

Countering Stage Fright

Prof. Smita Jha

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Week-01

Lecture-01

Hello students, I am Professor Smita Jha and I am here to discuss countering stage fright. Well, the biggest fear in a professional life is how to give a presentation on stage or, you know, public speaking or public speech. The kind of fear that is there is due to the self image. We generally think of the future- if I may not in a position to deliver my talk in the proper manner, may I tarnish my image? These are the fears that occur in the mind of the presenter and that makes one very shaky and you know nervous. This is very important to know how to counter, how to minimize, how to neutralize stage fear or fright. One of my students was asking me for the advice to reduce stage fear, but the subject was always very complicated to explain.

And as a student he was of the view that he has never received any solution that would answer his questions of why does he suffer so much, very true. Because it varies from person to person, one personality to the other and there are several regions to be scared while giving oral presentation. Why does it feel so horrible most of the time even though he or she really enjoys speaking? If any advice was given, it mostly consisted of the investigation of the symptoms and his or her stress level and how to get rid of them. And the usual question would be, what is happening? What is happening actually? But never, why is it happening? It was not very helpful.

And the student concerned, remembers how much he/she was trembling on his/her first performance his or her school days, college days and hearing that stage fright is a sting of remorse because of not having practiced enough. He also remembered hearing very often that it will pass with time, means, gradually with the passage of time it gets improved. Obviously, it did not pass with time and the student arrived to the point that he did not have any time left. Some reflections brought to the student more questions. Why it is sometimes less stressful to play on a big stage than in a small room and for a smaller public? Do I fear being judged or is there something more? What do I actually feel when I am on the stage? Why has my stage fright never changed? What are the possible solutions that will finally work? We need to go through all these questions in a very detailed manner because there is no fixed answer, but yes there are some ways with the help of which we can reduce a stage fright.

In the literature and social perception the character and definition of a stage fright is often ambiguous, complicated, difficult. Next to the numerous concepts of negative influence on the performer, there are also theories defining stage fright as something

positive and helpful. According to some researchers, the preparation for the performance and retrospective reflection afterwards can bring positive emotions and joyful opportunity to present one's own artistic and technical achievements, a great chance to present the result of our arduous work. Therein lies a positive experience which enriches one's well-being and good health. After years of receiving misleading information and harmful advice which led only to more and more confusion, that particular student told me that he would like to understand what is really happening and prove that the complex nature of performance anxiety is neglected and not well explained in his educational circles.

we have tutorial classes and the very purpose of this tutorial class is to know students personally, one to one, face to face because you cannot rate all the students on the same parameter or a scale. Now, for understanding and discussing stage fright, it is necessary to investigate its definitions. To know the real apt definition of stage fright. However, the concept itself is difficult to define. Is it fear, panic attack or anxiety? or is something else? The somatic symptoms of panic attacks are shortness of breath, fast or irregular heartbeat, trembling, sweating, choking, nausea, numbness or tingling, vertigo, dizziness, depersonalization, hot or cold flashes, worrying of losing control over oneself, pain or discomfort in the chest.

The symptoms of panic attack: generally you give or you deliver a presentation in front of large gathering, not all the symptoms may be one of the symptoms some of the symptoms may occur and you feel nervous. I personally do not think anybody enjoys standing in front of a big group of people and talking, especially students, maybe with the passage of time, years after years, you can be a good speaker, it creeps us out, it makes us so nervous, we feel sick. And ultimately we are afraid of being judged negatively by our peers, but is this the actual reason why we get a stage fright? Or is there some kind of mechanism that causes these weird sensations in our bodies when we get in front of a big group of other people? For people in modern time, excellent public speaking skills is considered as necessity on the way to success. Yes, in this globalized world, in this commercialized world, in this highly modern life of professional competition, one needs to have this knack quality to give a good presentation. It not only renders people with ideas, opportunities to be recognized and appreciated.

It makes them to get working positions, but also helps them build social connections, thus paving the way for further development of their careers. So, see this is very important in a corporate world, in a world where you need to get success. However, there is a particular anxiety that hinders people from developing good public speaking skills. The public speaking anxiety or glossophobia, I mean I will discuss all these points in detail in rest of my lectures. Glossophobia, which refers to the fear and worry people have when they are holding speeches.

Stage fright or performance anxiety is the anxiety, fear or persistent phobia which may be aroused in an individual by the requirement to perform in front of an audience whether actually or potentially. In the context of public speaking this may precede or accompany participation in activity involving public self-presentation. Well in some cases, stage fear or fright may be a part of a larger pattern of social phobia or social anxiety disorder. But

many people experience a stage fright without any wider problems and that is why I repeatedly say that it differs from person to person. Quite often a stage fright arises in a mere anticipation of a performance, often a long time ahead.

It has numerous manifestations, fluttering or pounding heart, tremor in the hands and legs, sweaty hands, facial nerve ticks, dry mouth, erectile dysfunction and dizziness. Well stage fright or performance anxiety is the anxiety because stage fright is also known as performance anxiety, a part of phobia. So, this is the anxiety or persistent phobia which may be aroused in an individual by the requirement to perform in front of an audience, whether actually or potentially. For example, when performing before a camera. Now, it affects all kinds of people who have to appear in front of an audience even when they are not necessarily speaking.

Musicians, dancers, politicians, students, even athletes are some of the various categories of people who can be affected by stage fright. A stage fright is obviously a very horrible feeling that many people, even the most talented and famous musicians have experienced and are familiar with. It usually exacts a huge stall on self-confidence and self-esteem and causes some people to leave school or a job or pass up a promotion. Many including seasoned professional performers suffer in silent terror. And because they feel embarrassed people try to keep their fear or secret even from a spouse or other close family members or friend.

So, while stage fright may be seen on the stage or in the course of being in an environment that opens one to judgment from a few or many it usually develops over time even before the main event occurs. People experience stage fright, fear, symptoms in different ways, but it is not limited to any of these traits. Traits like excessive dread or excessive worry about the event. That is called anxiety, thinking too much of the upcoming event. That is why I said that stage fright is more concerned with the future event than the present.

Feeling distant or withdrawn from the others, feeling of loneliness. Why? Because thinking of the audience, you know, almost as an enemy. Experiencing a sense of numbness that is losing the control over muscle and due to nervousness, dehydration, feeling dry mouth, throat tightening because you want to express, but it is choked, which can make talking very painful because this is not the flow. You have to struggle hard to make or to pronounce word. And very high heart beat, racing heart beat.

This is all fear and a kind of nervousness that if I fail, if I could not deliver a speech in the right manner, if I could not satisfy the audience. And due to this perspiration also: heavily sweating, and then due to dehydration or you know problems, nausea and vomiting. These are the symptoms of acute stage fright to some extent it is fine. Heart palpitation you know fast heart palpitation and then dry mouth, but this nausea, vomiting, stomach pains, cramping and then desire to escape and leave the scene. Has something happened? Then I should leave.

Intense paranoia about rejection or judgment. You know, paranoia- a kind of disease. So,

this is very important to address all such symptoms at the right moment and if you have such symptoms seriously you need to see the doctor. So that, you may rectify well in the time because if life is important, professional life is also important and for survival, we have to make our professional life successful. This kind of fear also leads to you know shaking, means not control over muscles and whatever you have practiced or something, that is all gone, memory slips.

The feeling of great insecurity despite excellent preparation means less confident. And as I said, obsessed with self-image, fear of ridicule by an audience and then embarrassment and shame, because this is also an art. If you forget something on the stage, you behave, you revive or you control as if there is no lacking, everything is flowing in a right manner. Worrying that something must be wrong with me, thinking why it is with me, why I am not like others, why? I mean you can think that this may happen with everyone and on top of all you know stage performance is not the matter of life and death. For some people a stage fright is a side effect or subset of social anxiety disorder.

This is a condition that is deeply rooted in fear of judgment and rejection that is why I said that it is more, you know, prone to the future event future rejection than to the present one. When some people including the stage performer like actors, musicians are quite antisocial and find it difficult to relate with others in the society they find themselves in. Therefore, it becomes hard for them to be able to perform in front of an audience they are not already comfortable with. For most people, stage fright starts with a feeling of nervousness that compounds to anxiety and anxiety triggers the body to activate its sympathetic nervous system where the body releases adrenaline into the blood stream. A response known as fight or flight syndrome, which is a process carried out by the body when it tries to protect itself from harm or perceives danger.

The adrenaline accounts for the physiological symptoms experienced during a stage fright such as shakes in places like the hands and legs, and the feeling of cold finger, numbness, toes, nose, ears, cheeks. The patterns happen so quickly that we do not recognize when it is happening until we are right in the middle of it. Stage fright, also being an anxiety disorder may also be a genetic problem. And this we shall discuss in detail you know later on that is why individual variations are very important. You cannot apply the same symptoms to everyone.

Nervousness, sensitivity- well quite normal, but too much of, you know, obsession may be due to the genetic problem. Research shows that genetic factors can play a prominent role in anxiety disorders. While there are not many studies examining the origin of stage fright up to 30 percent of generalized anxiety disorder cases appear to be genetic, meaning, it runs in families. Well there is not a permanent one size fits all cure for stage fright. However, it is absolutely possible to overcome most of the fear and learn to perform without excess anxiety.

With the right mindset and skills people can learn how to feel more comfortable in social situation. So, the somatic symptoms are exactly the same in the case of stage fright. It is quite easy to tell from one's own experience and by asking colleagues and teachers, but

according to Bourne, critical writer regarding the stage fright, the diagnosis of having panic attack happens in certain specific conditions. Panic attacks happens spontaneously, unexpected and without any particular reason or without any preceding thought process. This, therefore, disqualifies a stage fright from being a panic attack even though the symptoms are similar.

The problem with the definition continues. Throughout the literature, the term performance anxiety for stage fear is used. But what is the difference in the definition of anxiety and fear? That is a very prominent question. In 1844, Søren Kierkegaard wrote that anxiety refers to something which is nothing, which resembles quite well the modern definition of anxiety. Anxiety does not have a specific reason or object of worry.

Uneasiness comes from the inside and not from the outside. It seems to be a reaction to a vague distant or even unrecognized threat. Worry of losing control of yourself or a situation or vague worry that something bad will happen- that is more for the future, in contrast to fear which has a specific reason. But is stage fright completely reasonless? Well, if we go through the pages of Bourne, the example of fear is the fear of failure. But is the worry in stage fright related to the fear of failure? Is it so? Remembering my own experience and advice heard in the past.

I remember referring to a stage fright as a form of social phobia. In the works of Edmund Bourne, social phobia is one of the most common anxiety disorders. So, in his definition, it refers to the fear of embarrassment or humiliation when one is exposed for the judgment of the society or public. The level of fear in this case exceed vastly the levels of worry in comparison with public in social situation or public speaking performances without social phobia. Most often the fear is very strong and causes the avoidance of social situations and most of the diagnosed patients are aware of their exaggerated levels of worry that are not relevant to reality.

Bourne later continues with the explanation that the most common case of social phobia is fear of public speaking. We will see the exam, exam is also a kind of anxiety, where one has to sit, one has to give the exam. Other types of social phobia refers to the fear of being observed during work, crowds, exam, using public washroom, bathrooms, choking on food when eating in public space or failing exams. At times the social phobia is diagnosed as general fear of every social situation where a person can be observed and judged. Despite the fact that fears of social situations are very common, the formal diagnosis of social phobia can be done only when avoiding social situations are disturbing the possibilities of working, social activities, and would cause serious mental health problems.

So, let us know what is fear or fears. Biological fear comes from the feeling of danger of losing one's life as a defense- flight or fight response. Then the fear diminishes because certain action is taken to minimize it. Social fear appears in a certain moment or situation when with or without awareness one is afraid of the others' judgment. It may cause the imbalance of the entire being. One can start to worry, which is often unfounded.

Fear begins to displace our normal thought process. Vegetative symptoms such as sweating hands, increased heart rate, dizziness, nausea often appear. So, the anxiety generating factors in the form of social anxiety also begin to influence our behavior. We either avoid a stressful situation that causes fear or try to minimize them. Therefore, for example, if we are afraid of public appearance, we shorten the speech, do not take part in the discussion and try to avoid similar meetings in the future.

Anxiety is also accompanied by other negative emotions such as nervousness, tension, anger, depression and hopelessness. So, students, this is all about the introduction. If a stage fright or fear is so serious, then why it is also called anxiety or phobia- we got to know what is fear the symptoms of fear anxiety and how to get rid of this. So, let us meet in the next video for further discussion.

Till then bye, see you in the next lecture. Thank you.