

## —Fear of Public Speaking—

### *A Deer in the Headlights*

*By Trina Swerdlow, BFA, CCHT*

Did you know that according to research, public speaking is a greater fear for most people than death? Comedian Jerry Seinfeld has a clever standup routine that uses this information by joking about how most people at a funeral would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy.

Very funny for some perhaps, but for those of us who have experienced glossophobia—a fear of public speaking—*this phobia is no laughing matter*. Glossophobia is one of the most common phobias, and it is estimated that as many as 75% of people share this fear. The term glossophobia comes from a Greek origin: *glossa* meaning tongue, and *phobos* meaning fear or dread.

Having a fear of public speaking can manifest in numerous forms, including (but not limited to):

- a classroom—when a child fears being called on by the teacher
- a social setting—when a person experiences fear regarding meeting and speaking with new people
- the home—when a jobseeker experiences anticipatory anxiety before going to a job interview (and the fear may also strike during the interview)
- the workplace—when an employee is terrified of making an oral presentation

Unfortunately, having a fear of public speaking can result in numerous missed opportunities in our social, academic, and work lives. For this reason, situations requiring us to "have a voice" can trigger the feeling of being a deer in the headlights. Or, in my case, I'd become *a doe in the headlights*. As far back as elementary school, I remember feeling terrified that a teacher would call on me. Raising my hand with a question or an answer in class simply wasn't within my skill set. Consequently, I lost access to my voice. When on occasion, a teacher did call on me—I usually froze and my mind would go blank. Extreme embarrassment followed these humiliating experiences. As a result, I began to dread going to school.

Children who struggle in certain areas of their lives often think that there's something terribly wrong with them. When they feel different from others, they can develop a large inner critic, which in turn, can cause them to begin to isolate. These children don't know that there is often a name for their challenge, resources that could help them, or that many others suffer with the same symptoms.

### **What Are Symptoms of a Fear of Public Speaking?**

Symptoms that are often experienced due to a fear of public speaking (speech anxiety) include:

- avoidance of situations or events where a group's focus would be on the individual attendees
- extreme anxiety before speaking in front of a group (or even thinking about doing so)
- emotional distress (panic) and/or physical distress

In addition to emotional distress, symptoms related to a fear of public speaking can be physical and verbal. When the Autonomic Nervous System is activated, it creates what is often referred to as the fight, flight, or freeze reaction—which is a stress response.

A stress response can create physical symptoms that include a stiffening of the neck and upper back muscles, and a dry mouth. Other additional physical symptoms triggered during a stress response can increase a person's:

- blood pressure
- heart rate
- perspiration
- oxygen intake
- hearing abilities

As far as verbal symptoms, many people with a fear of public speaking report that they experience a tense, quivering, or shaky voice. Stammering and an unintended overuse of "umms" and "ahhs" can also be symptoms related to a fear of public speaking.

### **What Causes a Fear of Public Speaking?**

Having a fear of public speaking can originate from numerous places. One cause, resulting in a fear of public speaking, can be related to trauma. A single traumatic event or multiple traumatic events can leave a person vulnerable to developing fears or phobias.

For example, emotional scarring can occur if a child is humiliated by an individual or in a group (including being humiliated in

his or her own family). I have worked with numerous clients who were humiliated, in childhood, by peers and family members for being overweight.

Being criticized and called cruel names can cause a person to instinctually want to run and hide (the flight response). If a person has a traumatic history, then being highly visible may feel threatening and scary. Therefore, for some people who have experienced trauma, being the center of attention, can trigger a stress response.

Another cause, resulting in a fear of public speaking, can be related to a person's negative core beliefs. A core belief is a positive or negative perception that people have about themselves. For example, a positive core belief would be that someone feels competent. A negative core belief would be that someone feels incompetent.

We all have various core beliefs about ourselves. These perceptions either add to our self-esteem, creating a strong foundation for our sense of self, or if weighted in negativity, can make us feel "less than" others. If we feel less than others, then public speaking may exacerbate this unconscious core belief. We may say things to ourselves like, "I'm boring and no one wants to listen to me." Or, "What if I say something stupid and people laugh at me?"

### **How Can I Overcome a Fear of Public Speaking?**

Over the past five years, I have successfully worked with numerous clients who initially had a fear of public speaking. I offer the following tools and techniques:

**1. Hypnotherapy:** Through deep relaxation you will have an opportunity to explore underlying issues that may be sabotaging your abilities to verbally express yourself easily and confidently to others.

Exploring under the surface of a challenging issue and addressing its roots, can be extremely productive. Self-defeating behaviors often dissipate when the unconscious fear is brought into the light where healing and integration can take place.

Using hypnotherapy so that you can "step into" a powerful self who confidently speaks, can be another effective method to move you toward your goal of overcoming speech anxiety.

**2. Assertiveness Training:** My Assertiveness Training will offer you interactive communication exercises that are educational as well as inspirational. During the training, you will be given the opportunity to practice communicating assertively within the safe environment of my office. Humor and playfulness are integral parts of this educational process.

I will teach you how to find your authentic voice and:

- Recognize passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, or assertive behavior
- Communicate assertively
- Speak from your heart (in personal and professional situations)
- Balance asserting with compassionate listening when conflicts arise
- Pursue win/win (rather than win/lose) conflict resolution results

**3. Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT):** A tool to assist you in releasing negatively charged energy. EFT is especially helpful to use before and after a meeting, presentation, or speaking engagement. In addition, using EFT to uncover negative core beliefs can be a way to address any unconscious "self-sabotaging culprits."

For example, believing that:

- I don't deserve a high-paying job or a great career
- I will go blank during my next job interview and look like an idiot
- My sibling is the star of our family (and if I get too much attention I could upset the family roles and be rejected)
- I'm an imposter (and if people knew how inadequate I am, they would...)

Several of my clients have worked with me to address the underlying causes of their fear of public speaking and to find their authentic voices. Then, these determined people joined a speaking organization to practice "flexing" their new muscles. Toastmasters International can be a helpful place to practice speaking skills regularly in a group setting.

Benefits of overcoming a fear of public speaking (and finding your authentic voice) include being able to confidently express yourself to family members, friends, business associates, and clients. Financial benefits can also be a reward of overcoming a fear of public speaking. When you tap into your abilities to verbally educate, entertain, and

inspire those whom you are speaking to, you tap into a reservoir of powerful and compelling energy.

For me, finding my voice was truly life changing and it opened up a whole new world of opportunities. After feeling emotionally and verbally suppressed for the first 29 years of my life, learning how to be assertive and express myself was a breath of fresh air! In fact, if I hadn't addressed my fear of public speaking—I wouldn't be teaching inspiring classes throughout the year at John Muir Women's Health Center.

Finally, are you ready to transform your public speaking experiences from *freeze to breeze*? If so, then pick up the phone today, and let's get started. Your ability to express yourself effectively and confidently may be waiting patiently for you...*just around the corner*.

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Trina Swerdlow, BFA, CCHT, is a certified clinical hypnotherapist, an artist, and the author of the 2-CD Set, *Weight Loss: Powerful & Easy-to-Use Tools for Releasing Excess Weight*. She is also the author of *Stress Reduction Journal: Meditate and Journal Your Way to Better Health*. Her CDs and her book are available from John Muir Women's Health Center online store:

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