HOW TO SPEAK SUCC ESSFULLY
WHEN YOU'RE PUT ON THE SPOT

BONUS CHAPTER

THINK FASTER

TALK SMARTER

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Bonus Chapter

CONFIDENT IN THE MOMENT: Improve Your Spontaneous Speaking by Attacking Anxiety at Its Roots

Award-winning journalist Joan Lunden is one of American media's most recognizable and affable personalities. As co-host of ABC News' popular program *Good Morning America* during the 1980s and 90s, she was a friendly, approachable figure known by millions for her willingness to get personal and reveal aspects of her private life to her audience. And yet, as Lunden told me, she did her best to hide a surprising secret: She was terrified of speaking in public.

How could a person who often operated without a script before a national audience feel nervous public speaking? As Lunden explains, speaking in a studio and engaging with people in live settings felt very different to her. In a studio, she was just talking to a camera. When she was out in front of audiences, she was much more aware of performing in front of strangers who might have been judging her. "You're seeing people's faces," she says, "and you're seeing them watching you, eyeball to eyeball, and reacting."[1]

Formal speeches were hard enough, but speaking spontaneously at informal gatherings was even harder—Lunden couldn't just hide behind a podium and read a pre-prepared speech word for word. As she mingled with strangers, she had to think of something to say in the moment, an experience that triggered feelings of self-doubt and concern. "There's this little niggly thing at the back of your brain that says, "Do I really have anything important to say? How am I going to come off? What are they going to think of me?"

Many of us share Lunden's fear of spontaneous speaking. We don't feel engaged or included when put on the spot—we feel put on the defensive. When an audience member in a public setting unexpectedly offers an opinion and asks us to react to it, it can feel as if they're challenging our credibility. When our boss asks us what we think in a meeting, or when we must think on our feet and remedy a technical snafu on Zoom, our competence can seem at issue. When we must offer someone a spontaneous tribute, we can feel as if we must prove our charm, charisma, and devotion to the person in question.

Worse still, the anxiety we feel about communicating in impromptu situations can take on a life of its own, making it increasingly more difficult to respond well. I hear many stories of people who struggle because of their challenges with spontaneous communication. They get passed up for promotions and job opportunities. They fail to land a first date (or a second). They find it tough to connect with their kids or to handle unexpected parenting challenges. They can't seem to make new friends. As these failures pile up, their anxiety mounts and their confidence sinks, causing them to retreat inward and avoid pursuing opportunities in the first place. Their lives become more difficult and less fulfilling than they might otherwise have been—all because they're locked into a belief that they're innately bad at communicating spontaneously, and because they find it awkward to speak well on the fly.

If you feel anxious at the prospect of being put on the spot in social settings, you should know that fear of speaking in front of others, whether spontaneous or not, is normal and natural—part of our evolutionary heritage. Back in prehistoric times when we lived in small tribes of people, our relative status in the group was a matter of life and death. If we didn't make the tribe's VIP list, so to speak, or if we weren't even close, we'd find ourselves near the back of the line when it came to distributing vital resources like food, water, or shelter. We'd also be less likely to reproduce. As a result, our ancestors developed an acute sensitivity toward social rank as well as anxiety about anything that threatened their status. Since saying or doing the wrong thing might compromise our ancestors' social status with severe, even fatal consequences, members of our species came to feel a strong trepidation about speaking up.[2]

Messing up a job interview or some other instance of spontaneous speaking probably won't lead to our demise, but it doesn't matter—our brains are still wired for tribal living. For this reason, the mere prospect of being put on the spot can thrust us headlong into fight-or-flight mode. If that happens to us, we're not somehow weak, incapable, or less-than. We're human.

The good news is that we don't have to remain imprisoned and stuck because of our anxiety. We can learn to manage these emotions so that we can respond more effectively in spontaneous situations and in time build up our confidence. As I've found coaching students and executive clients, managing anxiety when speaking spontaneously requires a two-pronged approach: handling the symptoms of anxiety, and addressing its underlying sources.

Addressing symptoms—a subject I cover in chapter 1 of *Thinking Faster, Talking Smarter*—can help us feel more relaxed and comfortable because we no longer fixate on or feel depleted by our anxious behaviors. Our audience, too, can focus on what we're saying and not be distracted by the anxiety signals we're sending. To truly bring our anxiety under control, however, we also have to tackling the underlying factors that initiate, perpetuate, and exacerbate our fears.

Watch out for EGO

Three of these factors are especially important and also readily addressable. I call them EGO—Evaluation, Goal, and Operating approach. Understanding these three can point us to an additional set of tools to help us moderate anxiety.

One huge source of anxiety that I see all the time, and that Joan Lunden was keenly aware of, is *the notion that others are evaluating and judging us*. This, again, originates in our evolutionary history. During our prehistoric days, when relative social status directly affected an individual's ability to survive, we were constantly trying to figure out where we ranked in others' estimations, and we were constantly ranking others as well. The task of judging and evaluating is as important today as it was at the dawning of our species, part and parcel of being human.

By virtue of temperament or past experience, some of us are even more attuned to this reality. We become extraordinarily self-conscious, wondering how every last thing we say or do is registering with others, and glomming on to the slightest sign that what we're saying is offensive or somehow falling flat. In both formal and informal settings, the feeling of being judged tends to be worse when we're just beginning our remarks (in fact, most people report feeling most anxious in the first minute of their communication).[3] If we can get through that initial hump, our awareness of being judged tends to dissipate because the threat lessens.

A second common source of anxiety around spontaneous communication is a concern over our goals. When we communicate, we often have specific goals in mind. We might want to convince an attractive other to go on a date with us. We might want a job or promotion. We might want to notch a sale. We might want our project supported. Whatever our goal is,

many of us worry that we won't achieve it, and this anxiety debilitates us.

Consider the goal of doing well on a test. Anxiety around test-taking actually leads students to get worse grades at school. Speculating as to why, researchers suggest that the stress produced by anxiety taxes the same parts of our brains that we rely on when performing complex tasks. Anxiety also causes us to ruminate, which saps up our working memory and prevents us from applying it to the task at hand.[4]

Anxiety around the goal of responding well in spontaneous situations might also hamper us cognitively. And as I've seen with my clients, it can have other unfortunate effects. Some clients become so anxious thanks to their desire to achieve a goal during an upcoming spontaneous speaking situation that they have trouble sleeping the night before. When they show up the next day at their big job interview, sales meeting, or romantic date, they're groggy and not able to think clearly. As a result, they don't do as well. Other clients get so nervous because of their goal of getting a job offer, land a big sale, or impress a date that they wind up backing out of the social encounter entirely—a sure way not to achieve their goal.

A third and final source of anxiety comes from unhelpful orientations to speaking we might have that can ratchet up the pressure. Many of us tend to think of our communication in the moment as a performance that must be perfect. We're "on stage," and even a single mistake we might make would be glaringly obvious. Sometimes we presume that impromptu communication is adversarial—our audience is out to challenge or critique us or to prove us wrong. We commonly go into job interviews or question-and-answer sessions with this mindset. I'll spend more time analyzing these mindsets in Chapters 2 and 3 of *Think Faster, Talk Smarter*, but for now let's just notice them and the angst they can cause us. These mindsets cause us to feel pressured and attacked. It's no surprise that our fight-or-flight response kicks in.

As these three sources of anxiety suggest, communication isn't emotionally neutral for most of us. Our egos and sense of self-worth strongly color our experience of expressing ourselves before others. We care about what others think of us. We care about our goals. And we care about doing our best as communicators. To reduce anxiety, we must acknowledge that we're emotionally vested in our speaking and that it affects us in a fundamental way. Then we must act to disentangle our egos from our speaking, recognizing that they get in the way of truly being present with our audience. We must find ways to dial down our ego involvement so we can increase our connection. We still want to be emotionally invested in our content and care about our relationship with our audiences, while not fixating on the results of our communication.

Attacking Anxiety at Its Roots

Effective tools exist that help us put EGO in its place. To diminish our sense that others are evaluating us, we can turn to three different techniques. The first entails understanding the significant gap that exists between our experience of our internal states such as anxiety and others' perception of those states. As researchers have documented, others don't have nearly as good a read on our internal states as we think they do. An "illusion of transparency" exists.[5] To reduce how intensely and deeply we perceive that others are judging us, we can make ourselves aware of this gap.

Using your smart phone, record yourself responding to one of the following three prompts: "Tell a story about a project you're working on at work." "Tell a story about your name." "Talk about a personal goal you have that you want to achieve in the next year." Keep your response short—about one to two minutes. When you're done, play your response back. What do you notice? Did you make good eye contact? Were there lots of ums? Did you gesture at all? Were you swaying and shifting? How nervous did you feel? How nervous did you look? When my students perform this exercise, they remark that they don't look nearly as nervous as they felt. Their sense of feeling judged dissipates, leaving them feeling calmer, more confident, and in control.

A second way to address others' evaluations of us is to practice the art of distraction. If we can distract our audience and direct them away from ourselves, we can open up a small bit of space for us to calm ourselves down. Tactics include asking a provocative question, taking a quick, informal poll with a show of hands or a virtual reaction (more appropriate if you're speaking before a sizable group), showing others around you a video or an image on your smart phone, and so on.

When I teach, I often ask students to take a minute to think about how a point or argument we just covered might relate to them. Likewise, when I'm in social settings and can't remember what to say, I will comment on something I perceive in the environment or invite someone else to enter the conversation. These actions give me just a bit of a breather to get my bearings and manage my anxiety. A client of mine starts all-hands meetings at his company by showing a short video. Doing so implicitly puts him in the role of a facilitator rather than presenter, a shift that in his mind takes the pressure off of him to perform.

TRY IT

Think of two or three specific questions you might pose to your audience to give yourself a bit of time to collect your thoughts. Examples might include: "How might this idea impact your current work?"; "How can you apply this information in your life?" "How does this information change or reinforce your thoughts on this topic"? You might also ask audience members what about a particular idea or point seems most surprising or memorable to them. Selecting among these or other questions, write them down on a notecard or enter them into your phone. That way, you'll have them available to you at moments when you might be put on the spot.

Third, we can diminish our feeling of being judged by desensitizing ourselves to it. In so-called exposure therapy, psychologists expose patients to distressing situations in small doses so that over time they become habituated and feel less distressed. Similarly, by deliberately putting ourselves in situations where we know we're being judged, such as asking a question in a meeting, we can desensitize ourselves to the experience.

Imagine a politician practicing for a debate or a sales person preparing to confront fear or uncertainty before making a pitch. We can also desensitize ourselves through visualization—we can picture ourselves, say, in a cocktail party being put on the spot and having those present look down upon us after hearing how we responded. These days, we can use technology to expose ourselves in manageable doses to others' judgment. One virtual reality tool called Virtual Speech allows users to don goggles and simulate speaking in front of audience of various sizes and that are engaged to various extents in what users are saying.

We can also take steps to help reduce anxiety associated with concerns about reaching our goals. Goals are all about the future. When we wonder whether we'll obtain our goals in a speaking situation, we're drifting away from the present moment and focusing on something that might happen at some future time. A powerful corrective is simply to redirect our attention purposefully back to the present. There are many ways to do this just before we step into situations where we might have to communicate spontaneously. We might perform a difficult mental task, like counting backwards from 100 by 17s. We might listen to music. We might do something physical.

I invite you to experiment with your own methods of redirecting your attention back to the present. But be careful. One former student of mine used to play Tetris to get focused before formal presentations. Sometimes she got so engrossed that she forgot to show up for her big meetings! She now sets a timer when she starts playing. Another person I know, a

former police officer, found that he could keep his mind from spiraling off unhelpfully into the future by performing 100 pushups right before he went on stage and took questions from his audience. You simply can't do 100 pushups, keeping track of their number as you go, while focusing on your future goals. The downside, of course, was that he got sweaty and flushed.

If you have only a small amount of advance warning before the need to communicate (you're sitting in a meeting about to be called on, for instance), you can refocus yourself on the present by practicing deep breathing. This is quite easy if you are virtual. Simply select your virtual tool's mute button to allow you to take an unnoticed deep breath or two. Or perhaps you might call for a quick break and take a short walk before returning. You could do something as simple as reaching out and touching the desk in front of you with your hands—that can help to nudge your mind back into the present. In just five or six seconds, you can rehearse a short tongue twister. My favorite one, since you asked, is the following: "I slit a sheet. A sheet I slit. And on that slitted sheet, I sit." Try to say that quickly without accidentally uttering a naughty word. The mere effort will cause you to forget about your future-oriented goals and be present.

TRY IT

There's nothing like a tongue-twister to focus you on the present and prevent yourself from feeling anxious about future goals. Write down a tongue twister and keep it handy for times when you suspect you might have to speak on the fly.

I'll say more about how to address unhelpful operating approaches in Chapters 2 and 3 of *Think Faster, Talk Smarter*. For now, note that we can moderate our anxiety levels by changing these mindsets. Instead of perceiving our communication as a performance that can and must be perfect, we can think of it as a more informal conversation in which we can connect by speaking authentically, not perfectly. Instead of viewing spontaneous communication as a jousting contest in which audience are trying to critique us or prove us wrong, we can frame it as an opportunity to convey our ideas to an audience.

TRY IT

Let's begin to reframe communication as an opportunity to expose audiences to your ideas rather than to joust with them. Think of an upcoming situation where you might need to speak spontaneously. List three to five benefits that your audience will attain as a result of what you are saying. How does what you might say help them in their professional or personal lives?

Reduce EGO

Technique	Description/ Examples	Effects
1. Understand the Gap	Make yourself more aware of a key fact: Although you might feel that people are noticing your anxiety, it might not be as discernible as you think	You can diminish your sense of being judged, and hence your anxiety
2. Ask a Provocative Question	What do you think of this cat video? Who will win the next election?	Your audience will no longer be focused on you
3. Exposure Therapy	Expose yourself to judgment—imagine it, stimulate it using virtual reality, post something on social media	Just like the proverbial toad submerged in the gradually warming water, this mild exposure will slow desensitize you to judgement
4. Return to the Moment	Recite the alphabet backward, listen to music, touch your podium or desk	Your thoughts will go from the future to the present

Working with Anxiety

Joan Lunden initially felt anxious when put on the spot, but she leaned into her fears, attacking them at their roots using a number of techniques. To reduce her sense of being judged in social situations, she practiced a version of exposure therapy, pushing herself to lead informal Q&A sessions as part of a series of appearances she made with the inspirational speaker Tony Robbins. Those sessions were "probably the best thing I ever did," she reflects, "because I had no choice other than to be extemporaneous. The more you do it, the more comfortable, less fearful, and more confident you get."

Lunden also started bringing herself into the present by borrowing a practice from Robbins and doing physical exercises such as squats or sit-ups before speaking appearances. "I have to tell you," she said, "it works every time. You go out there immensely more confident than if you don't do it. Anyone can do this before a PTA meeting, business meeting, dinner party—anything." To solidify both her confidence and groundedness in the present, she would finish her pre-appearance routine by smiling into a bathroom mirror. Doing so had the additional benefit of improving her mood if she happened to be upset or angry about something.

Lunden further reduced her anxiety by shifting her mindset away from perfectionism and a performance orientation, viewing impromptu speaking appearances instead as potential learning opportunities. With the pressure off, she could take any negative feedback she received in stride. To enhance her learning, she also began to prepare in advance for spontaneous situations, researching the people with whom she'd be interacting and thinking of some topics she might discuss or points she might raise in the moment. This preparation allowed her to feel more confident in the moment and also to offer up better responses. As she reflects, shifting her mindset about spontaneous speaking was key: "We all have the ability to change our mood and change our sense of ourself by changing what we say to ourself. You can change a habit anytime you want to change a habit. Every habit is changeable. And the same goes for your frame of mind."

Change didn't come easy for Lunden—she worked on her anxiety over a period of years. Today, she is much more confident when entering any kind of spontaneous speaking situation—and formal presentations as well. "I now love to speak," she says. "I know I'm good at it. I know I can entertain an audience. I know I can command the stage." She accepts a wide range of speaking opportunities, including ones she never would have taken earlier in her career. Attacking the sources of anxiety made all the difference.

Working with the techniques in this chapter, start chipping away at your anxiety through consistent effort and practice. Change won't happen right

away, but as I think you'll find, sticking with it can yield enormous benefits over time. Improving your ability to speak well in the moment can allow you to ace that job interview, get that second date (or that first one), inspire that team of yours to perform at its best, forge that exciting new friendship, bring that community of people together. On a personal level, it can allow you to overcome challenges you might have thought impossible, in the process helping to build your confidence and self-esteem. It can help you to seize opportunities, truly live your life to the fullest, and contribute your ideas to the wider world.

All of us can become strong, confident speakers in the moment—we don't have to be extroverts born with the gift of gab. It starts with recognizing the underlying causes of the fears we feel and committing ourselves to the ongoing work of addressing them. If we become more adept at tackling anxiety at the source, we're well on our way to thinking faster and talking smarter. 💬

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Abrahams is a leading expert in the field of communication. As a lecturer in organizational behavior at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, he teaches popular classes in strategic communication and effective virtual presenting and has received the school's Alumni Teaching Award. Matt also teaches public speaking and coteaches Improvisationally Speaking in the Stanford Continuing Studies Program.

When he isn't teaching, Matt is a highly sought-after keynote speaker and communications consultant and coach. He has helped numerous presenters prepare for high-stakes talks, including IPO road shows, Nobel Prize award presentations, and appearances at TED and the World Economic Forum. His online talks garner millions of views and he hosts the popular award-winning podcast *Think Fast, Talk Smart, The Podcast*. His book *Speaking Up without Freaking Out: 50 Techniques for Confident and Compelling Presenting* has helped a wide audience manage speaking anxiety and present more confidently and authentically.

To relax and rejuvenate, Matt enjoys hiking with his wife, talking and watching sports with his kids, hanging with his friends, and being continually humbled at his karate dojo.

FOOTNOTES

1. Joan Lunden, interview with the author, Feb 14, 2023.

2. See Peter Trower and Paul Gilbert, "New Theoretical Conceptions of Social Anxiety and Social Phobia," *Clinical Psychology Review* 9 no. 1 (1989): 19-35, https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358(89)90044-5. For more on the evolutionary functions of anxiety, see John Price, "An Evolutionary Perspective on Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders," in *New Insights into Anxiety Disorders*, ed. Federico Durbano (London: IntechOpen, 2013), 10.5772/52902 The importance of social status in our evolutionary history also helps to explain why some of us become overly confident. As scholars theorize, overconfidence helped people gain more social status: Pamela Tom, "Why are people overconfident so often? It's all about social status," Berkeley Newsroom, August 14, 2012, https://newsroom.haas.berkeley.edu/why-are-people-overconfident-so-often-it%E2%80%99s-all-about-social-status/.

3. Beatty, M. J., & McCroskey, J. C. (1987). The effects of communication apprehension and audience type on cognitive and behavioral responses to communication tasks. Journal of Applied Psychology, 72(2), 219-226. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.72.2.219; McCroskey, J. C., Beatty, M. J., & Valencic, K. M. (2006). Communication apprehension, communication competence, and anxiety sensitivity as predictors of communication effectiveness. Communication Research Reports, 23(4), 321-328. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090600937742.

4. Erin A. Maloney, et. Al., "Anxiety and Cognition," *WIREs* Cogn Sci 2014, 5:403–411. doi: 10.1002/wcs.1299.

5. Research has shown that "an awareness of the illusion can improve the quality of a speaker's performance, from both the speaker's own perspective and in the eyes of observers," Kenneth Savitskya and Thomas Gilovichb, "The Illusion of Transparency and the Alleviation of Speech Anxiety," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39, no. 6 (November 2003): 618-625, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-1031(03)00056-8.