

Harnessing Stage Fear

*How Not to Let Nervous Energy and
the Fear of Failure Cripple Your Presentation*



Actuate Microlearning

India's First Live-Action Microlearning

*“There are only two types of
speakers in the world.*

- 1. The nervous and*
- 2. Liars”*

- Mark Twain

Panic! In the moment

The nervous energy that most public speakers experience in the moments leading up to, and in the first few minutes of, their presentation, can wreak havoc on them!

You most likely know the symptoms. Your:

- Stomach seemingly tied up in knots,
- Voice all brittle and feeble,
- Words incoherent,
- Palms sweaty
- Your brain enveloped in a dark, impenetrable fog impeding your desire to say something smart or interesting.

If it helps any, though, such experiences are not unique to you. In fact,

...this happens to the best of us

I know stage fear from experience!

I feel it every time I am to face an audience; this considering I have loads of stage experience. I have fronted a pop-rock band, done amateur theatre, danced semi-professionally, emceed events, conducted over fifteen thousand hours of corporate workshops, addressed audiences domestically and internationally and delivered keynote addresses.

All this, over thirty-nine of the forty-four years of my existence!

But irrespective of the how many times I have faced an audience, stage fear, quite like my shadow, is my constant companion.

Stage fear and performance anxiety *afflict the best of us*



I especially remember this one day when I was petrified and edgy. Terribly so!

It was a dear friend's wedding, and he had requested me to be the Master of Ceremonies (the emcee, as some would term it) at his wedding reception. I had agreed. And I was regretting that I had.

D-day had arrived. And I had the heebie-jeebies.

My stomach was in knots. I was nauseous. And I feared that I would flop miserably; that I would be a laughing stock.

It's normal. Really!



You see, what I was experiencing wasn't anything extraordinary. Stage fear is a by product of the classic physiological 'fight or flight response' to a perceived threat to our survival.

To understand the fight or flight response, we need to travel back in time to when human beings were hunter-gatherers walking the grassy plains of the Savannah in Africa.

Red-Eye's Adventures

Now, imagine this scenario: one of our dear ancestors – we will call him



Red-Eye →

← Sabretooth

- out on a hunt to provide Eagle-Claw, his beloved wife, with the weekend roast.

Crouching as he creeps through brushland, dreaming about the juicy venison roasting on the spit, Red-Eye fails to notice that the herd of deer in front of him has suddenly gone taut as if sensing impending danger. Continuing at a careful pace, doing his best to avoid revealing himself to the creatures, his eyes fixated upon his prey, Red-Eye fails to consider the reality that he may not be the only predator out on a hunt at that moment.

The realisation hits too late. A hundred and fifty feet from the herd, Red-Eye finds himself staring into the eyes of a massive sabretooth.

Now, how much of time does our dear Red-Eye have to decide to run, or to choose to stay back and fight? A split second! Anything more than that and our dear Red-Eye will be sabretooth food.

Consider a second scenario: Red-Eye is back from the hunt - having successfully negotiated the sabretooth (he distracted the beast and fled) and bringing down a magnificent, fully-formed gazelle - and is confronted with a sabretooth (a different one this time, come on) crouched in the shadows about to pounce on his dear Eagle-Claw.

All over again, Red-Eye has to contend with another survival situation. He must decide to act: fight the sabretooth, or flee it. And, how much time does he have at his disposal to arrive at this decision?

A split second, again!

Wild Savannah days

Back in the Savannah, in our hunter-gatherer days, the human brain required to create a mechanism that would help it arrive at the split-second decisions necessary to deal with various threats to life. So, it developed what we now call the 'fight or flight response'.

Here's how the mechanism works.

When faced with danger, your body redirects oxygen from the brain to your muscles. The ability to think logically, which is a time-consuming activity, is severely curtailed in such situations.

Your pituitary glands secrete adrenalin into your bloodstream, providing the nervous energy to facilitate action, which is vital in survival situations.

These are just two of many physiological changes that the human brain brings about in your body as it is being primed to fight or take to flight.

You would feel exactly like you do before that all-important presentation

The kicking in of the fight or flight response leads to one's heart beating exponentially faster, pumping a higher amount of oxygen to the muscles. The high dose of Adrenaline being secreted causes the body to experience tremors and the mouth to go dry as nervous energy envelopes the body.

Blank mind

Pounding heart

Trembling hands

Sweaty palms

Cracked voice

Your body is being primed for a
fight or flight
response



Are these not the symptoms that you encounter before that all-important presentation?

Your radar perceives approaching danger

You see, your brain perceives the audience to be a threat to your well-being. “The rascals you are about to address could laugh at and mock you; they could cause irreparable harm to your career; they are an existential threat to you and to your well-being”, your brain tries to warn you.

Of course, these are all exaggerations, the overzealous machinations of the human brain; a necessary survival mechanism in life-threatening situations, but which has now turned into a cruel joke your cerebrum is playing on you. Remember, logical thinking has flown out of the window.

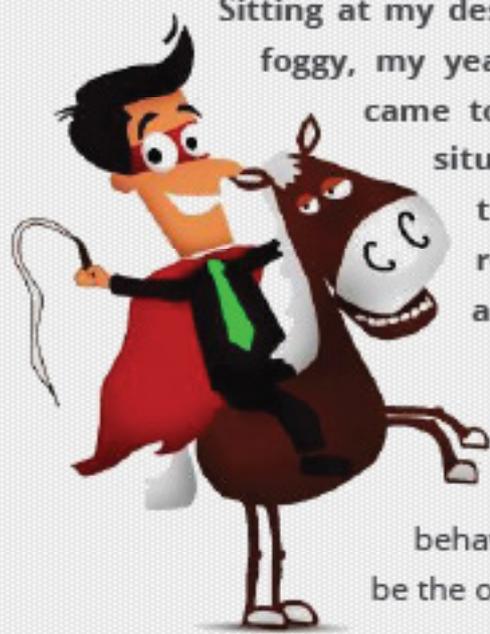
And, what response do you think the brain forces your body to make to this perceived danger? You got it: fight or flight. Consequently, the symptoms.

I was having my ‘fight or flight’ moment

And that was precisely what was happening to me on the day of my friend’s wedding.

My palms were sweaty, my body was quivering, and my mind felt blank. I feared that I was going to be a gigantic, momentous flop.

It was time to tame the wild horse



Sitting at my desk, prepping for the big event, my mind still foggy, my years of experience with public performances came to my rescue, helping me take stock of my situation: I wasn't a buffoon destined to provide the audience with the matter for their mirth, I reminded myself. I was simply in the throes of a fight-or-flight moment.

And, so I reasoned that if evolutionary or survival reasons were causing my body to behave like an out-of-control wild horse, then I would be the one who would tame that bucking bronco.

It was time to bring my body and mind under control, I decided.

And, here's what I did.

Take care of the first five minutes

It is usually in the first few moments of a presentation that one feels intense nervousness. Once the nerves settle down, we get more comfortable in delivering the presentation.

But, those first few moments often represent the 'make or break' period in a presentation or performance. So, I decided that I would script what I would speak in the first few moments, rather than fall back on my foggy brain to conjure up the right words to say.

Scripting precisely what I would say at the start of my address and committing this to memory would help me deal with the problem of my mind going blank, and rendering me groping for the right words to like a goldfish thrashing on the living room floor.

So, that's what I did. I wrote down - word-for-word - what I would say in the first thirty seconds or so of my opening.

And I committed those to memory. Only thirty seconds worth of content, I decided. Not more. The rest I knew I would be able to come up with on the go, once I had navigated the slippery slopes of my opening address.

Do not rely on memory; use cue cards (or 'Presenter Notes')

Our mind can be notoriously unpredictable especially when we are nervous. This is never truer than for presentations where the outcome could have significant repercussions.

And, so, even though I had memorised the script for my opening lines, I was unwilling to rely on my memory for that all-important event. I was sure that I would forget what I had planned to say.

So, I made myself some cue cards. I prepared some PowerPoint slides with a transcript of my opening lines and bullet-points of what I would say during each subsequent section of the event.

I added a synopsis of jokes I would crack, instructions I would need to provide, and everything else I would say that day. Now, no longer would I be stumped for words or rendered clueless as to what to say. I could refer to my notes and deliver a winning performance!

I printed these, three slides to a page, and pasted them onto some elegant card paper. Next, I cut each slide into individual cards of a size that would fit into my jacket pocket. Importantly, I numbered my cue-cards so that I would not lose their order in case my adrenalin-fuelled fingers caused me to spill these on stage in nervousness.

Now, I had decided to use cue cards, since as an emcee at a wedding I would have no access to a laptop.

For a business presentation, I recommend the use of Presenter View in PowerPoint, rather than physical cue cards, to help you along the way.

Familiarity breeds contentment

But despite my preparation, I remember still being more nervous than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I was unsure how I would deal with an alien crowd in a place that I had never visited before.

So, I decided to get to the venue early. And I walked around the place familiarising myself with the layout of the place. Now, at least the place was not alien to me.

Then I began making the acquaintance of the guests as they arrived. I started walking up to and introducing myself to them. I focussed on them, enquiring if they were comfortable, and generally making small talk with them. Now, at least I had some friends amidst the strangers.

Arrive at the venue

early



Familiarise
yourself with the place



Build a relationship *with your audience*



But did all this calm my nerves entirely? Well, not quite.

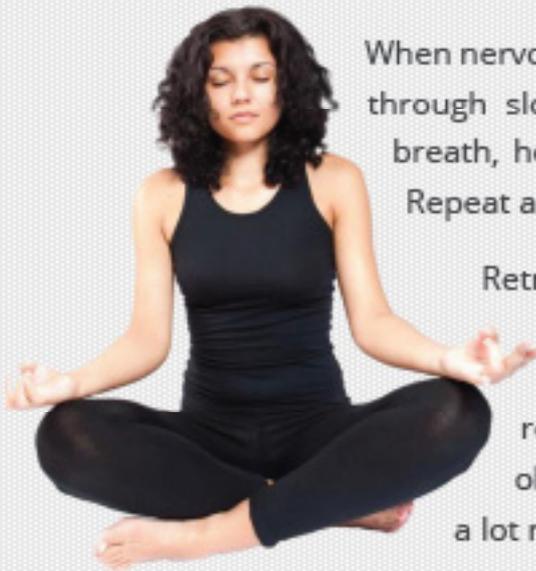
Oxygen, oxygen, oxygen!



In the description of our body's fight or flight mechanism earlier, we had noted how, in stressful or dangerous situations, oxygen is cut off from the brain and redirected to the muscles. Well, I was in the throes of a significant oxygen redirection exercise being executed by my brain.

And, in spite of all my preparations and friendship building endeavours, I found the dark clouds of doom enveloping my brain. I was struggling to recollect my carefully prepared opening lines.

I needed oxygen to be redirected to my brain. Pronto! And that's just what I decided I would focus my fast-dwindling attention on.



When nervous, the best way one can calm one's mind is through slow, controlled breathing. Draw in a deep breath, hold it for a split second and exhale gently. Repeat a few times.

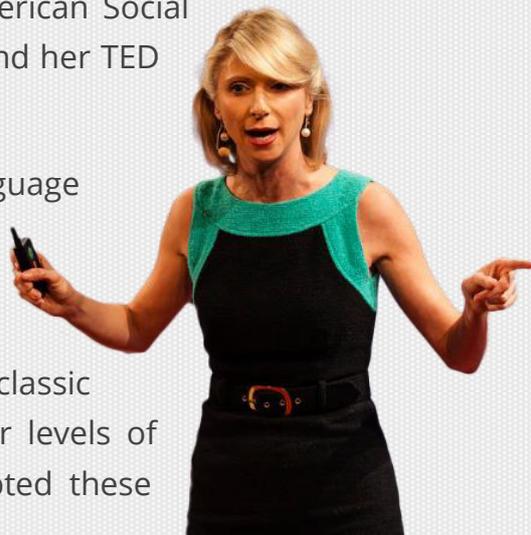
Retreating into a quiet nook of the facility, I put my knowledge of oxygen redirection into practice. Instantly, I could feel my body relax and that dark, dense fog that had been obscuring my brain, slowly lift. I began feeling a lot more confident and at ease.

And then I turned my attention to my go-to technique for dealing with stage fear and performance anxiety.

Power posing (Thank you Amy Cuddy)!

My career as a sales trainer had led me to American Social Psychologist's research. (BTW, I highly recommend her TED talk, the link to which is [here](#))

Amy found that individuals who adopt body language postures which connote 'power', for example, legs astride, shoulders pulled back, chest puffed out, hands on the hip, a-la Superman, or feet up on a desk, hand clasped behind one's head, the classic CEO of yore pose, reported experiencing higher levels of "feelings of power" than before they had adopted these poses.



Interestingly, her research found that these feelings were not merely figments of the subjects' imagination: adopting poses of the kind described above, caused real physiological changes in these individuals. The subjects' saw an increase in their testosterone levels, and a corresponding decrease in their cortisol - the chemical associated with stress - levels.



Consciously adopting a pose

as though you are a winner, supremely confident and in control...

...increases testosterone levels and lowers cortisol levels...

Standing there practising my deep breathing exercise, I remembered Amy's research (see, deep breathing helps). And, so I decided to don my invisible superman suit and practice my best superman pose imitation, paunch and all.

I still vividly remember the feeling of power and confidence, that began enveloping me at that moment.

I was ready for showtime!

Showtime was Fun Time

By the time I was half-way through the evening, people were asking me if I was a professional emcee. People were laughing at my jokes; they loved what I was saying.

The feeling was exhilarating!

I got offers to emcee two other weddings.

Of course, I politely refused both.

As narrated by Jerson James, CEO, Actuate Microlearning

Epilogue

That's all we had for you in this ebook. We hope you found the content interesting and of value. Truth is though, this was just a trailer – there's so much more where that came from!

The content presented here is a derivative of a large body of work we have developed at Actuate Microlearning on the topic of business presentations.



For your information, that body of work is a module titled 'Presentation Delivery (Public Speaking) Skills'. You'll find many more delightful and thought-provoking insights along with practical tips to help you improve your public speaking ability.

Here's a link to our website, where you can preview an outline of this module.

[Click Here.](#)

Thank you! Good luck on your learning journey!

So, here's to good choices and decisions, and here's to you



Video-Format Microlearning from Actuate Microlearning

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1. Engage the modern-day learner (especially the burgeoning millennial and Gen-Z workforce)
2. Create learning journeys for your learners
3. Ensure better course offtake and completion rates

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2 (you should see some of the fabulous feedback we've received!)

3 Users find our courses relatable and relevant

4 Our courses are built for the phone

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Over the last nine years of our existence, we've served over seventy organisations across industry verticals. Some of our esteemed clients include Kotak Securities, ICICI Lombard, Zydus Cadila, Edelweiss, Angel Broking, Motilal Oswal, DCB Bank, Lodha, Tata Capital, DESIS, Prudential, to name but a few.

Do Get in Touch!

If you'd be interested in knowing more, please suggest a date and time we could possibly speak/ meet. Thirty minutes should suffice for our discussion.

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