

# Presenter Paralysis ... Eight Ways to Avoid It!

By Karel Murray

I first notice that my hands are getting clammy. Wiping them carefully on my pant leg seems to help just a bit. The trickle of sweat running down the middle of my spine is dealt with my leaning back on the chair – firmly.

Handling things well so far...

I allow myself a small simile...until I wonder if I have food in my teeth. They did serve that desert with poppy seeds on the top. Glancing furtively around the table, I observe that everyone is focused on the business meeting currently in progress. Where is a toothpick when you need one? Or a mirror for that matter? I only have minutes. Reaching carefully into my purse, I lift out my business card, pretend to sneeze, and quickly run the edge between my two front teeth.

There... another disaster averted through quick thought and poise.

Funny... I can't hear very well. My heart is beating irregularly and blood seems to be surging up into my ears. I feel like guppy out of water and I'm unable to take full cleansing breaths. Hyperventilating seems like a real possibility right now.

Must clam down fast!

Grabbing the lukewarm water glass, I gulp the entire 12 ounces down in one long drink. That's when I notice I really need to excuse myself to go to the rest room. I'm just about to stand up and discretely inch over to the closed ballroom door, when the President of the Association looks my way and nods. He's signaling me... The business meeting is coming to an end and they are about ready to introduce the speaker... me!

Okay... smoothing out the creases etched into the sheet of finely typed words that comprise my speech, I realize a larger font is needed in order to see the words from a standing position. Squinting, I've heard makes a person look wiser, more worldly. Squinting definitely helps.

Wait! Why does the information on the page look totally unfamiliar? I've rehearsed the talk over and over and over. It's memorized for heaven's sake... so why can't I remember a thing? "Writer's Block" is a common occurrence, but what do they call it when a speaker blanks out... "Presenter's Paralysis"?

I need time!

Maybe the lapel microphone won't work – allowing for 20 minutes of the 30 minute allocated time to evaporate due to technical difficulties. Nope. I've flipped the switch and it's working fine. The President of the Association is looking my way and beginning the introduction. I wonder where he got the information he is sharing with the group.... Oh, well, too late now. Got to stand up and move forward.

After two steps, my slacks start to creep up my legs. A quick shock like feeling along the calf announces static cling is ready to make my life miserable. The bottom of the silk pant leg is clutching like fevered hands to my nylon knee highs. Wiping the top of my shoe against the hem doesn't help.

But the shoe looks more polished. Hmmmm.

Watching the steps of the platform as I advance upon the podium, I neglect to lift my foot high enough to allow the heel of the pump to clear the last riser. With a quick stumble, reminiscent of Chevy Chase, I'm hurled forward. I grab quickly onto the back of the guest of honor's chair... effectively shoving his head forward into his coffee cup which he had raised to take another drink.

No damage done... just a dribble down his chin which is quickly wiped off.

Smiling gamely at the audience, I carefully lay down my paper, take a small breath, and speak. I should say tried to speak. My mouth is full of cotton...chalky almost. My tongue is now a foreign object, swelling to the size of a banana. Clutching the water glass, I take a small sip, wishing I could gargle.

That's better. I suck in a large breath; throw my arms out wide to begin my speech with a resounding effective opening... and the buttons of my blouse pop open, revealing an ordinary white cotton bra projecting from a pale chest. A hush settles over the audience of 100 association members, all eyes glued to me.

I look down and view evidence of a disaster already in progress, shrug ruefully and say, "I wish I'd worn the good bra!" Laughter erupts through the room giving me time to re-button myself back up and launch into an unplanned humorous routine about life's embarrassing moments... my crumpled papers forgotten.

Do you feel like you just experienced de-ja-vu?

It's said that speaking in front of others is one of the most dreaded acts for the human being. What I've described transpired during my first professional assignment. At least one of these "symptoms" re-occurs every time I speak professionally. The "butterflies" never seem to go away. But I've come to understand that this is a good thing!

If you truly care about the presentation you're about to give and you value your audience, your body responds accordingly. It's up to you to minimize the level of severity so that it does not incapacitate you.

1. **Come prepared** – if you are prone to “nervous sweating”, wear darker colors so the moisture doesn't show and use deodorant with strong perspiration blocking properties. If you are a woman, consider using a product for male athletes. Avoid baby power on your back and under your arms. It turns into paste. Trust me. Have a handkerchief handy to wipe your palms. Bring a small can of Static Guard and liberally apply it when wearing clothing that attracts static. I've learned to discretely safety pin my blouses or avoid wearing any outfit that could inadvertently expose more of me than I want!
2. **Learn to avoid “tricky” foods** – as a presenter, you'll often not know what is being served at the banquet. If the food looks like something that will turn your mouth bright red, leave a stain around your lips, or nestle stubbornly in-between your teeth, don't eat it. You can eat all you want after the presentation.
3. **Establish a “pre-presentation” routine** – throwing up is not the recommended option. The thudding heart, inability to draw a deep breath, and fluttering stomach muscles are all signs of adrenaline rushing through the body. Doug Stevenson, NSA speaking coach, teaches speaking professionals to excuse themselves 20-30 minutes prior to the presentation and find a private location. I use the women's handicapped stall when choices are limited. Doug suggests that presenters should do a few deep breathing and stretching activities while visualizing a rousing and energetic positive experience. This will effectively calm you down and clear out mental cobwebs. However, it does have the potential to establish a unique beginning to your talk if you do this while the lapel microphone is on and broadcasting.
4. **Avoid drinking large quantities of fluid at least one hour before “show time”** – the human system is a marvelous thing. Discover your tolerance level for fluid intake and output schedules and behave accordingly. Preplanning can create great comfort – literally!
5. **Cut the chalky mouth syndrome** – this is your nervous system in action. Anxiety commonly dries up the mouth. Susan Wilson, CSP, Executive Strategies Inc., taught me to line my lips with Chap Stick just prior to the

presentation. At least your lips won't be glued shut. I've also learned to consume a couple pieces of hard candy. I tried rocks once (as recommended by a nature survivalist). Pebbles tend to chip your teeth. Besides, it's difficult to secretly spit them out, find a place to put them when you are ready to talk without looking like a squirrel gathering nuts for the winter.

6. **Provide the meeting planner with your introduction** – don't leave the most important aspect of your presentation to chance. Your introduction sets the tone and establishes your credibility for the audience. Have friends and family members give the introduction you have created. Listen closely and re-work it until anyone can introduce you with flair.
  
7. **Learn to laugh at and exploit your "disasters"** – Life has a way of tripping us up when we least expect it. Handle it... I bought better, fashionable bras (just in case my first line of defense fails). I've learned that our audiences want us to succeed – they are our cheerleaders. Many individuals are in awe of our ability to even get up on stage, let alone speak coherently. Once you understand your conference room is filled with people who are right in the game with you, laughter and a confident attitude will take you a long way.
  
8. **Remember it's about the audience** – Your message is the value you bring. The honesty and sincerity of your presentation intimately impacts those who are on the receiving end. Don't cheat them by not bring everything that is "you" to the platform... the wrinkles, static and grape stained lips. They will respect you for keeping it "real". Your audiences will embrace you if your message is sound.

Presenter Paralysis is conquered when you speak from your head, heart, and soul. Create programs from personal ingrained knowledge and present them with genuine joy.

After all, you have nothing to lose.

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