



# Nerves

## “I am nervous.....”

If there is an area of personal improvement that is universal to new speakers it is the desire to control nerves. When guests stand up and are introduced to the club, it the one thing just about everyone mentions as a goal. You may have that goal for yourself.

## What are nerves?

Dictionaries describe nerves/nervousness as agitation caused by fear, anxiety, or stress. But it can also mean courage as in “kept one’s nerve” or impudence “he had the nerve to insult me”. The meaning we attach to the word is important.

Let’s look at the common meaning. Think about the last time you felt nervous. What were you feeling in your body?

This is a typical list of reactions that people state they feel when nervous:

Pounding heartbeat

Breathing faster

Feeling sick

Chest Tightness

Sweating

Feeling faint

Needing the toilet

“Butterflies” in the stomach

You may feel one or more of these when you think about public speaking. Now think about a time when you were really excited. For example: going on an aeroplane for the first time; going on a date with someone you like; going to that critical last deciding match of football season; going to a long awaited concert. How did you feel?

Biologically there is little difference because both are expressions created by adrenaline (epinephrine) release into the body. Adrenaline release creates a range of physical effects and feelings, especially a heightened state of awareness, fear, and excitability readying the body for action. It is the primary reason for nerves AND excitement.

It can be hard to separate the two as anyone who enjoys rollercoasters will attest.



Your body simply cannot tell the difference between nerves and excitement. Only your mind can.

The biological basis to nerves and its psychological triggers have an important implication. That is the nerves never really go away. We are sorry to disappoint you here but for you to have no nerves, the “flight or fight” instinct that is genetically encoded into your body will have to vanish. That can never occur.

That is the bad news. The good news is that you can cope with nerves. So how is this done?

## **1. Acknowledge your Nerves**

Much of the pain that comes with nervousness is caused by attempts to deny and shunt it off into a corner of your mind. That is an illusion because you always know it is there; it is like trying to avoid catching your reflection in a mirror.

People who are nervous do not generally appreciate other people telling them to calm down. It feels patronising and insensitive and yet people persist in saying that very same thing internally.

"I will only be a complete success if I stop feeling nervous otherwise I will be an absolute failure because I cannot control my nerves".

It is an unreal binary situation. It is unrealistic because it denies both the biological basis behind nerves and human psychological state by saying that you should not have concern about yourself.

It is a paradox but calmness starts by accepting the situation you are in, acknowledging and accepting that you have nerves. Recognising that both extremes of emotions are places you can go to but will not, allows you to tell yourself

"Yes I am nervous but I can do my speech. I will be ok".

## **2. Change the Internal Dialogue**

Acceptance is the first step to changing the dialogue you have spent a lifetime developing in your mind. Remember biologically there is no difference between nervousness and excitement; it is only your mind that is telling you this.

Therefore it is also possible to change the way your mind is describing the way you feel.

The way to do that is simply to change the word “nervous” to “excited”. If you do that often enough, it will become the way your mind accepts what your body is doing.

This does take time.



To think that you will not describe yourself as nervous before your first speech is unrealistic. But the progress you make in 1st London is such that by your fifth speech, you will feel better. By describing your feelings as excitement from the start is a positive thing and will hasten your improvement.

The dialogue progression that will occur if you come often enough to the club is this:

"I am too nervous to speak"

"Yes I am nervous but I can do my speech"

"Yes I am nervous but I can do my speech. I will be ok"

"Yes I am nervous but I can do my speech. I am really excited to have the opportunity to speak"

"I am really excited, a little nervous, but looking forward to speaking"

### **3. Nerves Are Energy**

Acceptance of nerves and addressing the dialogue going in your mind are “head” things. You may well ask is there is anything else that you can do that is practical and can do right away.

Yes there is.

Think back to what you do when you are excited:

- You move around more and are expressive
- You are louder
- You laugh and joke more

Both Nerves and Excitement are Energy. In physics, energy is the capacity for action, to do things. Energy can be stored, transformed or used.

Likewise your nerves/excitement can be stored, transformed or used.

In speaking we try to avoid storing energy but rather transform and use it.

The three techniques to transform and use your energy are:

### **Posture & Movement**

Standing still will only store nerves. A lot of new speakers will do the opposite and have uncontrolled movements – pacing up and down and inability to stay grounded. It is a lot to expect (too much really for new speakers) to have controlled movement all around the stage.



Hand gestures and arm movements when standing still is easier to achieve and a good beginner thing to do to transform and use energy.

Wiggling fingers before you start is another one although obviously not something to carry on doing whilst speaking.

Open gestures also avoid shrinking yourself on stage. Slouching will compress and store energy. Standing upright with hips pushed forward and rolled under your pelvis will straighten the back and push energy out. It does so by making you seem larger and more authoritative on stage.

## **Breathing**

Only speak when you are ready to start. Before you speak take deep breathes. Breathing deeply to the body core (into the stomach) though the nose, and not shallow breaths (in and out of the mouth just as quickly) is a well-known way of reducing tension. It does work.

## **Smile**

This is a great and very easy one that people are always told to do and always seem to forget about. There are times when not smiling is appropriate (giving serious news for example) but mostly that is the exception not the norm. Smiling releases a lot of tension inside you, creates empathy with the audience and helps you relax with them.

ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS tell yourself that the nerves will go once I start speaking. Because speaking is also a use of energy.

## **Nerves are a Good Thing!**

To say you don't want to be nervous is to say you want kill off part of what makes you human. Not only is it an impossible goal, it is an undesirable one too. Keeping your nerves is a good thing.

That may seem contradictory when the expressed goal of everyone who joins 1st London is "I wish to lose the nerves when speaking"

There is a speaking reason why being nervous is a good thing as it encourages you to keep aware of the audience.

Good communicators listen. You may have met people who speak to you but do not listen. They have no concern about the effect of their words on you and they pay no attention to how you are reacting.



Giving a speech is still a conversation albeit decidedly one-sided.

The value of nerves is the awareness created. They ensure you are aware of the need to keep the audience on your side. People who forget this risk becoming complacent (perhaps arrogant) and they forget to “listen” when giving their speech.

**No nerves is total indifference.**