

Contents

Introduction	1
Part I: Exploring the Territory	3
Chapter 1: Is It Really Possible – For Me?	5
So what will be different this time?	6
What you'll learn	6
Chapter 2: Let's Look At This Thing Called Fear	9
It feels lonely ... but is it?	10
Fear and the famous	12
What have you tried so far?	15
How do effective speakers manage it?	17
Good luck charms	18
How do you do fear?	19
Change the connections	23
The curse of perfection	24
Success or failure thinking	25
'I'm going to fail anyway'	25
New ways to learn	26
Part II: 25 Confidence Strategies	29
Chapter 3: Use Your Imagination	31
Strategy 1 – Change fear to excitement	31
Strategy 2 – Imagine what you want	35
Strategy 3 – Play with the vision	41
Strategy 4 – Find a good model	45
Strategy 5 – Transfer an ability	49
Strategy 6 – Think about after the ball is over	53
Chapter 4: Be Present	55
Strategy 7 – Focus externally	55
Strategy 8 – Find 'the zone'	60
Strategy 9 – Use association triggers	63
Strategy 10 – Centre yourself four ways	66

CONTENTS

Chapter 5: Come Alive	69
Strategy 11 – Use energy before you start	69
Strategy 12 – Ride your fear like the rapids!	72
Strategy 13 – Breathe in power	78
Strategy 14 – Find your purpose	82
Strategy 15 – Find your passion	86
Strategy 16 – Let feeling in, or not	89
Strategy 17 – Use all or nothing thinking	93
Chapter 6: Let's Look At the Audience	97
Strategy 18 – Make friends with your audience	97
Strategy 19 – Create a connection	100
Strategy 20 – Lead the audience	103
Strategy 21 – Coach yourself	107
Chapter 7: Be Yourself	113
Strategy 22 – Connect with your inner self	113
Strategy 23 – Wave your magic wand	116
Strategy 24 – Play, seriously!	119
Strategy 25 – Trust	124
Author's Note	131
Acknowledgements	133
Bibliography	135

CHAPTER 1

Is It Really Possible – For Me?

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a minute and think of it.

A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

Lots of books have been written on public speaking and presenting; perhaps you've read some of them. Maybe up till now none of those books has made much difference. You might ask yourself if it's really possible to speak well in public – for you.

So straight away I want to tell you the answer is yes.

Yes, it's possible.

It's possible for you.

You really can learn how to perform well in public. You can learn what to do to overcome performance anxiety even if you think you have tried everything and have completely run out of ideas.

What gives me the confidence that it's possible for you? Well, because I have witnessed many people succeed. Over the years I have coached hundreds of people on public speaking and confidence, and many started with little hope. My Voice of Influence workshops have been attended by some who could scarcely get themselves inside the door but edged in holding on to the walls with fear. And those very same people by the end of the next day stood up and gave a speech – without notes – that connected powerfully with the audience.

I have worked with people one-to-one who have told me at the outset that their issue goes beyond fear: ‘This is not just fear, it’s a phobia,’ they say. Those same people learn in a few sessions how to perform with assurance. One person had actually fainted from anxiety the last time she’d had to give a presentation for her corporation. Very soon after we had worked together she went on to give a successful presentation to an audience of two hundred potential investors.

I am sure that you too would like to be able to perform with assurance and confidence. But the truth may be that you are worried and frightened. You tell yourself not to be but nothing ever changes. Maybe too you have heard promises from teachers and trainers that didn’t lead to any positive results for you.

So what will be different this time?

Firstly, it’s not just about learning what to do. You probably have a good idea *what* to do already. Even if you feel less than confident about your material, the finer points of running a PowerPoint presentation or the protocols of a formal speech, even if you worry about forgetting things or looking stupid or making mistakes, I’m convinced you have watched enough people speak either live or on screen to know broadly what to do. You are probably also sufficiently aware of the pitfalls to know what *not* to do.

The problem is that even with this knowledge you can’t do it. You’ve already tried to do what you see good speakers do and it hasn’t worked for you. The reason it hasn’t worked I suspect is that you don’t believe it’s possible for you. It’s your self-belief that lets you down.

What you’ll learn

If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito.

Betty Reese

This time you’ll get to the root of it. This book will help you in easy steps to gain the self-belief to speak brilliantly.

You'll learn:

- The one thing you need to know to stop feeling alone and hopeless.
- The four 'common-sense' strategies you're probably using right now and why they never work.
- Why most of the advice you're getting from well-meaning professionals and self-help books is actually making it harder to perform well.
- Why 'working' at improving your performance is never successful and what to do about it.
- How to overcome your self-defeating belief that it's just not possible, and create the mindset that will allow you to get exactly what you want.
- How to make sure you're in the right frame of mind – every time.
- How to come alive when you're speaking instead of dying on your feet.
- What to say and what not to say to make sure that the audience loves you and listens to every word you say.
- How to ensure that you hit the ground running whenever you speak.

The book is in two parts: Part I introduces you to some of the tools and Part II contains 25 sure-fire strategies for overcoming performance anxiety. When you get to Part II you might want to read straight through from beginning to end on a first reading, or you may prefer to browse to see which strategies jump out at you and practise those first. You can then go through Part II again and learn the strategies one by one. Some will be immediately useful and others might take a bit of practice. Sometimes those are the very ones that will become your favourites.

Each strategy in Part II is introduced and then the process is laid out step by step. At the end of each strategy there are notes or case studies based on the experiences of others who have done the exercises. These notes will guide you to explore various options to make the strategies work for you – even those that seem less easy at first. This makes it more like my working with you in real life: we are all different and sometimes exercises work better if they are 'tweaked' a little to suit you.

Keep the book by you and consult it every time you have a question you can't answer or whenever you need a bit of extra help. You can also contact me at info@voiceofinfluence.co.uk if you can't find the answer.

The journey starts here. If you are impatient you can go straight to Part II and get started on the strategies! Come back to Part I though – it's an important part of the process.

Your success will depend less on hard work than on your willingness to try something different. Listen to this cautionary tale:

The Fly

In our kitchen we mostly keep the window shut and the door wide open in summer. I often find dead flies on our south-facing windowsill. Each fly tries to escape to the garden through the pane of glass. Again and again it flies towards the light against the glass; it buzzes furiously and again and again I hear the small bang of its body hitting the pane. I sense the life and death exertion: 'Again! Again! Try harder, try harder!' But it is never going to succeed and the effort allows no hope of survival. The fly is doomed.

If it could just back away from the seductive light of the window and change its strategy for only a moment it would find the huge gaping door to take it into the world outside. With simple ease in just a few seconds it would be free. But it never can. It has condemned itself to endless effort towards a doomed goal.

Are you like the fly banging at a closed window with your efforts to overcome performance anxiety? If you try what you have always tried you are probably going to get the result you've had so far.

Relax. Breathe again. Sometimes it's about going about something differently. Have a look around you. The door to freedom is open. All you need to do is step through ...

CHAPTER 2

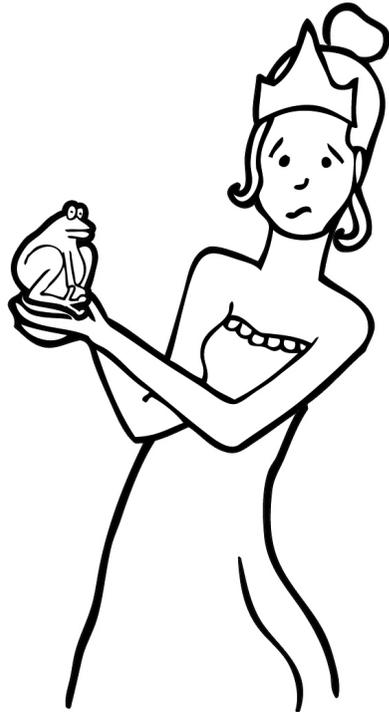
Let's Look At This Thing Called Fear

A young actor confessed to an older actor before a performance that he had nervous butterflies in his stomach. 'I don't expect you get those any more, do you?' he asked.

The older actor looked at him with the hint of a smile and replied, 'Oh yes, I still get them; but I don't try and kill them. I've taught them to fly in formation.'

Fear is not bad of itself. It keeps us out of danger so that we don't get too close to a cliff edge or lean into a fire. But our fear is sometimes out of date and based on a strange assortment of emotional data from the past. Human beings do not have to be in real danger to set off feelings of fear.

So let's start at the beginning by looking at fear itself, not because we want to focus on the negative but in the spirit of kissing the frog that's going to turn into a prince.



It feels lonely ... but is it?

When you are afraid, it can be a lonely feeling. You feel inadequate and abnormal. You convince yourself that you are the *only* person in existence who feels this way. It seems that the *whole world* can do this thing and you're the only person who can't.

Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you if you get a kick out of feeling unusual.

This isn't unusual: it's common.

The biggest big business in America is not steel, automobiles, or television. It is the manufacture, refinement and distribution of anxiety.

Eric Sevareid, American news commentator

People get fearful all the time and they are afraid of a lot of things! A BBC survey in 2006 of people's twenty worst fears¹ came up with an extraordinary mix of scare-making things from buttons, balloons and ice-lolly sticks to coleslaw, feathers and the letter Y! Fear of public speaking is certainly not unusual. One survey in 1993 asked people 'about the things of which nightmares are made' and they mentioned fear of heights, deep water, insects, financial problems, sickness, death and much else besides.² But the most common fear of all was speaking before a group. It came out right at the top of the list way above fear of death!

It is true you may have a gentler word for it, there may be a number of other factors involved and of course technique is important too, but the basis of most performance discomfort is fear. In fact, it's the biggest single factor preventing us from achieving just about anything.

'More good creative ability is wasted due to fear than anything else I can think of,' says the author of *Creative Thinking*, Michael LeBoeuf: 'People with good voices are afraid to sing. People with artistic talent hide their

¹ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4849832.stm>, 30 March 2006 (accessed 11 July 2011).

² Bruskin-Goldring Research (1993). America's number 1 fear: Public speaking. Edison, NJ: Bruskin-Goldring.

paintings rather than risk ridicule. People who love to write are too embarrassed to show their writing to anyone.³

What are your main fears about public speaking?

- Fear of being looked at?
- Fear of not knowing enough?
- Fear of not being able to express in words what you want to say?
- Fear of drying up?
- Fear of your voice sounding all wrong?
- Fear of going red and blushing?
- Fear of being judged and found wanting?
- Fear of being vulnerable to what people might say or do?
- Fear of revealing things about yourself that you don't want people to know?
- Fear of forgetting something important or losing track?
- Fear of getting flustered with unexpected questions or interruptions?
- Fear triggered by remembering bad occasions in the past?
- Fear that you won't measure up to other people?
- Fear of looking foolish?
- Fear of not being good enough?
- Fear of the feeling of panic?
- Fear of getting frightened?
-
-

Are your fears included here? I've left a space for you to add your own. What frightens you the most?

³ Michael LeBoeuf (1994). *Creative Thinking: How to Generate Ideas and Turn Them into Successful Reality*. London: Piatkus Books.

Fear and the famous

It plagues me. I'm standing in the wings with the sweat pouring off me thinking what on earth am I doing?

Sinéad Cusack, speaking about stage fright

It's not just ordinary people who get nervous: it's everyone! You only have to use your eyes and ears to know that it's true. Switch on the television news and watch presidents and prime ministers as they come into the public gaze. Before they descend the stairs of the recently arrived aeroplane the men adjust their ties and touch their pockets and the women smooth their skirts and play with their hair. Do you think they didn't check their appearance before the aircraft door opened? Of course they did. This fidgeting is just nerves.

Watch well-known speakers: how they compulsively straighten their conference papers or touch their faces. Watch actors being interviewed: how they over-laugh and over-enthuse. Watch politicians in important debates: how their gestures become stiff and their voices narrowed. Then watch them put on the spot: how they blink and fidget and tap or clutch their hands. Think they aren't nervous?

So take note of this important observation:

**The extent of your nerves bears little relation
to the amount of talent you have.**

Many famous people have been famously frightened:

- The actor John Cleese confided that before *The Frost Report*, which was transmitted live, he could not have been more afraid if he had been in a bullring with an angry bull.
- The generous-sized and usually cheery actor Patricia Routledge was discovered before one of her solo spots in *Victoria Wood as Seen on TV* shaking in terror underneath the costume racks in the dressing room.

- TV personality Stephen Fry gave up fronting the BAFTA awards confessing that he suffered extreme stage fright prior to his appearances.
- The great actor Sir Laurence Olivier was so struck with nerves in one run at London's National Theatre that he had to have the stage manager push him onstage every night.
- The legendary cellist Pablo Casals suffered so much from clammy hands at his Viennese debut that the cello bow shot out of his grasp during an early flourish and hit someone in the ninth row of the audience.
- The singer Barbra Streisand, after forgetting one of her lyrics during a Central Park concert, stopped performing live for almost *three decades*.
- The film star Lauren Bacall initially adopted her seductive trademark look – where she presses her chin against her chest to face the camera and tilts her eyes upward – as a tactic to stop her nervous quivering.
- The singer Bruce Springsteen claims to get excited rather than frightened but admits to being physically sick before performances.



Shall I go on? It's not just actors and musicians – we meet performance fear everywhere:

- The broadcaster Sheridan Morley, who wrote the news in the early days of television, was once called upon at short notice to read the bulletin. His fear got the better of him and afterwards he says that many people wrote in to give him advice on his Parkinson's disease!
- The boxer George Foreman recounting his famous fight with Joe Frazier remembers that his knees were knocking so much he just hoped that Joe wouldn't glance down and realise his advantage. 'Fear is everything,' he said. 'It's not the fight you lose, it's yourself.'
- Go back in history and you discover the British Prime Minister William Gladstone taking laudanum – or opium tincture – before important political speeches to steady his nerves.
- In the popular television programme we watch hopeful entrepreneurs arrive in the 'Dragons' Den' and quake visibly or even dry up completely before the multimillionaire potential investors.

The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson writing back in the nineteenth century declared that 'Fear stops more people than anything else in the world.' Fear is widespread. Fear assails us all.

Most people think that courage is the absence of fear. The absence of fear is not courage; the absence of fear is some kind of brain damage.

M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*

But note this first glimmer of light: even though famous and talented people clearly feel fear *they are nevertheless successful*. So it is clearly *possible* to feel frightened and yet to perform with distinction. You certainly cannot claim that fear equals failure – all the people mentioned above have won through. They understood the most important lesson of performing: it's not a case of *either* feel fear *or* perform well; it's *both* feel fear *and* perform well. Both/and – that's the secret.

So what about you? What can you do about it?

What have you tried so far?

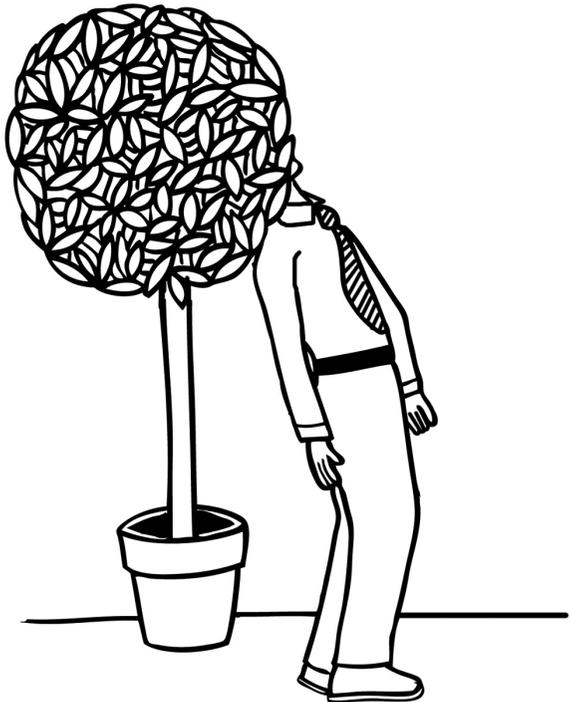
Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. The fearful are caught as often as the bold.

Helen Keller

You have probably already employed some strategies to counter fear. For example, have you already tried any or all of the following (which incidentally don't work)?

Avoiding all situations where you might be called upon to speak

This is a popular strategy though it does very little to help you avoid stress and pain. You turn down invitations to speak. Then your work situation increasingly demands that you *do* speak. So you prevaricate and postpone. You send members of your staff who don't mind speaking. You arrange presentations that involve your whole team with the excuse that you are making it a democratic event or providing a learning experience for them. You do this for as long as you can. But sooner or later you're up against some situation that is hard to avoid, and there you are back in the black hole of fear.



Beating yourself up

You tell yourself that you *should* be able to speak confidently. You tell yourself that you are a pathetic worm and that you will never amount to anything. You insist to yourself that you face your fears. You beat yourself up again and again. This all makes you feel very bad; beating yourself up never worked for anybody. So when you actually do speak in public your negative inner voice that has got so used to beating you up saps your confidence and sabotages your performance. The more you beat yourself up the worse you feel; and the worse you feel the more daunting the situation seems. It never works.

Telling yourself to be positive

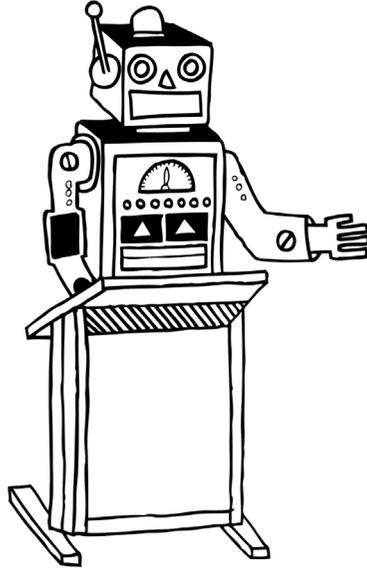
You always think this should work. It never works. You tell yourself that you are feeling confident and that little voice pipes up inside you: 'Actually, I'm feeling really shaky.' So you revert to the previous strategy and beat yourself up verbally for a bit. Then you tell yourself again that you are feeling really positive; and the little voice pipes up a bit more stridently and wails, 'Hang on a minute. I'm feeling really bad, my knees are knocking.'

In fact, the more you tell yourself you are feeling positive the worse you get. You're not feeling positive at all. It's a lie.

Positive thinking is going to help you. But this isn't it.

Controlling the fear

We think that fear is our enemy and take steps to control it. We push the fear down and take a firm grip of ourselves both mentally and physically. Some people do this quite successfully: they stand up straight they keep their hands still. They do not quake; their voices are steady. You would guess that they weren't nervous. But they don't look nervous because they are dead. Well, not literally of course – but every bit of life has been squeezed out of their performance. The body is inert. The voice is flat and monotonous. The treatment of the subject even has that dull, impersonal, official quality as if they are reading a telephone directory. They never say, 'I have decided', they say instead, 'It has been decided'. They never say, 'I think it's a good idea', they say, 'It has been recommended that'. They have become robots. And robots outside science fiction lack



charisma, empathy, excitement, engagement, determination and everything else that makes us human and interesting.

As a strategy it doesn't work though people try it all the time! You could of course get by through using this method. But your audience deserves better, and so do you.

A life lived in fear is a life half lived.

Spanish proverb

How do effective speakers manage it?

We have already seen that successful communicators often get nervous and yet still produce great performances in spite of the fear (or could it even be *because* of the fear?). The important question is not, 'How do you get rid of fear?' but rather, 'How do you learn to perform so that fear doesn't inhibit your performance?' or even, 'How do you perform so that it *enhances* your performance?'

One actor found a way to stop himself getting nervous by desensitising himself to the point where he could go on stage and feel nothing. This enabled him to go on and play his part each night. But feeling nothing

he just couldn't get his juices flowing and his performance always lacked spark. He discovered he didn't enjoy it any more. By getting rid of nerves altogether he lost something so important that acting no longer seemed worth doing.

The actor Judi Dench in an interview with Michael Parkinson confessed that she likes to feel fear:

It's to do with free-falling and that's exactly what it is. I didn't realise – it's real fright. It's being pushed out of the plane ... I like to feel real fear. The more you [prepare for a script/role], the more is expected of you and the more frightened you get. *And the fear, like any emotion you feel, is what generates you.*⁴

So how can you get to such a point where nerves enhance your performance? Easier said than done? Some skills certainly seem easier to learn than others. Overcoming fear is not like learning how to solve cryptic crosswords or use a new gadget, where conscious application is effective. An emotion like fear does not respond readily to your conscious will. If you merely tell yourself not to feel nervous your conscious mind doesn't have much control over giving you the result you want. You stand at the podium determined to be confident; you launch into your speech and then despite yourself your knees start to shake. *Who told them to do that?*

Good luck charms

Whistling in the dark, our conscious mind gropes around for coping mechanisms. We make conditions, bargain with the gods or fall back on superstitions. Most of us are affected to a certain extent by circumstance when performing and our criteria for success can be detailed and particular:

- 'I can perform OK as long as I'm wearing my best suit or my red dress.'
- 'I'm fine as long as I don't know the audience.'
- 'I need to perform in front of friends.'

⁴ Parkinson, 9 March 2002, BBC 1.

- 'I can perform to a few people but it can't be more than twenty.'
- 'I'm all right as long as there's no one too important in the audience.'
- 'I'm okay if I get up early enough, learn it off by heart and don't have to wait before speaking.'
- 'Things go well provided I've got my lucky horseshoe charm in my pocket.'

The beliefs we carry into performing situations can be pretty idiosyncratic.

Such thinking restricts you and keeps you scared. *Most importantly it puts the power on the outside.* The moment the numbers in your audience grow or someone important walks in your fear returns. It's out of your control. If you want to get the control back it is very important to take the next statement on board. You might not like it; you might not even believe it at the moment but it's this:

You create your own fear.

Fear is what happens in your head according to *how you react* to a situation. In other words, you do it to yourself. Olympic gold medallist and politician Sebastian Coe suggests, 'All pressure is self-inflicted. It's what you make of it or how you let it run off on you.'

How do you do fear?

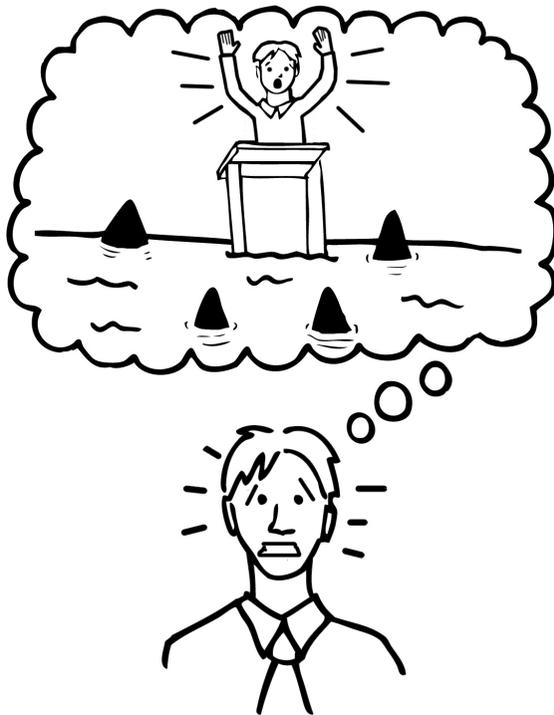
If that is correct, and you inflict fear on yourself, then *how do you do it?* You can't beat it if you don't know how it works. So if I wanted to learn how to experience fear in exactly the same way as you what would I have to think, do, say or feel?

Making pictures and sounds

I asked a coaching client this question, and she replied: 'Well, first of all, if I am asked to give a presentation I want to know all about it and how much it matters. If I'm told that it's an important event, I instantly feel more nervous.'

‘How do you do that?’ I asked.

‘Well, if my boss says it’s an international event in a London hotel, I straight away think about how much he wants it to be a success and I start to imagine how he is going to be disappointed if it’s not. I picture myself drying up on stage and see his face full of disappointment. I then hear him saying something withering like, “You let us down there, didn’t you?” Then I feel terrible and begin to worry about how little I know and feel that I’m not sufficiently informed to speak on the topic.’



My client described one common strategy for creating fear – a very successful strategy as it happens if you *wanted* to create fear – and that is to create pictures of future disaster in your mind. She also added words and voices to the picture in her head which made it more compelling. Every time she returned to this catastrophic scenario she strengthened the connection between thinking about her presentation and pictures and sounds of disaster. This had been such a proficient learning strategy



that the connection had hardened into a habit and someone had only to suggest that she speak in public for her to go into panic mode by creating inner pictures and sounds that frightened her.

Making meaning

She made meaning of an event and the meaning scared her. Is this how you do fear? Think of some aspect of presenting that scares you and ask yourself what it is about it that worries you.

For example, if you tell yourself, 'I'm scared if there are more than ten people in the audience,' then ask yourself, 'What does more than ten people represent for me? What does it mean?' You might reply for instance, 'More than ten people means that I can no longer talk to them as individuals and this means that I am forced to perform or act and I feel that's something I can't do. It then becomes scary.' Or the meaning might be, 'If there are more than ten people they won't be close enough for me to use my normal speaking voice; therefore I won't be heard and they will get irritated and bored. That scares me.'

Going to future and past

Very often this process of making meaning takes you, as in the last example, into the future to imagine disaster. It can also take you into the past to remember disaster. It's usually a combination of the two with your negative past memories serving to amplify your fear of the future. If your boss is in the audience you may make meaning of it by instantly connecting this event with one that happened in your past. For example, 'The first time I spoke in front of someone with authority it was at primary school and the head teacher told me afterwards that I'd really embarrassed everyone and that I'd be much better not volunteering for such things in future.' The connection with such an event from distant childhood, even though so long ago, leaves you feeling infantile and hopeless and sabotages your present performance.

This is particularly toxic as there you are, living in the present, thinking and acting as an adult, but seeing your boss in the audience you suddenly become six years old. Not only do you feel small and vulnerable like a child, but the adult in you also feels critical and angry at yourself for appearing so pathetic. Your judgemental feeling *about* your feeling piles on an extra burden.

Generalising tragic thinking

Most of us have unhelpful stories from our past available and ready to connect instantly with present discomforts and impact negatively on our performance. Some of us regularly run through our repertoire of tragic tales and have one for every present circumstance:

'Tom didn't say hello this morning. I was always the one left out at school – what a sad sack I am!'

'I have just failed my driving test. I always fail everything. I even messed up learning to read.'

'Look, my hand is starting to shake. How pathetic is that? My ex-wife always called me a wimp; she was right to leave me.'

Some of us could win an award for our ability to prove ourselves inadequate time after time by producing a stream of life experiences to justify each present perceived failure. How much effort are you putting into proving a self-view of inadequacy? Did someone teach you how to do this? Most of us learned how to make these connections early in our life. Who was your model of how to do fear? Maybe it's time to update this early learning.

Change the connections

It's important to recognise that the associations you make in your head with impending future disaster or past disaster are *created by you*. Once you fully grasp the truth of this you can move on to the recovery stage, which is to understand that if you can make associations in this way, you can also learn how to make associations in a *different* way. In other words, you can choose to connect present situations with confidence-boosting experiences rather than self-sabotaging ones. You already know really well how to make connections. You just have to learn how to find more useful ones.

Your way of connecting your present situation with negative stuff is an old habit and it's time for change. Your subconscious which keeps the habit in place is like the Japanese soldiers who were discovered on a remote Pacific island in the 1970s still shooting at the enemy. They didn't realise that the war had ended twenty-five years previously. They were still in the habit of 'visitor equals enemy, therefore shoot!' Your subconscious – like the Japanese soldiers – will be delighted to be brought up to date.

Excellent speakers allow themselves to feel nervous but make meaning in a different way: 'Ah, I feel nervous. Yes, that's because this presentation really matters to me. I really want to do my best here. Of course I'm nervous. My nerves remind me that I want to prepare really well for this one.' Or 'The adrenaline's really coursing through me; I can't wait to get going.'

We will cover in detail later in this book how to create connections in your mind which, instead of sliding you towards despair, move you powerfully towards confidence and enjoyment.

The curse of perfection

The person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.

Albert Einstein

Just a few words on unhelpful beliefs before we embark on the success strategies. A particularly damaging belief for any kind of performance is the one that says, 'This must be perfect', and it comes with its evil twin, 'But I'm not good enough'.

The belief 'I'm not good enough' produces a host of unhelpful connections, such as, 'Mistakes are bad', 'I'm the only one who does this', 'There's something wrong with me', 'I'll never amount to anything', 'I can't perform', 'I'm stupid', 'I only got 98%, what happened to the other 2%?', 'What made me the dim-witted one of my family?'

Sound familiar?

Don't ever think about getting it right. Why? Because you're not going to get it right; how could anyone get communication right? And in any case it's not about getting it right – whatever 'it' is. Be happy with imperfection and then you'll create something excellent. Traditionally, every precious Persian carpet has at least one deliberate small fault in it. In that Middle Eastern culture only God is perfect so to weave a flawless rug would be to invite the evil eye.

What *is* perfection anyway? Once there was a man who gave a perfect speech; every word was practised and then uttered exactly as planned.



The arguments were carefully thought out; the choice of words was optimal. There was not a single mistake in the whole speech. The audience could not fault a single thing. But a small child huddled in the corner next to his father who had been unable to find a childminder commented, 'Dad, why is everyone asleep? Is it because the man is so boring?'

Success or failure thinking

Success and failure – what is success anyway, a false idea. If we taught children to speak they'd never learn.

William Hull, quoted by John Holt in *How Children Fail*

Perfectionism is a fundamentalist approach, an example of black-or-white thinking: it's perfect or it's not. Another example of fundamentalism is success or failure thinking. We want our performance to be a success but we fear that it will result in failure; either/or – black/white. It's an approach that many of us learned as soon as we entered full-time education. A piece of work was correct or it had mistakes; a tick or a cross. Everything was judged a success or a failure, and the judge stood outside in the figure of the teacher or parent. That authority figure still lurks within us pronouncing each of our efforts a success or a failure.

This is particularly harmful thinking for any sort of performance and no great performer adopts this approach. As the educator John Holt says, 'There is no line with *Success* written on one side and *Failure* on the other. These words seriously distort our understanding of how we, as well as children, do things and do them better.'

When we even *think* in this way we tend to assume that it will be a personal disgrace if things don't go well. We take it all horribly personally, and every perceived specific failure is seen as a proof of our incompetence and lack of worth.

'I'm going to fail anyway'

The greatest mistake you can make in life is to be continually fearing you will make one.

Elbert Hubbard, *The Note Book of Elbert Hubbard*

John Holt suggests that we sometimes deliberately cause failure to release unbearable tension. This explains why you may sometimes start a presentation well and then after a few minutes experience terrible

feelings of fear which sabotage your performance. He explains with reference to his piano playing:

As I play, the inner voice that comments on what I am doing says: 'All right so far; watch that G sharp; oops! narrow escape, you almost played F sharp instead of F natural, etc., etc.' The voice gets louder and louder, until finally the communication channels are clogged up, coordination breaks down, and I make the mistake I have been fearing to make ... there is a peculiar kind of relief, a lessening of tension, when you make a mistake for when you make one, you no longer have to worry about whether you are going to make one.⁵

So forget success and failure – it really is not *about* that, and thinking in terms of making mistakes only leads to making them. The international violinist Nigel Kennedy writes in his autobiography about moving away from getting it right as a young violinist. He went through a period as a college student where during the day he obeyed his teacher and played as he was told, while at night he'd try different things out in front of a small audience. He found that by communicating his feelings rather than getting things 'right' everyone loved his playing.

For great performers there is no such thing as the perfect performance. Each individual time is different; each one is the way it is; each one is the creation of *this* time; each one is *this* one.

Non, je ne regrette rien!

Édith Piaf

New ways to learn

By understanding that it is about your thinking, it is possible to change the way you do things. You just need certain new elements in place.

The first thing to realise is that your conscious mind is not in charge of the show, so you need a new way to communicate with yourself. We have talked about the old way of telling yourself to be different and, however

⁵ John Holt (1995). *How Children Fail*. Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press.

willing your mind is, it usually can't oblige. You say to yourself, 'Don't go *tight in the throat*' and your voice hears 'tight in the throat' and becomes constricted. You need to find a different way of communicating with the part of you that's getting in your way and you can do that through teaching your *body* what to do and by working on your beliefs, not by instructing yourself to feel different.

If you want to run a hundred metres within a certain time or perform any other strenuous activity with your body the first step is to get fit. For performing too you need a sound basis on which to build. Your success will depend on *how* you learn. Here are some learning principles based on the thinking of one of history's greatest geniuses, Leonardo da Vinci. Adopt these ways of thinking and you will make fast progress.

Leonardo da Vinci's way of learning

1. Be curious. No, be *very* curious. Don't worry about the outcome, just get wondering: "That's fascinating ... why is that?"
2. Try things out. Don't just read this book – experiment. Find out what works and what doesn't ... *use* your curiosity!
3. Use all five senses. Often fear is based largely on one sense – for example, it is triggered by negative inner talk (sound) or by an internal picture of disaster (sight). Make use of every sense.
4. Welcome confusion – at least, don't be put off if you get confused. Every genuine breakthrough comes after a time of confusion. That's why it's a *breakthrough* not just a matter of slotting something into place. N.B. This may need a little patience!
5. Use your imagination *and* your ability to pay exquisite conscious attention to what is going on. You need both.
6. Learn in the muscle. Remember that your body – not just your brain – has to learn the new patterns. It's a bit slower than the mind so give it time.

7. Everything's connected and it will all come together when you're ready.

(Adapted from *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*
by Michael Gelb.⁶)

It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.

Leonardo da Vinci

⁶ Michael J. Gelb (2000). *How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day*. New York: Dell Publishing Co.