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LET'S have a show of hands. What is the biggest fear people have? If you said "death", you would be wrong. In fact, the No. 1 fear is a fear of public speaking. So when people say, "I'd rather die than give a speech", they may be speaking literally.

Why are people so afraid to stand in front of an audience and give a speech? Basically, people are afraid of being humiliated in front of others.

Some may have negative experiences in the past, such as having been laughed at by the other kids in school when in front of the class.

But, for most people, it is the general fear that they are going to get up on stage and perform badly – that people won't like them.

This fear can manifest itself in many ways:

- You get "butterflies" in your stomach.
- Your palms sweat.
- Your hands shake.
- Your knees also shake and you feel as if your legs are about to collapse.
- Your heart beats much faster than normal.
- You experience a "fainting" feeling.
- You have panicky thoughts.

Now, many of the above are normal reactions. In fact, some experts say a mild level of anxiety is good before you give a speech as it gives you a burst of energy, resulting in a more dynamic presentation.

But if the fear of public speaking is keeping you from advancing in your career or keeping you away from certain social situations, then it is time for you to act.

Practise

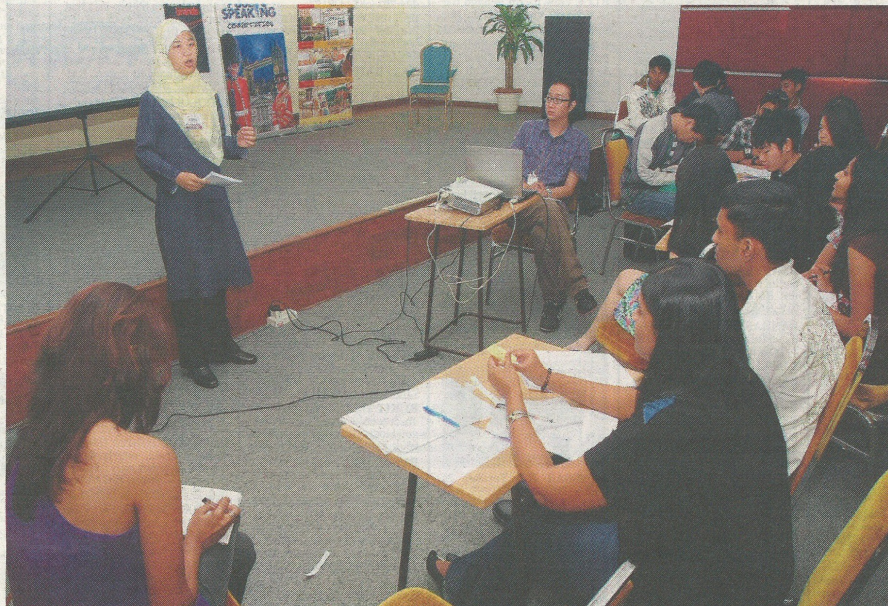
Most people don't want to hear this, but the best way to conquer the fear of public speaking is to practise.

Facing any fear head-on allows you to control it, rather than let it control you.

Your over-reaction to your fears is really your brain trying to protect you from what it perceives as a threatening situation. Feeling faint is a good way to keep you off a stage, saving you from the threat of

Stand and deliver

Here are some pointers to help you overcome the fear of public speaking



A good way to begin feeling comfortable about presenting in public is to start small by sharing stories with friends or colleagues. – Filepic

humiliation. But, the more you experience the "threatening" situation without the harm (humiliation), the more you are able to extinguish that fear.

A good way to begin feeling comfortable about presenting in public is to start small.

Start sharing stories with friends and co-workers. This could be something you read about in the news or something you did over the weekend. The point is to practise speaking in front of others and feeling successful at it.

If you have no problem speaking socially in front of friends but shake at the thought of getting behind a podium and speaking in front of strangers, then practising behind a podium is what you must do.

There are speaking clubs, such as

Toastmaster's International, which meet weekly in cities all over the world. For a nominal fee, you can join a club in your area and practise speaking in public and listen to speeches on a weekly basis.

You will also receive feedback on your weaknesses as well as your strengths. You will probably be surprised to find out that you are better than you thought you were.

Too fearful to practise

If your anxiety level or social phobia is so great that you are having extreme trouble getting into the practice phase, there is some hope for you as well.

People who need to learn ways of coping with the fear of public speaking sometimes resort to

psychotherapy as well as hypnosis.

For extreme anxiety, there are also medications such as beta-blockers that can provide some temporary relief; enough to possibly help you gain a positive speaking experience.

The point is, you don't have to allow your fear to rule your life.

For some, the ability to give a speech in public can mean closing a sale, getting a promotion or charting a new career path.

It would be a shame, with all the resources now available to help you conquer your fear, to allow that fear to win.

■ Article by Shari Hearn, a writer and creator of Public Speaking Tips And Advice. – Singapore Straits Times / Asia News Network

Giving speeches with confidence

WHEN you are giving a speech, everyone will look at you. While some are able to deliver a rousing speech, others might fumble and forget the words. Below are some pointers to help you to deliver speeches with ease and confidence.

1) Be knowledgeable on your speech topic. Research issues regarding your speech using various reading materials. This shows that you know your topic well. Compare the ideas of experts in the field to the concepts highlighted in your speech.

2) Rehearse your speech on your own. Do not memorise your speech word for word. Learn how to speak comfortably. Look through your speech outline and formulate the speech in your head. Do this during your free time and the moment you wake up. Record your recitation and strive to polish up your pitch and rate of speech.

3) Practise the speech by talking about the subject with others. Seek a friend or family member to bring up one of the speech items and recite any of the paragraphs in a casual way.

4) Get to know your audience. Try talking to them before the speech. This helps to make them more receptive to your message.

5) Calm yourself before the speech. Take deep breaths and try to visualise delivering a flawless speech. Imagine yourself being at ease and with perfect posture.