

The 'Vicious Circle Thought Form' for Public Speaking Anxiety

(a CBTandFeelingGood.com handout/worksheet©. Use it as a template to catch and change your own thinking)

Example situation: I have to give a presentation in work...

Behaviour:

- *Coping/safety strategies?*
- *Relating/communicating response?*
- *Self limiting/sabotaging?*
- *Avoidant?*
 - Come up with reasons and ways to avoid it
 - Excessive worrying spoiling the here and now
 - Irritable and out of sorts
 - Presenteeism
 - Procrastination



Negative Automatic Thoughts:

- *What's happening?*
- *What's going to happen?*
- *What does that mean?*
 - It's going to be awful
 - I can't cope
 - I'm going to make a show of myself
 - People will think there's something wrong with me
 - I'll lose respect
 - They'll see I'm a fraud
 - I'll look like a quivering wreck
 - Everyone will see my knees, hands, body shaking
 - My voice will wobble uncontrollably
 - I'll start waffling off the point and lose track of what I am saying
 - I'll get asked loads of questions that I don't know the answer to
 - They'll all be talking about me

Feelings – emotional and physical: upset, anxious, stressed, nervy. Sick feeling & racing heart & overload on oxygen when I visualise it.

New self talk suggestions:

- It is not 'about me', it's about the data.
- I'm not on X-factor, I'd prefer to do well, rather than 'demand' I do well.
- I can manage my physical discomfort (fight or flight), everybody has it sometimes.
- I am fortune telling and visualising something that hasn't happened yet – did I ever give a presentation and it was ok? That's evidence against my thought.
- I can cope, it's more true to say that I'd prefer if I didn't have to cope.
- I am sharing important information.
- It will be good for them to have this information from me instead of having to discover it themselves, that's my job..
- I understand and believe in the content.
- I am just a messenger, I aim to do it competently. I can only do my best for them.

The following are 'fight or flight' symptoms:

- Oxygen overload: disrupted breathing, shaky voice, hyperventilating.
- Adrenaline overload: heart racing, muscles tense, primal physical readiness, overheating/sweating/shaking.
- Cortisol release: butterflies/sick feeling, dry mouth, bowel movement.

Once you've suffered from anxiety attacks, it is likely that the fear of the physicality is enough to set it off, rather than the thoughts that caused it in the first place. So it is important we understand the actual science of it, that we have awareness it's our bodies attempt to help us, it assumes the primal fight or flight response is appropriate, even though it's not. Learn exactly what each stress hormone is doing and why.

We cannot stop it in its tracks - we must instead let it happen, for many people it will last 2 to 3 minutes and then settle down. You may manage the oxygen overload with a deep breathing exercise. Understand the exact science of it, telling ourselves it's ok, that *there is no tiger or danger*, but that it's truly a fascinating and beautiful process if there were (yes, seriously!) – all the while replacing our self talk with helpful realistic processing of the event instead of the 'tiger like' Negative Automatic Thoughts. You can do this! *And* practice acceptance and living in the present (ie just getting on with it until either your body returns to homeostasis, or until the event is over). **Find more detailed info on my blog:** <http://iveronicawalsh.wordpress.com/>

General tips:

- Accept an anxiety disorder as a real disorder that you must manage, but do not have to be ashamed of. Even in front of others. It is what it is, unfortunate for you, and you're working on ways to fix it, but for now, it's here and it's an illness like diabetes or high blood pressure
- When giving a presentation, remember, it's about the content - it's not about you! (or your 'cool' or your hair or your clothes or your weight)... if you saw a TV newsreader have these symptoms while reading the news, you'd be surprised, and might not have ever registered the 'person' before, because you're only there for the data/content. Remind yourself of that - and choose a person you admire that is about the data, and not concerned about themselves or others perception of them, and visualise them to help to ground you.
- If the situation is extreme, go to your GP to discuss the possibility of medication to take for these events to: depress your central nervous system (with beta blockers), and/or the anxiety (with anti-anxiety medication), perhaps only until you're able to manage the event with your new coping skills.
- Tell yourself that you would 'prefer' to do very well, rather than 'demand' that you *must* and *should* do very well or else it's *awful* and *tragic*. You are a human being with frailties and flaws, you accept that, and are only doing your best.
 - Plan your environment and presentation so that it best helps with your problem:
 - Have a fan plugged in beside you if you 'overheat'.
 - Wear green base foundation/concealer if you blush (a department store consultant can help you with that)
 - Get ready well in advance and plan a comfortable and smart wardrobe, and look your best.
 - Give yourself a break - feel free to do a 'death by PowerPoint' with text and graph filled slides, and present it by 'reading' them out. It's not ideal, but needs must if your condition is extreme and your goal is simply to get through it with no drama.
 - Use Mindmapping to prepare, so that you are word perfect and the data is organised in your head for comfortable and easy recall.
 - Thought stop and interrupt negative visualisation by visualising success instead, including past achievements and successes.