

## **Countering Stage Fright**

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**Week-04**

**Lecture-19**

Hello friends, I'm here once again, to discuss the systematic desensitization of stage fright. I discussed this topic even in my last lecture. This is very important to know because we are discussing stage fright and to some extent, as we discussed earlier, the feeling of this fright or flight is normal, but when it is on our health or disturbing our psychology or nervous system, then this kind of problem needs to be addressed. So, as we start with the stage fear, which is also called performance anxiety which is also called phobia, glossophobia. So, somebody rightly said once- the human brain is a wonderful organ, it begins functioning the moment you are born and does not stop, until you are called upon to deliver a speech. The most carefully prepared speeches are never heard because of this mind block called stage fear, nerves and topophobia.

So, we prepared, but we cannot exactly present on the stage as we prepared earlier. This is called stage fright and this is not to us only. This is natural, but then as I said, then when it becomes a very serious disturbance, then it should be addressed. When you feel this kind of fear? So, when you are seated in the audience waiting for your turn to speak, you start thinking, I mean unnecessary thinking- I am scared of what might happen.

My grammar is so bad. How can I do justice to such a vast subject in just three minutes? Oh, look at the size of the audience. They all seem to be clever. I am making a fool out of myself. Suppose someone picks an argument with me.

These are the ideas coming, you know, to your brain inside your brain. Oh God, what will happen if I cannot even utter a word? So many ladies present and I did not even shave properly. You are look-conscious. So many men, I should have worn my saree. What will my father, my mother, my wife, husband, employee, you know, sitting in the audience think of this stupid speech.

All these thoughts make you a trifle anxious and this increases your heart beat. You start breathing faster and then the next thing you know is that your mouth has dried up, your

knees go wonky, your mind goes blank and you are in the grip of the universal phenomenon called stage fear. That is why we need to know the systematic desensitization of this so-called fear. You start wringing your hands, you drum your finger on the table podium, you tap a pencil or keep pressing the on or button of your pen, you scratch your hair, you tap your foot or both your feet, you lean on the podium, you keep removing your spotless spectacles- clean with a handkerchief, put them on, only to remove them a minute later clean them again. You fold, unfold, twist your hanky.

You face with objects placed on the table, you grip the mic tightly, you keep pulling your ears, you know, digging your nose, rubbing your eyes, you keep chewing the locket of your chain- several undesirable activities, you start jingling coins while your hands are in the pocket. And in short, you have lost your confidence while speaking. So, this happens because of some fear. When your brain senses your anxiety, it signals the release of extra amount of adrenaline and energy giving fluid into your body to help you combat the anxiety. An inexperienced person does not know how to handle this extra flow of adrenaline resulting in any or all the above manifestations of stage fear.

All the above means whatever I have discussed earlier that you know, on and off doing your pen, playing with your hair, rubbing your nose and your ear, this is all abnormal activity. So, stage fear is for real especially for those people who are not confident about their speaking skills, their personality is generally introverted. But in today's competitive world, it is important to overcome the stage fear because in every phase of life, whether in a school or college or at the university level, or while applying for the job and even during your job, one needs to communicate with people. You need to make presentations in college, you have to be part of live projects and workshops in university. and you have to make presentations when you enter the professional work scenario.

Professionals like MBAs have to make presentations to top management, and lawyers have to address the judiciary and the court. So, public speaking skills are a must to master for the youth. The most common human emotion, fear, is one that cannot be avoided at all. This is a very common feeling. People experience fear in different ways and to different degrees, but the feeling is universal.

Fear has the power to alter a person's psychological makeup and consequently conduct. So, the flight or fight reaction, also known as the fight or flight response, results from the awareness of danger and is a response to fear. And through systematic desensitization we try to minimize this fear or neutralize this fear. People become capable of performing numerous things that one would not ordinarily be able to or ready to do in response to the threat by learning from the past about what can safeguard one in a risky situation. In general, there are two kinds of fear.

Innate fear and identity fears. People are born with innate fears which act as a form of survival instinct and are fears that every person experiences on some level. As humans progress, identity fears emerge in addition to this. A lot of people also dread connection and love. These fears are a subcategory of identity fears.

Individuals tend to form relationship with other people as they progress through life and these attachments become very important to the individual. One of the biggest fears for many people, is losing these bonds. Both a strong individual emotional response and a physiological reaction to the situation are involved in fear in humans. Since people are mortal, the fear of death is an example of a logical fear. But when fear prevents us from doing our jobs properly, it turns into a phobia.

The propensity to experience fear of fear can be a symptom of an anxiety disorder. Well, I want to discuss conquering fear with you today. At some point in our life we have all felt fear and it is normal to feel terrified or apprehensive in particular circumstances, as fear can also keep us from reaching our objectives and leading the life we want to. How can we conquer our fear? Use it for good instead. And it is crucial, first, to pinpoint the underlying source of our apprehension.

And again, this is the systematic desensitization of stage fright which will help us to come over this imagined fear. Fear can occasionally be a normal reaction to a risky or a strange scenario and in these situations, it is critical to weigh the risk and implement the necessary safety measures. However, dread frequently arises from our own thoughts and beliefs. It may be beneficial in these situations to question unfavorable or unreasonable beliefs and swap them out for more uplifting and practical ones. Face our concern head on is a further effective tactic.

This does not mean putting ourselves in a perilous situation. Rather it means progressively exposing ourselves to the things that make us comfortable and strengthening our confidence and fortitude over time. Setting modest, doable objectives and acknowledging our accomplishments along the way can help with this. So to get assistance from friends, family, or a therapist can also be beneficial. By talking about our anxiety with others, we might feel isolated and receive the inspiration and support we need to face our worries.

And finally it is critical to keep in mind that everyone experiences fear occasionally and that it is normal to be scared. What counts most is how we decide to handle our fears. We can learn to overcome our concerns and lead more fulfilled and adventurous lives by taking baby steps and asking for help. Fear, the quintessential human emotion is an

utterly unavoidable human emotion and this, I repeat, this is natural. The extent and range of fear from different things vary from person to person, but the emotion is the same.

Fear is capable of causing psychological changes and ultimately behavioral changes in a person. Humans experience fear as a response to a specific stimulus to a situation occurring in the present or an anticipated future threat that is a risk to oneself. The response to fear arises from the recognition of danger leading to the confrontation of the situation or escaping the fear or avoiding the situation, also known as fight or flight response. We all humans are programmed in a manner to recognize fear, to avoid or reduce being harmed. Learning from the past about what can protect one in dangerous situations makes people capable of doing many things that one would not typically be able to or willing to respond to the threat.

Many people suffer from some form of anxiety while speaking and these reactions include a panic attack when asked to stand in front of even a few people. Studies have shown that many of us are more afraid of public speaking than death. Unfortunately, there are many occasions where we cannot avoid delivering a speech. Whether it is business presentation, community event or just a family gathering, there will always be times when you have to stand up and speak. So, you might as well sharpen your speaking skills.

Most of us, even those, you know, who are at the top level experienced a struggle with public speaking anxiety, that is also called performance anxiety. And see, when I ask my students what makes them nervous, invariably they respond with the same answer- I do not like being watched, I do not like the eyes on me, I do not like being in the spotlight and it follows that when they get up to speak, nearly all of them initially avoid making eye contact with members of the audience. Therein lies the problem. While avoiding direct eye contact may seem like an effective strategy for coping with speaking anxiety, it actually makes you even more nervous. To understand why, we need to go way back to prehistoric times when humans perceived eyes watching us as an existential threat.

Those eyes were likely predators, people were literally terrified of being eaten alive and in response to that prehistoric reality, the amygdala the part of our brain that help us response to danger, kicked into full gear. And when our fight or flight response gets triggered we understandably feel intense stress and anxiety. What does this have to do with public speaking? Turns out everything. Our brains have transferred the ancient fear of being watched onto public speaking. I mean this could be one of the explanations.

I am not saying that this is the only explanation, but this could be the explanation. Prehistoric time, when we were not safe, unsafe, spending life in forest, jungle. In other words, public speaking anxiety is in our DNA and we experience public speaking as an

attack, the mob attack. We physiologically register an audience as a threatening predator and mount a comparable response. Many people's physical responses while speaking resemble how their body would react to physical signs of danger like shortness of breath, redness of face, shaking.

So, today when we speak in front of a group and audience and feel the eyes watching us we feel painfully visible like a caveman exposed in daylight. And because our brain is telling us that we are under attack, we do whatever is necessary to protect ourselves. We construct walls between ourselves and the source of danger and in this case the audience to repel the attack and blunt any danger. Fortunately, there is a solution- human generosity. The key to calming the amygdala and disarming our organic panic button is to turn the focus away from ourselves.

Away from whether we will mess up, or whether the audience will like us, and towards helping the audience. Studies have shown that an increase in generosity leads to a decrease in amygdala activity. Showing kindness and generosity to others has been shown to activate the vagus nerve which has the power to calm the fight or flight response. When we are kind to others, we feel calmer and less stressed. The same principle applies in public speaking.

When we approach speaking with a spirit of generosity, we counteract the sensation of being under attack and start to feel less nervous. The hardest time is speaking in public because their brain is telling them now is not the time to give, it is time to run. But it is absolutely possible to become a generous speaker. So there are three steps that you can follow. The first is, when you are preparing, think about your audience.

When we start preparing for a presentation, the mistake we all make is starting with the topic. This immediately gets us inside the details and makes it harder to break down the wall between us and others. Instead, start with the audience before diving into the information- ask yourself who will be in the room? Why are they there? What do they need? Be specific in your answers. Identify the audience's needs both spoken and unspoken and craft a message that speaks directly to those needs. Then the second step, right before you speak, refocus your brain.

You are the most nervous right before you speak. This is the moment when your brain is telling you everyone is judging me, what if I fail? And it is exactly at this moment that you can refocus your brain. Remind yourself that you are here to help your audience. Be firm with your brain. Tell yourself, "brain, the presentation is not about me.

It is about helping my audience." Over time, usually between 4 and 6 presentations, your

brain will begin to get it and you will become less nervous. While you are speaking, make eye contact. One of the biggest mistakes we make is speaking to people as a group. We scan the room trying to look everyone at once and end up connecting with nobody. So, in reality, each person in the room is listening to you as an individual.

And so the best way to connect to your audience is by speaking to them as individuals. How? By making sustained eye contact with one person per thought. Each thought is about one full clause- by focusing at one person at a time, you make each person in the room feel like you are talking just to them- means, a kind of bond you are developing, a closeness. Well, this is hard, difficult.

We are accustomed to scanning the room. Making direct eye contact can feel uncomfortable at first, yet as you practice it more, it will actually make you less nervous. It is far easier and more effective to have a series of one-on-one conversation than it is to speak to everyone at once. When my students- I mean, I suggested some of the students who were feeling very nervous- when my students use this technique more than 3 consecutive times, they almost always report a decrease in speaking anxiety. Note that the most important people to look at are those who are at the far edges of the room. And these are the people who are already a disadvantage.

By being extra generous to those at the edges of the room, you bring everyone in. We know the power of generosity gives us a sense of fulfillment, a purpose, and a meaning. Generosity is just as powerful in speaking. It turns a nerve-racking and even painful experience into one of giving and helping others. A generous speaker is calmer, more relaxed and most important more effective at reaching the audience and making the desired impact.

The fear of public speaking, as I said, also known as glossophobia or phobia- according to one estimate about 75 percent of people suffer from various forms of this phobia and 10 percent of people are genuinely terrified. The fear of public speaking is the number one phobia throughout the world and is more common than the fear of heights or the fear of snakes, which rank two or three respectively. Well if we talk of systematic desensitization of this fear, breathing is a very important factor in overcoming the nervousness caused by the increase of adrenaline. Excess adrenaline makes us breath shallowly, that is in the top part of our lungs, and too rapidly. So how to help yourself to relax and control your breathing? Relaxation and breathing techniques are invaluable when trying to calm your nerves.

When we are nervous, we often take shallow breaths and this leads to added anxiety. So slowing down our breathing and learning to relax are invaluable. Now, in this regard I

would say exercise wide that exercise 1 what is the exercise 1 learning to relax. Find a comfortable place and lie on the floor, close your eyes, concentrate on relaxing every part of your body. starting with your feet and legs and working upwards to your shoulders, neck and head.

Now bring your attention to your breathing to begin with just be aware of breathing in and out. Now try to imagine a place. that you can associate with calmness. Picture this place and hear the sounds, smell and other kind of fragrances. Once you have become familiar with recalling this special place it can be somewhere to go whenever you are feeling nervous such as just before you go on a stage to make a speech.

Learning to relax takes time, but it will really help especially if you do this exercise regularly. After a while you will be able to recall the feeling of relaxation anywhere. Then exercise 2, centering yourself, stand with your feet shoulders width apart, your hands hanging loose, shoulders down and head relaxed on your neck. First try to collect your thoughts.

and think in your head feel yourself become lighter. Now try to think in your stomach and start to feel yourself getting rooted in the ground. Your effective thinking your center of gravity down through your body and this process is called centering and it may take a little practice. Now breathe in and feel the breathe going right down into your center to the bottom of your lungs and into your stomach. breathe out allowing your diaphragm to control the outward breathe as described in our previous discussion. Well while wrapping up I am coming to the last exercise get to know yourself that nerves often come from the unknown.

So, go to the room or hall where you will be speaking and walk around it rehearsing your speech out loud. Now, sing parts of your speech and move around allowing your voice to fill the space. you can neutralize your stage fear with this systematic desensitization. Wrapping up the discussion I would say that let us meet in the next lecture where we can learn something more to enhance our public speaking skills till then thank you.