone, expressions, and content, excitement, fear, hope, or relief all help make a story memorable, in contrast to a flat, "old school academic" delivery.

Use Visuals to Support the Story

Use images, graphs, or videos that complement and enhance your narrative rather than distract from it, and keep them visually consistent. As a rule of thumb: the less words on the slide, the better.

Mind Your Timing, Language and Authenticity

Timing is key. Make sure every part of your story fits within the allotted time without feeling rushed; running over time is one of the most common presenter frustrations for both speakers and audiences.
Avoid jargon. Use clear, simple language. Assume your audience is smart, but not necessarily a fellow specialist, and match your language to the conference or audience's level of knowledge.
Be genuine. Authenticity resonates with audiences. Share personal stories or experiences when appropriate, and connect with your own "why".

Rehearse and Engage

Rehearse your story multiple times and in different ways to refine your delivery. When presenting, maintain eye contact, use appropriate gestures, and vary your tone to keep the audience engaged throughout, remembering that people's eyes are drawn to movement.