

## Scared speechless?

Disarming the threat of stage fright

Dan Zak. Edmonton Journal. Feb 24, 2007.

WASHINGTON - They are three strapping men in mid-career – a salesman, a real estate broker and an officer in the military. All are at ease around a table in a casual setting, but put them behind a lectern or in front of a crowd, and their breathing quickens.

Their chests tighten.

Their voices start to tremor.

A quiet panic builds to a roar.

Stage fright is something that fells giants. These three men, tired of surrendering themselves to nerves, are sitting at a table in a basement in Alexandria, Va. They have enrolled in Stagefright Survival School.

"Does anyone know the secret to tightrope walking?" asks Burton Rubin, the school's director and a lawyer by trade.

"Don't look down," the broker says.

"Yes," Rubin says. "Now does anyone know the secret to overcoming stage fright?"

Silence.

Then the salesman gives the correct answer: "Don't think about yourself."

Fourth grade.

Give or take a year, that's when you're first forced to read aloud in class. It can be the seminal experience of feeling judged by peers or anxious about your performance. It's the moment that can anchor a long struggle with stage fright.

Rubin, 61, remembers his moment vividly. He lost his lines while playing a narrator during a fifth-grade play. That one experience of panic and humiliation was enough to conjure a dread of public speaking that dogged him through law school. He graduated and went into legal publishing rather than face a law firm or courtroom setting.

"I had to duck into areas in which I would be safe from speaking," says Rubin, of Burke, Va. "Eventually, I went to see a psychiatrist, psychologists and tried hypnosis, and nothing worked."

He met David Charney, reputed in the Washington area for his work with phobias, and the two dissected the problem with an intensity that paid off for Rubin.

Since then, the pair has collaborated on creating a metaphorical tool kit for dismantling stage fright. In the process, they've worked with members of Congress, the diplomatic community and on-air talent.

"Some clients were so highly placed in their fields that they took our breath away," says Charney, 63, of Alexandria.

"Others couldn't even be coaxed down the stairs and into the classroom."

They say they've unwound this problem – Rubin from the inside, Charney from the outside – and perfected a model for treatment in the form of the Stagefright Survival School, which launched last month and is a synthesis of two decades of work.

The school provides a 10-week course that begins with understanding the physiological process that accelerates stage fright, Rubin says. Onstage panic is ignited by catecholamines, a family of chemicals that includes adrenaline. When we're in trouble, the body juices us full of them.

"As human beings, we cannot differentiate between physical danger and what we would call social danger," Rubin says.

So the body thinks it's being hunted by a panther instead of standing safely on a podium. The heart races to prepare for a chase that doesn't come.

It's a whirlpool of anxiety that spins faster and faster and feeds off itself. You can't outrun it, Rubin says. You must face it. The key to blocking stage fright is to not think about yourself, to not trigger those pesky chemicals. Rubin and Charney have developed distraction techniques -- such as maintaining a deliberately slow cadence -- for people to displace thoughts about screwing up. Charney sometimes prescribes medications such as Xanax - to ease anxiety -- and beta blockers -- to still the physical jitters -- as "training wheels" for people with extreme stage fright.

"We also use grounding techniques," Charney says. "You grab hold of the podium and with your hands squeeze as hard as you can. You move the locus of attention away from your bad thoughts to your hand. Pain in your hand is better than craziness in your mind."

Some people find success with Toastmasters International, a network of more than 10,500 clubs for people to learn and practise speaking in front of a group.

"Usually, when we have one bad experience we try to avoid that for the rest of our life," says Sadjadi, now a director of business development for an IT services company. "I had this thing formed in my mind that I can't do it because I get nervous. With Toastmasters, you put yourself out there and you have to do it. After a few times, it's not so bad."

During meetings, speeches are timed and evaluated by other members, and a speaker's "uhs" and "ums" are counted. This model works for many but is not for everyone, says Charles Boyd, 34, president of New Southwest Toastmasters Club in Washington. The trick with Toastmasters is to find a club that's supportive in its evaluations and makes you feel comfortable.

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## STAGE FRIGHT TIPS

There's plenty you can do to lay a stress-free foundation for your speech, presentation or performance. The more things you can calmly take care of in advance, the less you'll be worrying about at the last minute.

- Get enough sleep. Assess how much sleep you need to be in peak form, and then make sure you get it. "All of us can think back to when we got our best performance," says psychologist Linda Hamilton, of Manhattan, N.Y. "That's what you want to duplicate."
- Get there early. Take into account traffic and anything else that could go wrong. Then add 10 minutes. The worst thing to do is arrive at your location without time to set up or settle down.
- Know your material and know your audience. If you've done your homework, regardless of the nature of your performance, you won't be worried about being "found out."

"If you know the material, you're not so afraid of being judged on it," says Carol Goldberg, a New York-based clinical psychologist and host of the TV program Dr. Carol Goldberg and Company.

It's also good to meet a few members of the audience beforehand so you have familiar faces to address.

- Do something that relaxes you before you're on the hot seat. Listen to music right before you go onstage. Or play golf earlier in the day. Whatever works.
- Hydrate yourself, since stress makes your mouth dry. But not with coffee (makes you jittery), alcohol (makes you sloppy), soda (makes you burp) or milk (makes you phlegmy). Have water at the lectern if your mouth tends to dry up quickly.

## Last-Minute Checklist

You're about to be introduced. The microphone beckons you like an overzealous dance partner. Here are a few things to consider before you tango with a crowd:

- Breathe deeply. Slow yourself down. Remind yourself: You're not in danger. "Physically, the one thing I learned is to breathe, because when we're nervous we naturally start taking more shallow breaths," says Todd McDermott, a TV news anchor in Washington. "It sounds so simple, but if you remember to do it, not only does it keep oxygen flowing to your brain, it keeps you from rushing."
- Know the first two lines of what you're going to say, says Peter Pober, coach of the George Mason University forensics team in Fairfax, Va. "You can absolutely nearly eliminate stage fright if you memorize the first two lines you want to come out of your mouth," he says. "Know the exact wording, and you'll start off with confidence." But remember: Memorizing a whole speech word for word is a bad thing.
- Direct your first line to the centre of the crowd, Pober adds. That way, you'll be hooking the most people right off the bat.
- Control the start and the finish yourself. The words don't have to rush out right when you reach the microphone, and you don't have to rush off as soon as you're done. "Before you start, take a deep breath and make sure the audience is with you," Pober says. "Then finish the last word, take a beat or count to three, and leave them with an impact."
- View the audience as friends and allies, not an army of skeptics or dummies. "Some people say, 'Look at the audience and diminish them or demean them or picture them naked,' and I think that's really ridiculous," Goldberg says. "Visualize them as good friends who are going to enjoy this."

## Damage Control

The panic is starting to snowball. You can feel your face flush. Before the catecholamines start racing, try these things:

- Just pause. Take a minute to collect yourself instead of trying to stumble out of the awkwardness. Chances are the pause won't even register with the audience as a mistake ...
- ... So just let the mistakes go. "The audience doesn't expect you to be perfect, so don't put that kind of pressure on yourself," says Washington standup comic Matt Kazam.
- Refer to a visual command. Rubin has his students paste a sticky note by their speech or on the lectern that they can refer to as a prompt to distract themselves from, well, themselves. The note can say "slow" or "calm," or whatever word will re-centre their attention.