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Toastmasters' tip: Breaking through the fear of public speaking

By CLAUDIA RUIZ for the Daily Facts
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"Courage is the power to let go of the familiar." - Raymond Lindquist

Most people are afraid of standing in front of a group of people to present their ideas and points of view. Unfortunately most people don't find the courage to overcome that fear, depriving themselves from developing this skill and sharing their gift.

Any time we are facing a situation that makes our hands sweaty, our knees weak and the butterflies in our stomach agitated, we are close to breaking through our comfort zone. If we gather the courage to go ahead, and just do it, in spite of our fear, we have grown in our capacity.

This holds true when jumping from a plane or delivering a speech for the first time. And as with skydiving or rock climbing, speaking before an audience becomes easier the more often we do it. Every time we face this fear and conquer it, our life expands, our opportunities increase.

How can we build the courage to overcome the fear of public speaking or, as Walter Cronkite, said, "have all the butterflies fly in formation"?

Consider these:

Nervousness doesn't show. Never acknowledge to the audience your anxiety. In most cases you are the only one who is aware of your sweaty hands and the weak knees. It feels worse than it looks. As your speech progresses, your confidence starts to build up. Act with confidence and soon you will be confident.

Focus on your audience. Make it about your audience getting

the most value from your talk, not about you looking good. Make eye contact with a single person and pretend that you are talking one on one. Do it several times as a way to connect with your audience.

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Be spontaneous. Never deliver a presentation or memorize a talk word for word. Doing so creates the anxiety of missing a word and going blank. Bring brief notes with the main points, so you have the flexibility of adapting to the situation.

Breathe and smile when feeling nervous. It will help you calm down. Fear is not the enemy, unless we allow it to become that. Instead, fear can be conquered with a smile. A smile has the power of dissipating fear.

Be excited about your topic. Turn the nervous energy into enthusiasm and excitement. By giving your audience energy, you will get it back.

Be in the present. Fear is the anticipation of pain. It is the projection of something going wrong. It is being in the future. However, what you fear has not happened and probably it never will. Fear can't exist in the present, so act in spite of fear and fear is gone.

Practice, practice, practice and practice some more. Preparation turns into confidence. Confidence turns into a smooth delivery, which comes from being familiar with your presentation and knowing you did your best effort to prepare.

Every speaker feels fear when facing an audience, no matter how experienced he or she is. The key is to break through it by doing it anyway, reaching new levels of confidence. As with everything, the more we do it, the easier it is.

Toastmasters offers a safe, friendly, supportive environment where we can deliver our presentations and break through our comfort zone, letting go of the familiar. Expand your horizons, go beyond what you think is possible.

The Redlands Community Toastmaster Club 8950 welcomes you to visit and join the club. If you want to check the club out online, visit <http://redlands.freetoasthost.info/>.

Redlands Community Toastmaster Club 8950 meets at the First Lutheran Church, 1207 W. Cypress Ave., on the southwest corner of San Mateo Street and Cypress Avenue in Redlands, 5:30 to 6:45 p.m. Thursdays.

Claudia Ruiz is an ACS (Advanced Communicator Silver) and has been a member of the Redlands Community Toastmaster Club 8950 since 2005.

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