6

Coping with nerves: the credibility problem

A common complaint

Although it has been left until halfway through the book, nervousness is probably the biggest problem to be surmounted for most inexperienced speakers. Were it not for nervousness, common sense, and normal intelligence, would ensure that most talks were interesting and well planned. But nervousness seems to disable common sense, and normal intelligence gets swamped by anxiety. A book like this is needed just because speakers get nervous. Like a rabbit caught in a car's headlights, they don't know which way to run. All sorts of bizarre behaviour results, unless there are firm guide lines. Like clinging to the wreckage in a storm, any fragment of advice gives security. Even if the speaker doesn't feel at all like smiling, for example, the knowledge that he or she ought to smile is enough to make them feel that they are doing the right thing.

Nervousness is a very real problem, and is the root of most of the other problems with speaking. We all talk competently in a group of friends, but as soon as the group of friends becomes a wall of strangers, nervousness usurps our every-day competence, and we need the prop of advice.

Unfortunately, many books on speaking dismiss nervousness as not worth discussing. Like laziness, or cowardice, these books seem to imply that it is something to be ashamed of, and certainly not something to be discussed. The speaker may be jollied along with advice like 'Don't worry', or 'It'll be all right'. He or she is given the impression that nervousness, like incontinence, is something which is better not thought about. It will go away if you ignore it, and if not, there's nothing to be done about it. Nervousness is beyond help, these books seem to imply, and only courage will

overcome it. Good chaps put a brave face on it, and never mention it to other chaps.

Sadly, all this hearty pretence is no help; it merely increases the sufferer's sense of his or her own inadequacy. It is also cruel: extreme nervousness is one of the most unpleasant experiences most civilized people go through. It is a form of physical and mental suffering which is unparalleled. Extreme misery, anguished anxiety, and even physical nausea are added to shame and a sense of inadequacy. Embarrassment is the least of the suffering. It may take weeks, months even to get over the misery caused by a catastrophic failure to cope with nervousness. The speaker may go through savage reassessments of his or her abilities as a result of ruining a presentation through nerves. Undoubtedly, nervousness is a serious problem; it needs careful and considered help.

Nervousness *can* be helped, and eventually reduced to manageable proportions. It is, after all, a purely mental phenomenon. Attitudes, and knowledge about the cause and function of the anxiety, advice about how to reduce it, and experience which renders the terrifying familiar, are the clues. Much of the work on nervousness has been done by musicians: talented young musicians find the intricate dexterity required to play their instruments turned into clumsiness in front of judges and audiences. Since it is clearly a waste, musicians have studied the problems of tension in performance. Speakers, who have similar problems, can benefit from the knowledge and techniques gained from these studies.

The first thing to learn about nervousness is that it is universal. Every nervous speaker thinks that he or she is the only one in the world to suffer. Compared with the calm competence of every one else, he or she feels their own shameful failure as a personal inadequacy. The truth is that nervousness when facing an audience is very common. Almost everyone suffers from nerves, even experienced professionals, and the reason why we are not aware of this is simply that the basic effect of nerves doesn't show. Providing the gestures are controlled, butterflies in the stomach are invisible to the audience. So the calm and confident speaker you watched with envy, was almost certainly trembling like a leaf inside: you just couldn't see it.

It is a good thing that speakers are nervous. Contrary to popular belief, the calm and controlled speaker is acting, he or she is disguising nervousness in a practised simulation of indifference. If he or she were really not nervous, there would be no energy to give the talk: nerves are useful to the speaker, without them he would go to

sleep. Even people who make their living from appearing in front of audiences—actors, comedians, performers—are nervous just before going on stage. They rely on these nerves to give them the boost of energy which makes them sparkle. And the shot of adrenalin they get becomes a fix. It is something they can't do without, and is probably why these people love the stage experience so much. Nervousness is a useful, and essential part of performance, not something to worry about or be ashamed of. The art of effective speaking is not ceasing to be nervous; it is using the nervous energy to improve the talk. Standing up and speaking requires a great deal of effort: the slight lift given by nervousness arouses our energies.

If you feel you have an unusually nervous disposition, you may be surprised to know that you are not alone. Such sensitivity is common; psychologists calculate that: 'Between five and eight per cent of the population are unduly anxious.'[1] Knowing that you are not alone doesn't change the fact that you are nervous, but it should give you hope that your nervousness can be conquered. One of the more unpleasant features of being very nervous is a sense of isolation, and the fear of shame if others see that you are nervous. Take heart, there is nothing especially unusual in being highly sensitive, and you are far from alone. Almost certainly, there are compensating advantages in your higher than average levels of arousal, and sensitive response to anxiety. Highly nervous people, for instance, are often of above average intelligence. It is possible to apply this intelligence to solving the problem of nervousness by learning about it, and applying the results of research. The higher sensitivity is also compensated by greater alertness, and awareness of audience reactions. It sounds paradoxical, but is none the less true. Nervous people usually make good speakers, once they have tamed and applied their nervousness.

Research on nervousness

What is the evidence of research, and why do speakers feel nervous? Other people inevitably affect our psychological state, producing increased levels of arousal. The presence of others is natural, and solitary confinement is a terrible, disorientating, punishment. But too many people, and the feeling that we are being observed by others is disturbing. Performance quality, generally, is affected by the presence of others. Early in this century, Auguste Meyer found, in 1903, that when people were asked to do mental and written arithmetic, memorize nonsense syllables, or completed sentences in front of an

audience, there was a 30–50% improvement in speed. Surprisingly, too, they made fewer mistakes.

More complex research was carried out by Dashiell, who used three different tests: multiplication, a mixed relations test, and serial association. Dashiell got his subjects to work alone, to work watched by others, simply to work together, and, last, to compete with each other. The result, in general, was that working with others present improves speed but diminishes accuracy. Other people make a difference to the performance of an individual. Quantity increases, but quality is reduced. The explanation is probably that speed of work, and the amount produced are obvious to the people watching, but the accuracy and quality of the work are less visible to onlookers. The individual in our society wants to excel, so he goes for what can be easily seen.[2]

Being observed by others affects our behaviour in well-understood ways. 'Arousal' is a technical term in psychology for a state of being 'keyed-up', marked by physical symptoms such as increased heart and breathing rates, dilated pupils, increased adrenalin, and alert and rapid reactions. Nobody is more exposed than the speaker, and it is not surprising that he or she is in a state of heightened arousal. While this is necessary to cope with the extra demands of speaking, if the arousal becomes too much the speaker starts making mistakes. The arousal is produced by the presence of the audience, and the anxiety by the fear of making mistakes. A competent, even merely satisfactory, performance reduces stress, since being observed by others is only over stressful if you are making mistakes. So your first aim must be to give the information clearly and adequately, then the anxiety about being observed will be replaced by a sense of achievement. If you are highly nervous it is essential not to try for too much too soon. Be satisfied with a minimum performance; there is less chance of mistakes.

Michael Argyle explains: 'The performer is aroused and anxious because his esteem and image are exposed to the risk of being damaged.' Of course, the level of arousal will reflect the risk, and the importance of success. Argyle continues: 'A well-known law in psychology states that increasing arousal has an energising effect, which first improves performance, but later leads to deterioration, as emotionality disrupts the pattern of behaviour.'[3] The art is to achieve an optimum level of arousal. Experienced speakers claim that their nerves are useful to them—it keys them up to give their best. As I have already said, people who make their living by performing in

front of an audience often rely on the boost of adrenalin for the added energy. But the inexperienced speaker rarely has the problem of not being nervous enough. How does he cope with his nerves?

There are a number of factors which affect the level of nervousness. These are the size of the audience, the importance of the audience, how familiar the speaker is with the members of the audience, the difficulty of the subject, the experience of the speaker, and the vulnerability of his or her public persona. Firstly, the size of the audience is important. Twelve people is less daunting than two hundred. If you have to give a presentation at a large conference next month, it will help to give a trial run to a dozen colleagues this month.

All the factors which increase arousal add together, and size can be compensated for by practice with the same subject, as well as extra experience with speaking. Secondly, the importance of the audience increases anxiety. If important bosses, or people who can further your career, are present, try to reduce the overall anxiety levels by choosing a simpler subject, or chosing a more modest personality to project. You are unlikely to be promoted to the board as a result of your first talk; but if you make a hash of it, you may lose the chance in the future. Try not to aim too high, if the stakes are high. On the other hand, if you know all the audience personally, you can afford to set yourself a more difficult task.

The most anxiety-producing of all these factors is lack of experience. Even the first time crossing a high bridge can be nerve racking if you have vertigo, although if you do it regularly it will soon be a matter of indifference. So with speaking—excess nervousness is mainly caused by lack of experience. Get practice in undemanding situations, and on easier subjects, and future presentations will arouse less anxiety, though do not expect ever to be totally unmoved by the need to speak. The last of the factors which increase arousal is the risk of weaknesses in your persona being discovered. We all adopt a public persona, which differs from the one we show our family. It is not wise to adopt too demanding a persona when speaking: to pretend to be an expert on a topic when you are really a novice is inviting disaster. Equally, to try to be a smooth, casually competent speaker when you are as nervous as a bride at a wedding is foolish. It is the level of risk which pumps up the level of anxiety. Keeping the risk down will reduce the chances of exposure, and calm your nerves.

Fear of facing an audience is often simply fear of facing the truth about oneself. Exposing oneself to others invites them to see all those

things which you secretly fear are wrong with your personality. In fact, few people are as bad as they fear, and most audiences are too interested in themselves, their own thoughts and their own concerns, to have time to do a detailed analysis of the speaker. Indeed if they did so they would probably expect the usual mixture of good and bad. They would only really dislike him if he were perfect.

Probably the best antidote to nervousness about one's own personality is the recognition that people who are unusual in their personalities or appearance often make a virtue of these features, and are liked and respected as characters. There is no need to be afraid of the identity you present to others. Only the fear itself is unattractive. All human variety is interesting and likeable; whatever your fears, if you are open and straightforward, the audience will like you for what you are.

The last section of this chapter presents a variety of antidotes to nervousness. They are not quack cures and many of them can be surprisingly effective. But before discussing them, let us look in more detail at the way nervousness affects a speaker and his or her audience.

Nervousness affects you

Nervousness has many effects on the body. The most obvious is the way that nerves affect the face. The muscles round the mouth tense up, and the eyes especially signal the wrong messages. Secondly, nerves affect the voice, especially affecting speed and pitch. Thirdly, nerves affect the performance generally. They cause timing errors: the biological perception of time depends on internal biological rhythms, which in turn depend on adrenalin levels. These rhythms go haywire when someone is keyed-up to speak.

Nerves also affect the way you think, interfering with language production, often resulting in ambiguity, and confusion of meaning. Nerves can cause mental blocks and loops. The only way to break a mental block, incidentally, is to abort what you are saying, and start again on a fresh part of the subject. When things are back on the smooth and level it may be possible to go back to complete the section which was abandoned. Finally, nerves affect the whole body, giving the speaker platformitis, jellied knee-caps, headaches, clammy hands, and an upset stomach. Nervousness is very unpleasant. It is one of the main reasons why inexperienced speakers dread the event.

One of the features of nervousness most obvious to the outside

observer is the hesitation in the nervous speaker's voice. Many people think that 'ahs' and 'ums' are a sign of nervousness and some inexperienced speakers work themselves into a state of real anxiety trying to avoid ever saying 'um'. They fail, of course, and then let this failure embarrass them. Since it is such a trivial aspect of speaking, it is surprising to find how much research psychologists and linguists have done on this topic. Let me first explain the jargon: 'filled pauses' are 'er', 'ah', 'um', etc. 'Unfilled pauses' are silences. Lay and Burron chose a recording of a speaker with a high rate of filled pauses, unfilled pauses and repetition. These were edited out from a version of the recording.

Different groups of listeners scored the speaker on dimensions such as hesitancy, fluency, anxiety, tension and nervousness. These listeners judged the edited tape was more fluent than the original (though only slightly). But interestingly, neither female nor male listeners thought the speaker on one recording was more anxious, tense or nervous than the other.[4]

This is an interesting result, since hesitation is conventionally regarded as a symptom of anxiety, and speakers worry about these 'hesitation phenomena' as linguists call them. Yet it seems that listeners do not in fact perceive nervousness in the speaker when he or she hesitates. Hesitation seems to be less important than speakers fear. There are various kinds of hesitation phenomena: they can be divided into the 'Ah', 'Um' variants (also called 'filled pauses'); the 'repetition' variants, which include stuttering, repetition of sentences and phrases already spoken while thinking of what to say next, or while the mind is stalling; 'omission' which is where parts of phrases are left incomplete without realizing it; and 'sentence reconstruction' a variety of hesitation where after the sentence has been started the speaker goes back to restart it using a different structure. Finally, 'tongue slip' is where a non-meaningful noise or distorted syllable which cannot be recognized is emitted. Many studies have failed to find any reliable relationship between nervousness or anxiety and these phenomena. Mark Cook concludes that 'On balance, therefore, it seems that anxiety, permanent or transient, is not related to the use of Ah.'[5]

Speech rate has also been associated with anxiety, on the obvious theory that any anxiety will energize behaviour, and make the person talk faster. Research shows that what happens is not so much that the words themselves are produced faster, but that the pauses between the words are reduced. In a similar way, speaking slower consists of

being relaxed enough to allow silences to grow between words and phrases. Interestingly, the results of research contradict the idea that nervous people speak more quickly when made more nervous. In fact 'instead of speaking still faster, they speak more slowly.'[6] In general though, the 'Ah' variant of speech disturbance was not correlated with anxiety.

The evidence is that listeners do not regard hesitations as signs of nervousness, although they prefer speech without too many pauses. Even good speakers have a scattering of hesitation phenomena; speech would sound unnatural, and rather plastic, without. The truth is that research on anxiety markers in speech has failed to show that filled pauses are interpreted by listeners as signs of anxiety.

Hesitation phenomena are not evidence of nervousness, or are not interpreted as such by listeners. But there are other grounds for avoiding too many of them; they impede directness, and the listeners' confidence in the speaker's grasp of his material suffers. But they should not be a source of worry; if they are, they are likely to increase, not decrease. They are entirely natural, and a moderate number of them probably signals natural relaxation, rather than anxiety, to the listener.

Nerves and the audience

The audience is disturbed by nervousness, as well as the speaker. There are two distinct ways in which the audience is affected; their judgement of the competence and subject knowledge of the speaker is affected by his or her nervousness (i.e. 'Why is he nervous if he knows what he's talking about?'): and their sympathy and concern are aroused by watching someone who is nervous ('The poor person is miserable!').

Firstly, the audience's judgement of the speaker's competence is affected by nervousness. The audience interpret the validity of the message depending on their perception of the assurance of the speaker. It is natural to feel that someone who knows what he or she is talking about, shows it in the confidence of his or her manner. So if a speaker is nervous the audience subconsciously feel it is because he or she doesn't know the subject properly.

There are two components to this: firstly, of course, it is difficult for an audience to realize how frightening they appear to the speaker. If a listener is sitting quietly in a chair, he doesn't feel very frightening! And he is not really aware of everyone else around him

in the same way as the speaker is. So it is very difficult for him to understand why anyone should be nervous about talking to him. The listener tends to think that the speaker's nervousness must have some other explanation. Secondly, people who aren't telling the truth are often nervous. Whereas this isn't true of competent tricksters, and there are many other reasons why people are nervous, the unconscious effect of evident nervousness on the audience may be to make them suspicious. Consciously they may be sympathetic, underneath they find their confidence in the message undermined.

So nerves can affect the credibility of a speaker. Studies show that 'expressed confidence' (i.e. using confidence asserting phrases such as 'I am sure...', 'I have no doubt that...'), as well as confident behaviour, affects the amount an audience is persuaded by a speaker. It is also easier to listen to a speaker whom you believe to be an expert—there is a subtle sense of time well spent. Whereas listening to someone whom you suspect doesn't know what he or she is talking about is difficult, because it may be wasted.[7]

For these reasons, nervousness in a speaker affects the benefit the audience gets from a talk. The speaker's credibility is reduced if he is obviously nervous, and the audience enjoy the talk less. How do the audience know if the speaker is nervous? There are both obvious, and subconscious ways in which an audience perceives nervousness. The subconscious ways depend on non-verbal communication (see Chapter Nine); but also on a phenomenon which has only recently been discovered. Stress shows in a speaker's voice by signals which are beyond our conscious perception. Listeners are sensitive to the presence or absence of inherent micro-tremors in the speaker's vocal pitch. All voice patterns include an individual and unique level of micro-tremor (similar in many ways to fingerprints). When someone is placed under stress there is a marked drop in the frequency of vocal micro-tremors, which is registered by the listener. This phenomenon has been used to construct lie detectors, and it may explain why we sense if someone is telling the truth or not. To us it seems like a magic fifth sense, because we are unaware of the physical basis of the evidence, but through micro-tremors, we can judge just how nervous the speaker is.

As well as these unconscious channels of communication, there are many visible signs of nervousness. The basic sign is an inability to stand still when talking:

> When a person is emotionally aroused he produces diffuse, apparently pointless, bodily movements. A nervous lecturer may

> work as hard as a manual labourer. More specific emotions produce particular gestures—fist-clenching (aggression), face-touching (anxiety), scratching (self-blame), forehead-wiping (tiredness) etc... An anxious person tends to talk faster than normal and at a higher pitch.[8]

All these signs will communicate the speaker's nervousness to the audience. It is such signals which make a listener say, 'you can hear him sweating with thinking'. They can be controlled, of course, and they ought to be controlled if the audience is to be comfortable. Nothing is more distressing than seeing another person going through a purgatory of anxiety. Out of sheer kindness to your listeners, you should try to damp down the amount of random movement you make. Calmness in the speaker, even if created by conscious self-control, is reassuring and relaxing to the listeners.

Cures for nerves

Because nervousness is produced by purely psychological means, it can be controlled by purely psychological means. This is a point which many speakers have not realized. Bleeding when you cut yourself is a physical event, and requires a physical cure such as a bandage. Nervousness has real enough physical manifestations, such as sweating, feeling sick, and trembling. But it has a purely mental cause; bandages won't help nervousness, but ideas will.

In this section I am going to offer a series of ideas which will help you to see nervousness in perspective, and to control its effects. But in the end, the only cure for excessive nervousness is experience. And that is the most difficult thing to get if you are over nervous. The solution, as I suggested earlier in the chapter, is to set yourself less stressful speaking assignments for the first few times. As you gain experience, your nervousness will subside, and you will be able to face a large audience. But don't be ambitious first time out; learner speakers should drive carefully. And when making your first trial runs, remember the points made in this section. Each will reduce nervousness to a level where you are able to start to speak; increasing experience will then get the problem finally under control.

The first idea which offers a 'cure' for nervousness is the realization that the effects of nerves can rarely be seen from the outside. You feel dreadfully exposed when standing in front of an audience, but the plain fact is that they can't see what you feel inside;

you are not made of perspex. It is almost always true that you look better than you feel. Like the ducks on the Bishop's pond, you may be paddling like hell underneath, but on the surface all appears calm. Remember that most of the audience are quite some distance away. Your eyelid may be trembling, your knee cap jumping like a jack-in-the-box, and your stomach churning like a steam engine, but none of this is visible from a few feet away. The back row can see nothing; even the front row can see little of what is really going on inside. So providing you prevent yourself pacing up and down, or waving your arms about randomly, you will appear to be calm, even if you are not.

Nervous speakers can rationalize their nervousness by thinking about the real situation they are in. Think about the audience as people, their motives, their hopes, and their interests; it will help focus your attention on realities, rather than your lurking fears. Here are six reflections which will help you gain this perspective:

1. It is an undoubted fact that an audience is made uncomfortable by a nervous speaker. There is a strong empathy between speaker and listener. One of the great showmen of speaking, Dale Carnegie, encapsulated this point in his dictum: 'I'm OK, you're OK.' Making yourself relax is a kindness to them as well. Think of yourself as helping them, and you will feel they are helping you.
2. Remember that the audience is *not* hostile. You were asked to speak, therefore they *do* want to know what you have to say. You are welcomed, since in effect, the audience has initiated the conversation by asking your opinion on a subject. They want to learn for their own benefit, and your job is to help. You also have the power of novelty, for they certainly haven't heard it before, at least not your way.
3. Remember that you are much more awake than they are, and much more self-critical. Therefore you are much more aware of errors and pauses than they are. What seemed like a dreadful mistake to you, was probably almost unnoticed by them. It may take them several minutes to become aware that something you said was peculiar. If you calmly correct the mistake, they will hardly realize you made it. Pauses, too, are perceived differently by speaker and listener. The audience is living on a different time scale, and what seems like eternity to the speaker may be barely noticeable to the listeners.
4. They are going to be more embarrassed than you, if the worst

happens and the talk collapses. It is only kindness to them, then, to keep going. Realizing that they are more frightened of failure than you are, makes it easier to be sensible. So try to keep the talk in order, for their sake.

5. An audience is naturally well disposed and sympathetic. Speakers are frightened of audiences because they imagine them to be composed of cruel ogres, who take malicious pleasure in failure, and sadistic delight in mocking errors. You may be surprised to know, if you are nervous, that this is not the case. Audiences feel involved with the success of the presentation, and the natural kindness of people is increased by their concern that everything should go well.
6. Even if everything does go wrong, they can't (and won't) actually shoot you. It's worth seeing your nervousness in perspective: what do you expect to happen if you make a mistake? The fact is that in many years of watching and teaching effective speaking I have *never once* heard derisive laughter. If the speaker is nervous, and makes mistakes, there is a sense of concern, and support from the listeners. The penalties for mistakes are very small, and most mistakes seem much bigger to the speaker than to the listeners, who may hardly notice. Don't worry: it isn't as bad as that!

In summary, one important cure for nervousness is to see what you are afraid of in a true perspective. Don't think of the audience as hostile and frightening: talk to them as individuals, and think of them as a collection of people. You would not feel that bad about talking to any one of them alone. Follow Machiavelli, 'divide and rule'. Remember that anxiety is usually at its peak just before you start talking. Once you are under way, you have to concentrate on what you are saying, and you forget about yourself. The keys are seeing the situation in perspective, careful preparation, and a realistic assessment of the audience. Providing you don't try to put on an elaborate front which you cannot sustain, nothing is likely to go wrong.

There remain, however, people whose misfortune is being over nervous, and who find simple rational self-control little help. In some cases this over sensitivity is genetic, in some cases it is due to bad experiences, such as too much hostility and teasing from school mates (perhaps because of a temporary problem—a stammer, a lisp, or a silly mother). Whatever the cause, there is no doubt that there are many people who cannot get on top of their nervousness by rationalization.

They undoubtedly have an additional burden. Sartre once said that no one was born a coward, and everyone had the choice of whether he was going to be a coward or not. Nature endowed some people with a more lively sense of fear, and these people undoubtedly had more to triumph over in order to be brave. But nature had not made them cowards as such; that was solely, and only, their own choice. It is a stern lesson. If you are over nervous, it does not mean you cannot be a successful speaker, it merely means you have more work to do.

The very nervous

What can be done to help the over nervous? Clinical techniques have been evolved to help psychiatric patients, which may also be applied to normal people. Desensitization treatment uses controlled exposure in small, un-threatening amounts. The exposure is gradually increased until the potential for anxiety from an observing audience is close to a real-life situation. It is the way of acquiring experience gradually while being protected from traumas which would give that experience a negative effect on confidence. The easiest way to provide desensitization therapy is through a planned progression, from simple talks to more demanding ones. It helps to be frank, and tell colleagues and friends that you are trying to control your over nervousness by getting used to speaking. Try to arrange to give a short (10 minutes, no more) presentation to half a dozen people from the same office or laboratory. Then try a bigger audience, and gradually desensitize yourself.

The basis of the effect is this: anxiety produces a rush of adrenalin in a dramatic response to a threatening situation. If the situation produces nothing fearsome, then the adrenalin has been wasted. Next time the same situation is encountered, the body produces slightly less adrenalin, because it has learned that it is working for nothing. With increasing exposure to the frightening situation, the body learns to react less and less, as it learns that its response is mistaken. This process of learned response is quite involuntary, and cannot be changed once learnt. It is quite impossible to feel fear when driving a car if you are an experienced driver, though statistically it is the most dangerous thing you do in your life, certainly much more dangerous than speaking. Next time you are on a long, boring motorway journey, and find yourself feeling drowsy, try to feel nervous about driving. I'm sure you will not be able to. Desensitization has the same effect on nervousness about speaking. Eventally it will become as routine as driving to work.

If you cannot arrange a graded sequence of speaking assignments for yourself, or if you are very nervous and can't bring yourself to try, a course on speaking is often useful. Many organizations now offer courses in effective speaking: giving an exercise presentation to a group of other learners is much less threatening than the real thing, and being told when you do well, and helped to correct simple mistakes, will be just the boost needed to get you started as a competent speaker. Even reading this book, for reasons I will come to at the end of this chapter, is a form of desensitization, and will help you face an audience with more confidence.

De-stress techniques

There are other physical de-stress techniques, which some find helpful. For instance, high levels of adrenalin upset the body's chemistry by preparing it for violent action, which it doesn't get. Burning off energy by filling your blood with oxygen will help to replace this missing activity. A bout of steady deep breathing does this. Standing up and walking round also helps. The level of adrenalin can also be reduced by deliberate relaxation. Try the technique of clenching each group of muscles from your toes upwards. Tense each group in turn, hold for a count of five, and then relax them. By the time you get to the neck and mouth muscles (as well as the forehead group), you will feel considerably more relaxed.

One way in which people work off stress is to become angry; it is supposed to be the method used by some surgeons in the operating theatre. All these techniques will help deal with the overload of adrenalin, which is causing the problems. It is even possible to use chemical therapy to reduce the levels of arousal. Thus *Inderal,* among other anxiety reducing drugs, has been successfully used to provide the initial platform of confidence on which de-sensitization can build. Such techniques are only available under medical supervision, of course. None the less, if you are thrown into a major presentation, and are completely inexperienced and very nervous, a drug like *Inderal* prescribed by your doctor, may provide the help you need. Providing you do not become dependent on it for every presentation, there is no harm in a little assistance at the beginning of the learning curve.

The best cure for nerves remains experience. But how does a nervous beginner gain experience if he or she shies away from just those speaking situations which would gradually reduce this nervousness? It is possible to gain substitute experience through the

imagination. Physical training instructors were surprised to find, in recent experiments, that simply making their trainees sit quietly with closed eyes and *imagine* themselves throwing and catching a ball actually improved their skills. What seems to happen is that imagining an exercise uses a similar process in the brain's balancing and perceiving circuits as the real act. The exercise helps these brain pathways to develop, and sharpen their responses. It is not only in literature that imagination can help real life. The same process occurs when preparing a talk.

By imagining the talk, the body responds as it would to the real situation. The prospective speaker feels nervous, and anxious. But each time he or she goes through the imaginary situation of standing up and opening his mouth in public, he has evoked another anxiety response which has proved to be unfounded. So each time the response occurs less strongly. Preparing a talk, going into the room which is to be used, and rehearsing the talk in front of a friend, reduces nervousness just as experience does. The process is more effective, the more precise and detailed the imagined experience is. Careful preparation is therefore very important.

Ill-prepared talks are often not only chaotic in content, but nervous disasters as well. The argument of this book is that if we understand the mechanism, we can control it. Careful and thorough preparation has this among other benefits; imagining just what speaking will be like reduces nervousness and increases confidence. This is why I suggested earlier that the simple act of reading this book would reduce nervousness. When reading about speaking, you are going through the processes of speaking in your imagination. At the end of the book, you will have increased your 'experience' of speaking, as well as your knowledge. This is not fanciful—research confirms that reading and thinking about something improves performance. Almost any preparation helps, but thinking carefully about task and audience is the best guarantee, for many different reasons, of successful presentation.

Notes to chapter six

1. Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour* (4th edn., Penguin, 1983), p.215.
2. Dashiell, J.F., An Experimental Analysis of Some Group Effects, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology,* Vol.25 (1930), pp.290–9.
3. Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour,* p.258 and p.21.

4. Lay, C.H., and Burron, B.F., Perception of the Personality of the Hesitant Speaker, *Perception and Motor Skills*, Vol.26 (1968), pp.951–6.
5. Mark Cook, Anxiety, Speech Disturbance, and Speech Rate, *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol.8 (1969), p.14.
6. Mark Cook (1969), op. cit.
7. Catha Maslow, Kathryn Yoselson, and Harvey London, Persuasiveness of confidence Expressed via language and body language, *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol.10 (1971), pp.234.
8. in John Corner, and Jeremy Hawthorn, (eds), *Communication Studies: An Introductory Reader* (Edward Arnold, 1980), p.54 and 57.

Further reading

There is also useful advice in:

Adler, R.B. *Confidence in Communication: Guide to Assertive Social Skills* (Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1977).
Daly, John A. and James C.McCroskey, *Avoiding Communication: Shyness, Reticence and Communication Apprehension* (Sage, Focus Edition, 1984).

Tension in performance

There has been a lot of research on educating performers to control their tension. You may find some of this interesting, and useful. If you want to read more about the control of nervousness, here are a few references:

1. Appel, S.S., Modifying solo performance anxiety in adult pianists, *Journal of Music Therapy*, Vol.13(1), (1976), pp.2–16.
2. Baird, F.J., Preparation, an antidote for stage fright, *School Musician*, Vol.32. (January, 1961), pp.34–5.
3. Barker, Sarah, *The Alexander Technique* (Bantam Books, 1978).
4. Ching, J., *Performer and audience, an Investigation into the Psychological causes of Anxiety and Nervousness in Playing Singing and Speaking Before an Audience* (OUP, 1947).
5. Grindea, C. (ed.), *Tensions in the Performance of Music* (Kahn Averill, 1978).