

**Why do we dread public speaking?**

I want to share with you one key thing I learnt about adrenalin and anxiety when I had panic attacks, as it may help you understand your fear of public speaking or public speaking phobia.

When I felt anxious somewhere, let's say on a train, I discovered that the next time I was on the train I became anxious again. Yet other people were sitting calmly on the train and I'd previously been able to enjoy riding on a train. What had happened?

I'd associated a random object, i.e. a train, with my anxiety as if the train had caused the anxiety. I'd then generalised this anxiety to all future train rides. I blamed the train, but it wasn't the train's fault.

Can you see how this might apply to public speaking for you?

Let me give you another example. I remember becoming anxious in a big shop full of bright fluorescent lights. I then, (without consciously knowing this is what I was doing), presumed all big bright shops were to be feared in future. So of course, I began avoiding or getting anxious about big, brightly lit shops! I was sure I'd have a panic attack in them and it was because of the lights. What I'd done, in psychological terms, was to associate a random object (i.e. a bright shop) with my anxiety, so I became fearful of a bright shop. How scary can a bright shop be? I laugh about this now, but at the time it was terrifying.

However, the shop itself, in reality, was quite random. I could have had an anxiety response looking at a red traffic light and then become fearful of red traffic lights. Or, I might have had an anxiety response whilst wearing a green jumper so I became frightened of green jumpers! Can you see the pattern here and how it might apply to your fear of public speaking? This is the kind of process by which some people can develop a public speaking phobia.

Separate out the anxiety from the event.

Let me give you a couple of examples directly related to public speaking. I was talking to a man on the phone last night about his public speaking fears. I commented to him on how articulate, pleasant sounding and easy he was to listen to. He said, "That's the funny thing, I'm fine on the phone because you can't see me, there's no one watching me". I asked him when he'd first felt anxious speaking in public, "I can recall being a page boy at a wedding, aged 6, and being thrust in front of a large crowd of people all looking at me. I hated it". I presumed from his description he became anxious. He therefore developed a fear of being looked at and had generalised this to a fear of all future audiences. Maybe he should just have developed a fear of weddings!

The second example, is of Melissa, who appears on the [Confidence for women in public speaking](#) recordings. Towards the end of her time as a university student she had to give a class lecture, on which she was being marked, to her peers. She chose a subject she knew nothing about as she had several weeks to prepare. However, she left the preparation to the last moment but didn't think it was going to be a problem. She described what happened on the day, "I was so nervous that nothing came out. I felt like an idiot. I was in tears about it afterwards and thought wow this is really scary." She then generalised this experience to all public speaking, presumed that she'd "fluff" all future presentations and that all public speaking was equally frightening.

It's not - had she simply prepared better for the day she might have been fine, as Melissa has some good presentation skills.

It's important to know that one flop does not mean permanent failure; it just means that you had one flop! No one, however skilled and confident, can go on stage, speech after speech, and always have 100% success. Talk to successful presenters and they will all be able to tell you of the time that a speech hasn't worked, or they lost their place, or someone fell asleep. Such experiences are normal. What matters is what you do with such experiences. Don't generalise one past failure to all future events.

I remember giving a speech to a local council once. It was after lunch. I looked around and sure enough there was one of the older guys, not just asleep, but snoring! What I needed to learn was how to wake him up without embarrassing him, and so I invented an exercise where everyone had to turn to the person next to them and talk to them. In other words, the man next to him woke him up for me! I have since used this technique very successfully in many ways.

If you learn from your errors and problem performances then your experience can build your public speaking confidence and skills rather than destroy them. After all, when you were a baby learning to walk and you fell over, what did you do? Did you stay on the floor and give up trying to walk? Or did you pick yourself up and try again until you got it?

### **Summary.**

All speakers have failures. It's not the failure that matters but what you do with the experience.