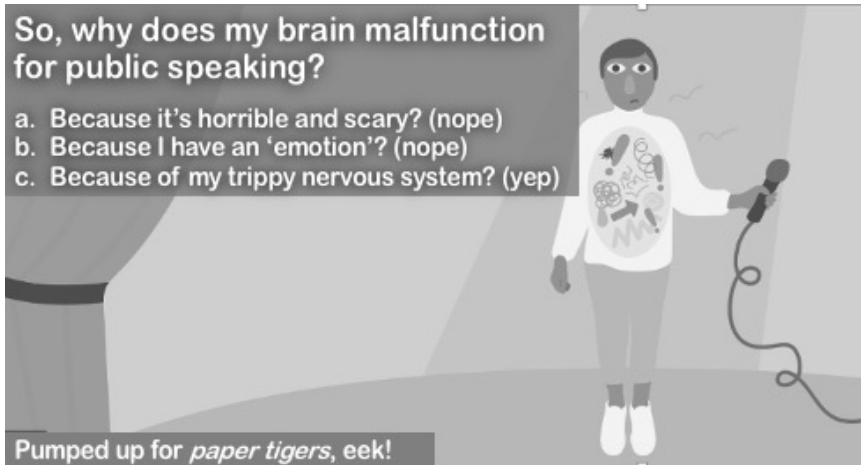


The CBT of Public Speaking Anxiety

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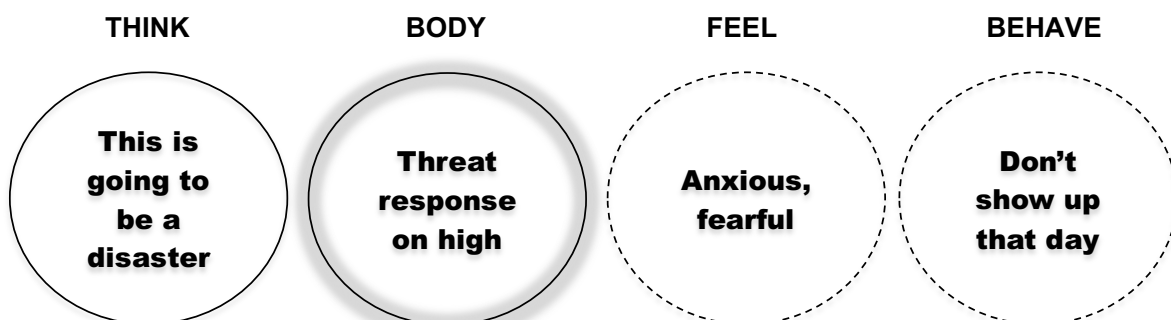
What is 'public speaking anxiety'?

It is the MOST common form of social phobia. The official term for it is Glossophobia, from the Greek word for tongue 'glōssa', and *phobia* meaning an exaggerated irrational fear – in this case the view that a 'social

performance' is a risk/threat that will have dire negative consequences. What prompts and drives that situational anxiety? *Unhelpful neural circuitry* – humans are 'wired stupid' for the task!

It is thought that up to 75% of us have an irrational fear of 'public' speaking, or 'social performance' – from speaking up at work meetings or training sessions – to talking about ourselves to an interview panel – to giving a presentation even to our own colleagues or peers – to making a speech – or God forbid to being on TV or radio to promote a cause or business... and so on.

Why do most of us have it if it's so irrational? Well, *'it's the nervous system, stupid'*. We amazing humans were patchworked together through evolution – and a key part of our survival was the ability to pump up physically for threats – this is when our nervous system, in an instant, releases a surge of stress hormones to power up our body, for physical threats, real or perceived – in psychology we call the perceived threats *paper tigers*, or *invisible tigers*, and we call the threat response process *'fight or flight mode'*. Even though public speaking is not a physical threat, most of us pump up for it as if it were – and being in the physical threat response mode is very unhelpful when we want to be cool and calm, and for others to admire us, in fact **the threat response IS the threat**. Is yours firing up unhelpfully?



Awareness mapping: there are four strands to an experience; how we explain it to ourselves, what our body is doing, the emotions we have, and the behaviour we do: **"I have to do a presentation!"**:

THOUGHTS + THE THREAT RESPONSE = FEELINGS & BEHAVIOUR

Dramatic exaggerated thinking (negative predicting) fires up your threat response in a dramatic way, and causes overly dramatic emotions and behaviours.

How are you explaining the situation to yourself? Be careful with how you are thinking, because your inner primal ape is listening and responding in real-time, ready to wire dramatic negative predictions and conditioning into that brain of yours, and to overload you with a surge of adrenaline and oxygen and cortisol to deal with the situation as if it was a physical threat. Use this handout to build a CBT toolbox for awareness and self-regulation of your self-talk and your body – you can change your perception and choices of behaviour, and collect new rational evidence based thinking to form new memories and to regulate your nervous system.

Which comes first? The thinking or the physical threat response? They can both drive each other, but for the purposes of CBT let's make the beliefs and thoughts our headquarters of 'awareness and self-regulation'.

Check out the following **ABC of CBT** journaling template to help you to do that efficiently and concretely:

A = activating event or situation, **B** = Beliefs and Thoughts about the situation, **C** = consequential Feelings and Behaviours.

THE ABC OF CBT – PUBLIC SPEAKING - UNHEALTHY		
A	ACTIVATING EVENT OR SITUATION	I have to give a presentation
B	BELIEFS AND THOUGHTS	"I'm going to mess it up. It'll be awful. They'll see my nervousness, and that will make it worse. I'll be shaking and tongue tied. I'll go blank. I'll make an idiot of myself! They'll all laugh at me. I can't cope."
C	CONSEQUENTIAL PHYSICAL FEELINGS (THREAT RESPONSE – NERVOUS SYSTEM)	Heart racing. Feel sick. Shallow breathing. Overheating. Blushing. Shaky.
	CONSEQUENTIAL BEHAVIOUR	I can't prepare properly. I pretend I'm sick and avoid it.
		CONSEQUENTIAL EMOTIONAL FEELINGS
		Very scared. Very anxious. Very worried.

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FEELINGS ARE NOT FACTS – THEY ARE THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF HOW YOU ARE EXPLAINING THE WORLD TO YOURSELF PLUS YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM – this is how humans roll - dial down the drama and change your self-talk, thus cooling down your body, and changing how you feel and behave. Change your mind, change your mood.

Catch your self-talk – and examine and edit it, and breathe your body down...

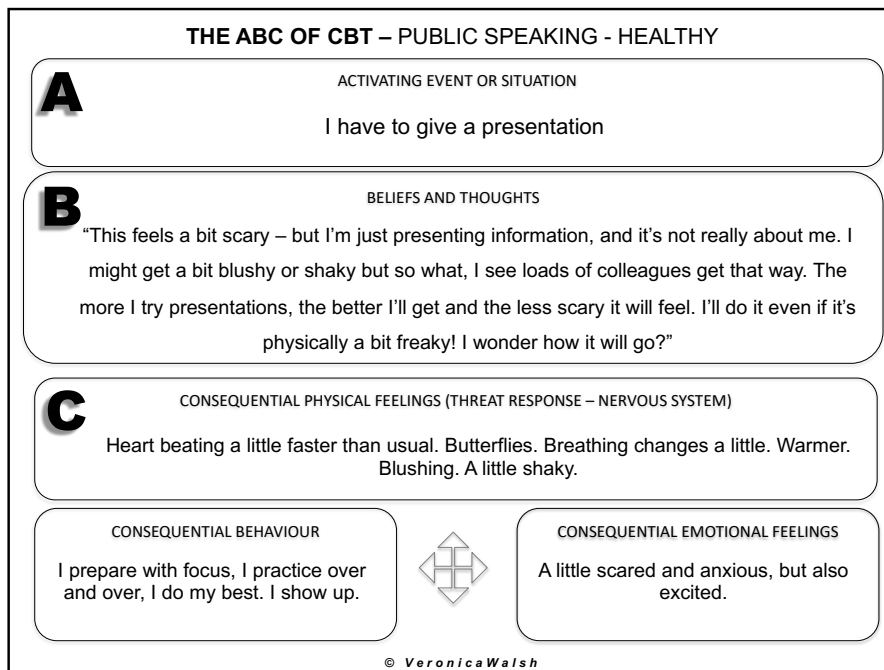
Top tip: talk to your doctor about occasional-use **beta blocker medication** if you have debilitating physical anxiety that is stopping you progressing in your life/work. They are a simple blood pressure tablet that will turn down the threat response by blocking adrenaline surges – regulating your nervous system for a particular situational anxiety.

Check out this selection of negative predicting self-talk (thoughts and beliefs regarding public speaking) –
 Recognise any of them? See how many are physical? And how most of the worries connect to the physical issues?

<input type="checkbox"/> I'm going to totally embarrass myself <input type="checkbox"/> It will be humiliating <input type="checkbox"/> My voice will be shaky <input type="checkbox"/> I'll be trembling <input type="checkbox"/> My breathing will go funny <input type="checkbox"/> I'll get cotton wool dry mouth <input type="checkbox"/> I'll feel sick <input type="checkbox"/> I'll talk too fast, or won't be able to talk at all <input type="checkbox"/> My mind will go blank <input type="checkbox"/> I will have a panic attack in front of everybody <input type="checkbox"/> My throat will choke/close <input type="checkbox"/> I will blush bright red <input type="checkbox"/> I will sweat madly	<input type="checkbox"/> It's going to be awful <input type="checkbox"/> I can't cope <input type="checkbox"/> People will laugh at me <input type="checkbox"/> People will think there's something wrong with me <input type="checkbox"/> People will see I'm not confident <input type="checkbox"/> People will think I'm unattractive <input type="checkbox"/> Some of them will be delighted I'm embarrassing myself <input type="checkbox"/> I won't be funny <input type="checkbox"/> I'll be boring <input type="checkbox"/> It's too risky <input type="checkbox"/> It'll blow my reputation and future prospects <input type="checkbox"/> No way, I don't do public speaking, I'd die!
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How are you explaining things to yourself? What are your thoughts and beliefs? Are they overly dramatic? How many of these statements are about physicality, but are presented in unhelpful ways? What do you think this kind of thinking does to your threat response and stress hormones? How does believing these statements 100% make you feel and behave? Does it give you self-limiting avoidant behaviour? Are the beliefs totally evidence based, or over the top? Are your thoughts and beliefs precise and proportional, based on evidence and clear language? Do you understand the science of your body, and the difference between physical and emotional feelings? It's time to skill up. To regulate. To edit this self-talk to rational self-talk instead.

Now, take a look at a rational proportional self-talk model:



Use this template model to regulate your self-talk, which regulates your feelings and behaviours.

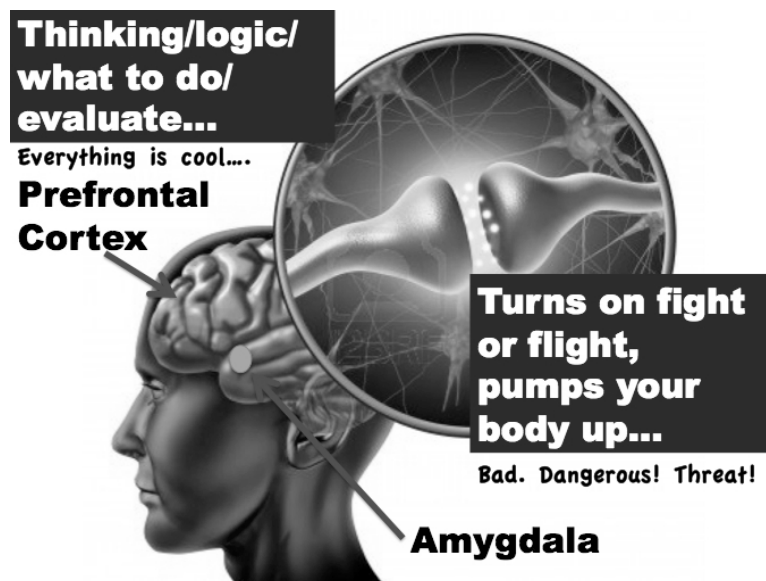
Public speaking anxiety self-talk suggestions (take what you need / create your own mantras):

- It is not 'about me', it's about the information.
- I am just a messenger; I aim to do it competently. I can only do my best.
- I'm not on X-factor, I don't have to 'perform'.
- I'd prefer to do very well, rather than 'demand' I do very well. I'm a fallible human being. I'll do my best, that's enough.
- I can manage my physical discomfort, most people have it, why should I be different?
- I am 'negative predicting' and visualising something that hasn't happened yet – did I ever do anything like this before, and my world didn't end? Is there any evidence against my dramatic thoughts and beliefs?
- I can cope, it's more true to say that I'd prefer if I didn't have to cope, and that I didn't have any discomfort. Refusing to tolerate discomfort will mean a small life and no excitement. The more I do it, the more comfortable I'll get. My brain will rewire and be less dramatic.
- I am just sharing information – if I plan and prepare it will be ok...
- I understand the information I'm giving.
- I am 'negative mind-reading' about what others will think of me, but I have no idea what they'll think. It's more likely to say that if I have visible physical discomfort that people see, they'll ignore it, and won't make a big drama out of it. And if somebody did think little of me, I don't have to agree with them.

Physicality prediction mantras – (all of these are temporary blips due to stress hormones at the start, and our brain usually adapts within minutes when it realizes the sky hasn't fallen in, and they are never as dramatic as you imagine):

- I may very well pump up unhelpfully at the start, but I will do my controlled belly breathing before the event to stabilise my little 'inner ape's' dramatics.
- I won't 'go blank', that's unhelpful colorful language - but I may very well be scatterbrained, at least at the start, so I'll be safer if I lower the bar, and allow myself to 'be boring' and 'read', (like a politician!). So what? Nobody cares really.
- My tongue won't be 'tied' – that's ridiculous unhelpful language and imagery.
- I may very well be a bit babbly and not say exactly what I intended in the way that I intended, but that's ok. If Hugh Grant can bumble and babble his way to getting the girl in every romantic comedy, I can accept my brain's very human blips and skips and bleeps.
- I may very well blush – I don't know. But that can be very charming, you know. And it's not a crime.
- My voice might be shaky – I don't know. I'm a normal human being. I'd prefer it if I had a guarantee it wouldn't shake, but I don't demand it, that's not realistic. I can tolerate it.
- I might sweat a bit – so I'll wear something light and a ton of deodorant.
- I might tremble, I don't know. Stress hormone surge/stimulus makes most people a bit shaky, but I'll get through it, like 75% of the planet.
- The physical threat response for public speaking usually adapts and rights itself within minutes – it's a nuisance, and that is all it is. I can certainly practice being present, and getting on with it either until my body returns to homeostasis, or until the event is over.
- **There is no tiger here!**

The science #1: public speaking anxiety is entirely human, and there is a science behind it. If 75% of us have it, then it's a disorder not to have it! But the cost of doing nothing about it is too high. The idea that we **MUST** not have **ANY** visible physical anxiety **EVER** will mean you have to live a small life. You can rewire and change your *fear conditioning*, whether it is innate or if you have learned it through bad experiences. The brain is 'plastic' – it is not fixed and inflexible, it will change through 'learning and doing' – so CBT is physio for your brain to change the default responses to public speaking – to dial down the drama and create new precise self-talk that includes an understanding and management of your body and emotions and behaviours. You can strengthen your logical brain, and weaken your overactive amygdala (when it's causing 'ape brain').



The idea that it would be negative event that would give negative outcomes if we were to 'perform' while having visible panic attack physiology in front of others is not completely irrational, even if it is distorted and exaggerated. We want to behave properly and to fit in and to be included, we want to be respected and thought well of, we want to be safe, we want 'status', and we don't want to be rejected. If we imagine scenarios of a dramatic event where we get the opposite to all of that, where we get 'laughed at' and risk rejection by our bosses or colleagues or peers, obviously that turns on our threat response, and is not a positive event with positive outcomes.

What can we do about it? We can undistort exaggerated thinking and cool our body down. We can learn self-awareness and self-regulation and self-acceptance and proportion – literally regulating ourselves by designing new rational cool evidence based ways to think and feel and behave in a given situation. We can imagine different, more likely and less dramatic, scenarios. You are a normal trippy human who can impart the information, even if it's not in the way that you'd prefer. Obviously it would be better if our rational pre-frontal cortex was the boss of us, rather than our primal threat response for tigers, and that is what CBT aims for. If I waved a magic wand and turned down your exaggerated predictions and drama, to stick instead to evidence based cool facts, and if I literally turned down your threat response, keeping your heart-rate and breathing and colouring and temperature and thinking capacity low to moderate, would that help? If you didn't have dramatic

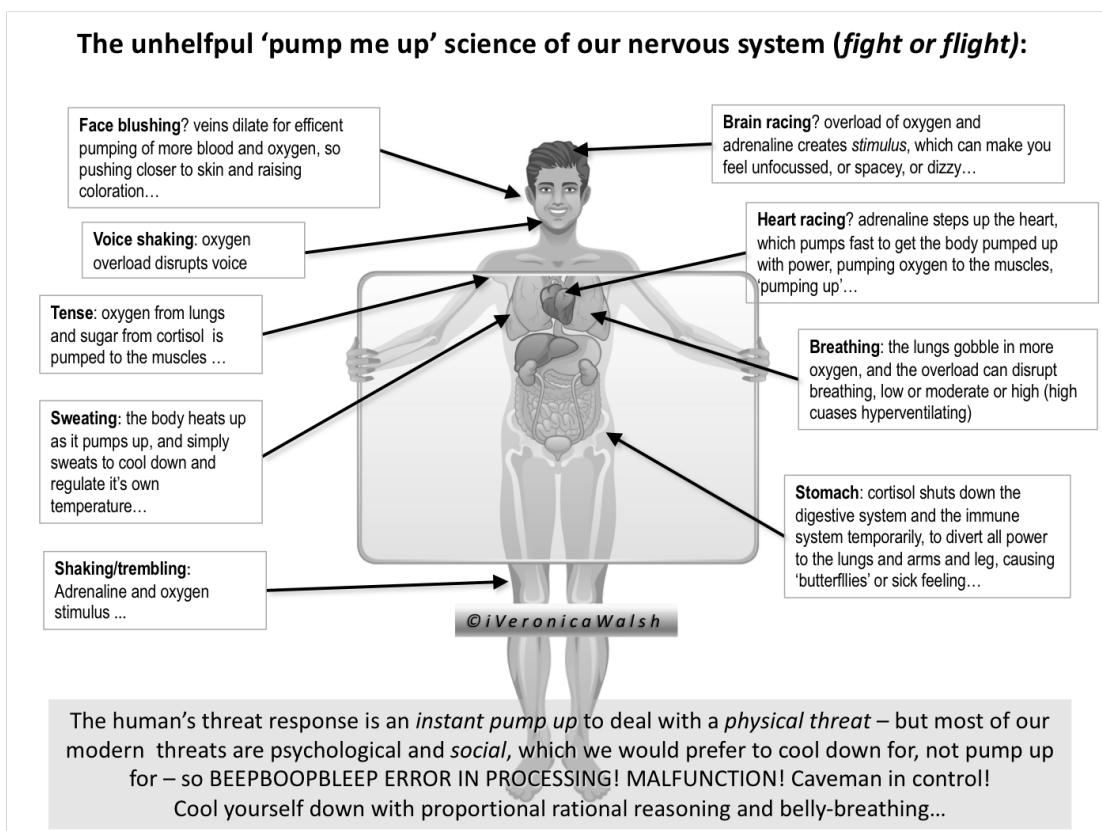
physical or emotional discomfort, and you could deliver the information in a competent way, would that help? Yes.

CBT is somewhat that magic wand. Research has shown that engaged learners can learn life changing skills that stay with them forever. if you regulate your perception, you can regulate your threat response, which will change your emotions, and performance. You can unlearn old bad habits and establish new good habits.

It is essential that you skill up to understand (like a scientist) what your body is doing, so that you can reframe the way you explain the situation to yourself with logic and facts – instead of trying to make sense of the world through your emotions.

The science # 2 - the public speaking anxiety threat response model:

i.e. automatic physical responses that embarrass us in front of others, *they can be understood and managed by your brain* :



Which ones resonate with you? Make a log of the key ideas here:

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THE THREAT RESPONSE IS THE THREAT

The pumping up of the threat response is fantastic for physical threats or challenges: to run from or fight a predator, or to jump out of the way of a car, or to surge to sprint and catch that bus that's about to leave the bus stop, or to go into 'hyper alert' mode in an instant if we are woken by a strange noise in our home in the middle of the night, or if a suspicious big spider appears at our feet while away on holiday. And it is effective in helping us to wire information for survival and safety strongly in our memories, so that we can make choices that protect us – this amazing process was an evolutionary advantage and adaptation to mobilise us to deal with threats, and to wire memory to avoid the threats. But... it's not at all helpful for public speaking - when we are doing a *social performance* in front of other 'apes', *the threat response literally becomes the threat*. And that's not totally irrational, we want to be judged positively and to have status in our group. If our tribe sees us shaking and 'malfunctioning' it might reject us, and if our tribe rejects us we might get eaten by predators (metaphorically speaking, of course), and certainly nobody will be 'hunting and gathering and reproducing' with us, so social safety and status is important and needs to be protected – but remember a PHOBIA is an exaggerated over the top gathering of all of this information – and CBT is proven to help us to dismantle and edit the self-talk in a practical concrete way with RATIONAL THINKING SKILLS. Making our rational pre-frontal cortex our headquarters of self-management, instead of our primal ape (the amygdala alarm centre).

An event or situation only INFLUENCES how you feel and behave – the same thing can happen to 10 different people, and they'll all process and respond differently. Your attributional style (how you explain the world to yourself), plus your nervous system wiring, will ultimately be the cause of how you feel and behave. And CBT can give you better management of that.

You cannot change your perception, (your self-talk), until you know exactly what it is. How we explain the world to ourselves doesn't come to us in neat paragraphs that we can see are quite irrational and exaggerated, if they did we wouldn't have them, we'd be cleaning them up and reframing as they came to us. We would be our own efficient editors, changing unhelpful ugly dramatic language to cool helpful realistic language. But no, our thoughts and beliefs are whizzing unbound in our amazing brain, bubbling along with half-truth memories and emotions and stress hormones and experiences and ideas – and it all feels perfectly rational and plausible, but FEELINGS ARE NOT FACTS.

Thoughts and beliefs are our main headquarters of reason and rationality, not our feelings – they are where we 'self-regulate' – they are where we explain our trippy nervous system and emotions and choices to ourselves. We learn thought-stopping and reframing in CBT – examining our reasoning and responses for facts.

What are the facts? We think we are *anticipating and problem solving*, but is it really the event itself that is causing how we feel and behave? Or is it how we respond to the event physically and mentally that decides our feelings and behaviours? Cognitive science shows us that while we humans have been saddled with some unsatisfactory wiring issues, they are not fixed and inflexible, we can literally edit our thoughts and our nervous system's aggressive over the top fight or flight response, when we learn what is going on, and how to clean it up with facts.

WRITE THINGS DOWN: get into the habit of journaling – catching key ideas, and creating new ideas - until we write our patterns and links down and examine them, and discover that all the general 'bad thinking habits' (irrational cognitions) are at play, we will be at the mercy of emotional reasoning. Check these standard thoughts and beliefs that kick in for public speaking issues, and think about how they take over and exaggerate reality for public speaking:

Catch bad thinking habits, and create new good thinking habits, by journaling.

The bad thinking habits table examples guide:

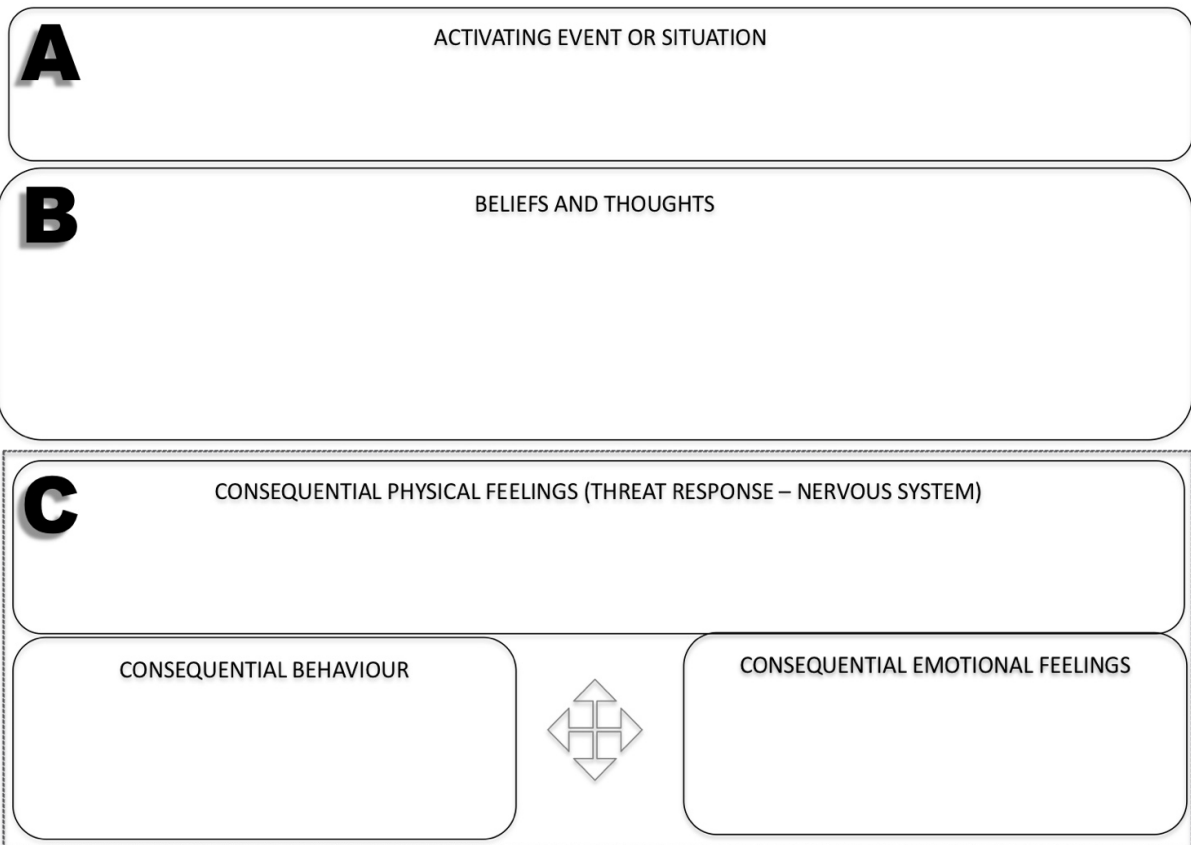
<p>Negative predicting:</p> <p>it's going to be awful! I'm going to embarrass myself! I can't cope. <i>And so on...</i></p>	<p>Negative mind-reading:</p> <p>They'll be laughing at me. They'll think I'm a nervous wreck and I shouldn't have this job. <i>And so on...</i></p>	<p>Emotional reasoning:</p> <p>I FEEL very bad, so it IS very bad. I feel anxious because I'm nervous because I'm stressed. <i>And so on...</i></p>	<p>Musty Rules for Living:</p> <p>I should be relaxed and great at public speaking. I must do well, or else it's awful and I can't cope. I ought to be able to do this easily. <i>And so on...</i></p>
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Can you see how these are in play with public speaking anxiety? Use the below template to make new statements:

Things I hear all the time in my office: "well it sounds stupid when I say it out loud", and "obviously that's a bit exaggerated". Well, yes! So let's un-stupid and un-exaggerate it, consciously and deliberately. Become your own editor, become your own coach and therapist, become your own best friend and mentor - be careful of what you say to yourself, because you are listening and believing.

Use this template to track and examine your self-talk, and how it effects your body and emotions and behaviours. Then reframe and redesign, and use the new rational clear self-talk over and over until you adapt.

THE ABC OF CBT - MAP YOUR HABITS OF THINKING FEELING & BEHAVIOUR

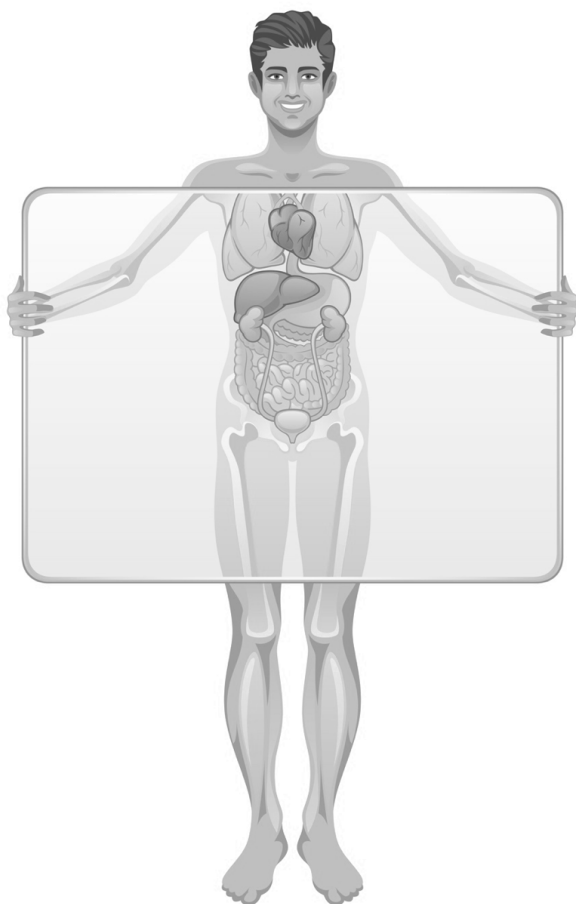


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Be rational. Be cool. Adapting to tolerate and do public speaking doesn't mean you have to love it, or that you'll be (or should be) a rock star at it. Let's aim for adapting, meaning you'll say yes and show up, and aim to do a competent job, and that's enough. And over time, as you get more comfortable, maybe you can look at the style and delivery performance aspects (but they don't really matter as much as you think they do – many mediocre performers have ruled the world since time began!)

Summary:

- **Create a new self-talk mantra**– thought-stop and reframe – be rational, be cool, regulate yourself in real-time. Use words with precise meaning, and discard and avoid dramatic ugly words.
- **Behaviour** suggestions – SAY YES - notice when you're talking yourself out of doing things, and talk yourself in. Expose yourself to new ideas and choices, and collect new evidence of outcomes (edit your memories with facts) ...
- **Feelings** suggestions – name it and tame it – when you feel anxious and apprehensive, relabel it 'excited' and 'hopped up' instead, and shake it off...
- **Tolerate discomfort** –call stress hormones 'discomfort' instead of inaccurately describing them as *emotions*.
- **Be precise, be accurate, be rational. Show up.**



Map your physical anxiety symptoms - draw arrows to the area and write down what is happening to you.

Use coloured markers and write labels e.g. "racing heart" – (use your own natural language and style).

Then learn the science of how and why... and write that down in your own words. Create mantras to understand and regulate. Nothing is attacking you, it's just a neural wiring nuisance.

Example 1 – My breathing is disrupted when I am accidentally in threat response mode, my body takes in extra oxygen to pump up for fake tigers – I will breathe it down to regulate myself – * take a long slow breath in through the nose – hold – long slow breathe out through the mouth, and repeat...

Example 2 – My heart is accidentally revved up by extra adrenaline for a physical threat – it's temporary, I will adapt to the situation as I reframe and breath it down.

Skill up!

Quick tips and hacks to manage public speaking anxiety:

- **IT IS NOT ABOUT YOU** - public speaking is not really 'about you', about your tone or body language or your hair or your weight or your style – rationally you are just the messenger imparting information. You're not in X-factor or a beauty competition.
- **Thought stop and use your mantras**, dialling down the drama can effectively interrupt and edit your conditioned responses, especially the threat response. Visualise it going fine, instead of a 'disaster'. Use evidence of any previous low drama experiences.
- **Belly breathing**: because so many symptoms are caused by an overload of oxygen ('oxygen stimulus') through the bodies fight or flight response to threats, breathing control exercises are hugely helpful in calming the body and cooling yourself down while you reframe thinking. Take a deep 5 second breath in through your nose, and feel your belly go in – hold for a few beats, then let the breath slowly out through your mouth, feeling your belly go out – repeat.... Practice until you can comfortably and effortlessly do this simple self-regulation technique.
- Learn how to '**mind-map**' and **make key idea visual notes** for better creation and storing and recalling of the content you want to present.
- **Lower the bar**, and dare to be a bit boring - if you just 'read it out', from busy slides or flashcards - so what? Lots of people who rule the world do 'death by PowerPoint'. Just show up - the more practice you get, the better your content and delivery will get.
- **Physical exercise** is key in managing anxiety and fight or flight symptoms – move your body before the event.
- **Mindfulness and visualisation** can be very powerful tools to distract and ground and calm us – if you're not worrying, you're not pumping up. Use your power of imagination for good instead of evil. Google for some mindfulness tricks.
- **Deliberate relaxation** –the body has a 'relaxation' physical response, which releases chemicals that reduce stress hormones, this slows your heart rate and lowers blood pressure and relaxes muscles, returning you to homeostasis – download a mindfulness app on your phone, and/or use the guided relaxation podcasts to cool your body down.
- **Stay away from coffee and cigarettes** – they'll spike your adrenaline – they do not help.
- **Dress comfortably and neatly**. Don't wear anything dramatic.
- **Have a sense of humour and proportion about it**.
- **Just do your best**.

Talk to your doctor about occasional-use **beta blocker medication** if you have debilitating physical anxiety that is stopping you progressing in your life/work. They are a simple blood pressure tablet that will turn down the threat response by blocking adrenaline surges – regulating your nervous system for a particular situational anxiety.

What have you learned? (key takeaways)

