

LIVING

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Public speaking can be an ordeal, but confronting your fear is the best solution, writes **Catherine Quinn**

Signposts:
self help**Pia Muggerud**

When you were young, were you told that being selfish was a bad thing? Was getting what you wanted not as important as other people? I found one definition in the dictionary that selfish means "concerned chiefly or only with yourself and your advantage to the exclusion of others".

Sometimes we need to be a little selfish. How can we give to others without first giving what we need to ourselves? In coaching, we see selfishness as "caring enough about yourself to get your needs met."

When we focus on ourselves and satisfy our needs, we find that we have so much more to give and share. What we have to give will seem bottomless when we fulfil our needs first. When we give with genuine love and generosity because we are fulfilled, it comes back to us 100-fold.

My client Anne is a successful businesswoman and single mother. Her busy schedule between work and home doesn't allow time for her own needs. Stopping to think about what she really needs has long been a foreign concept. When she first approached me about moving away from our usual coaching into focusing on her needs as a person and as a woman, she could barely speak about the things that she needed deeply for herself. Her issue was finding the time in her schedule where there was room to make herself a priority.

I started taking Anne through a process of rediscovery – peeling back the thick layers of her business tasks and her duties as a mother. At the bottom lay a sadness and sometimes even resentment. Sadness because she was discovering feelings that she had not allowed herself to connect with for a long time and resentment because she felt she had no other options.

Much of her drive has come from her family's expectations – that she is the capable one, that she will handle everything. Often, Anne would find herself in autopilot mode, just doing something out of habit and duty.

Once Anne was able to get clarity on some of her needs, it was easier for her to see that some of them could easily be fulfilled. She now understands that getting her needs met starts with her own awareness. Once she could see and feel her deep needs that were hers alone, she was able to meet them slowly. As she grew in confidence in her own self-reliance, she was also able to ask others for what she needed.

Lost for words

You have prepared for days, your slides are in perfect order, and you have mentally rehearsed every question that might come at you. But the minute you step out in front of your colleagues, your mouth goes dry, your knees tremble, and you can barely stammer out a sentence.

Sounds familiar? If this scenario resonates with your working life then you're not alone. Speaking in public is routinely cited as one of people's worst fears, with some surveys ranking it above death and divorce. It's also one of the most common fears (alongside heights and spiders) for which we seek help from therapists.

It's not just junior staff members who have a dislike of standing up in public. Managers, executives and business gurus also frequently suffer from a fear of public speaking – entrepreneur Richard Branson is notorious for his dislike of it.

"We conducted a survey of business leaders, which found that 71 per cent would be nervous about addressing a large conference," says Professor Khalid Aziz of the Aziz Corporation, a communications consultancy. "The biggest concerns are that they will bore their audience

or fail to get their message across. But we found that many worry that they will lose their train of thought or be unable to answer questions. Considering that a major speech or TV interview can make or break their reputation, it is worrying that so many of them fear communication."

For those who dislike public speaking it's exactly this kind of pressure that exacerbates the problem. But considering that most of us are more than capable of addressing a group of friends or colleagues on a small scale, why do so many of us get that sinking feeling when it comes to speaking to a larger audience?

"The fear of speaking in public is often only the tip of the proverbial iceberg," says Harrison Monarth, US speaking coach and author of *The Confident Speaker*. "There's more to this fear than what initially meets the eye. What is often labelled as 'public speaking fear' can actually be a fear of experiencing intense physical sensations, like one's heart racing, hands or legs shaking and trembling. For most people these are all unpleasant sensations that are perceived as causing extreme physical discomfort. When we're speaking in public, we perceive ourselves as naked in front of others

When we're speaking in public, we perceive ourselves as naked in front of others with no place to hide our insecurities

Harrison Monarth, speaking coach

with no place to hide our insecurities and our self-perceived flaws. Our brain's belief system signals danger to our self-image, and instead of challenging these signals as false alarms, we give them too much credibility and believe that the danger is real."

But while analysing a fear is one thing, dealing with it is quite another. So what can you do if you're a terrible public speaker, beset by unassailable nerves?

Bear in mind that good public speakers are made as well as born; of more than 20 experts consulted for this article, each was confident that a poor public speaker could be made competent within a short space of time. You can pay for tuition. But it can be expensive, and there are also ways to improve your public

speaking under your own steam. Public speaking association Toastmasters, which meets at Causeway Bay, for example, is an excellent way to gain confidence addressing an audience by offering your skills at one of their informal events. Kim Horner (a self-titled "shy introvert") improved so much that she now trains others in speaking to crowds.

"Lots of good books have been written about presentation skills and public speaking, [but] the only way to get better is to stand up and do it," Horner says. "Just like an accomplished musician or singer, good public speaking is about practice, practice, practice. Seize every opportunity to speak, no matter how daunting it may seem. And I guarantee that you will get better and better."

Monarth also advises knowing as much as you can about your audience needs in advance, and tailoring to fit the group.

"Bigger audiences demand more engagement by the speaker," he says. "The audience is naturally further away from the speaker and therefore the speaker must project himself more on the audience."

There are also other issues behind delivering a great speech in

public: your accent and body language will also come under scrutiny, and there is evidence to suggest that your audience will be judging you.

There is also the issue of clarity and being understood, says voice coach Caroline Sherwood-Roberts. "The nicest sounding voices are spoken through the mouth rather than through the nose and you can achieve this through simple vocal exercises to strengthen your soft palate."

Sherwood-Roberts says it's poorly formed words and nasal pronunciation rather than accents that should be addressed for public speaking. "I would never want anyone to lose their accent because it's part of who they are," she says. "You can have a strong accent but spoken through the mouth it will sound rich and warm, and people like accents because they sound friendly."

Body language is also worth some attention; even the question of where to put your hands can become stressful on stage. "It's only natural to use hand gestures but some presenters block it and so are completely unnatural on stage," says regular public speaker Dom Monkhouse.

The joke's on you

It's nerve-racking enough delivering a good speech, let alone adding some humour. But making your audience laugh gets their attention and softens them up to your point of view.

"The safest type of humour is of the self-deprecating kind, where the speaker makes fun of a shortcoming in himself, allowing the audience to laugh along as well as giving them a chance to relate to a likely similar shortcoming," says speaking coach Harrison Monarth. "Balance is important though, as the speaker can't sacrifice credibility for a laugh."

"Resist the urge to laugh at your own jokes. If no one else laughs you look silly. If you hear crickets chirping instead of guffaw laughter, move on and act as if you were serious."

Catherine Quinn

"The best thing to do is to talk to the audience just like you talk to a friend. Body language is how we all read each other, so keep it natural and people will be more likely to remember you."

Guardian News & Media

By fulfilling needs that seemed to be simple, she got the confidence to start making more allowances for herself. As she started making room for herself, it opened up more space for her to be available to others.

I took Anne through the following process:

- Clarify your needs by making a list of them. For example: respect, safety, trust, love, joy, abundance, acceptance. These are things you feel you need to be the best version of yourself. This makes you feel satisfied and content.
- Discover why these needs are important to you. Ask yourself: "Who am I when I get this need met? How do I act? What do I think about? What motivates me? Who am I not when I don't get this need met?"
- Commit to act. What changes would you have to make in your life to meet and satisfy this need? What would you add? If your first need is love, choose five loving acts you can do for yourself this week. Get a massage, meet a friend for lunch, go for a walk, take a hot bath, read a magazine before bed, get a great hair cut and so on. See how it feels to be consistent with your behaviour. Does your view of the world change? Are you expecting less from others?

So, give yourself permission to be selfish. Give yourself what you need first. If getting your needs met involves other people, you have to help them. They are not mind readers – so ask for what you want. Ask for help, ask for time. Just ask for what you need. Getting your needs met is not optional.

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Ask Sharon

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I'm dating a guy who is five years younger than me. We have a lot of fun together and I really like him. However, I feel very uncomfortable with him because of the age gap. I'm insecure about the relationship. I've talked to him about my concerns, but he says that age is just a number. I believe that at his age he's not ready for marriage. Many of my friends don't think I should continue this relationship because he's too young for me. They predict that eventually he'll dump me for a younger girl and I'll have wasted my time. At the same time, I have other men showing interest in me and it makes this relationship very unstable. I feel lost and depressed. What can I do?

Some 30-year-old women talk about hearing their 'biological clock' ticking, telling them that they need to have children as soon as possible. Many women also fear that staying single for too long will result in

missing out on family and children altogether. If you're dating to find a husband, then your younger man may not be an optimal choice. If you're dating to learn more about yourself and have fun, then he's just what you want. You appear to be influenced by friends and "advisers" who believe that any relationship that doesn't appear to offer good husband material isn't good for you.

The best way to decide whether your boyfriend is a good prospect for a husband is to discuss it with him. Talking about marriage as part of a conversation about life goals would be useful. If he tells you that he cannot consider a permanent relationship until he can afford to support a wife in grand style or wants to wait until he's 40 and well travelled, then some of your questions are answered.

Every relationship has something to teach you. You're enjoying being with this younger man and have

enough charisma to attract and interest other men. Enjoy the positive regard that all of the men in your life show for you. Keep your options open and explore what choices are out there. It's my experience that people marry when they're ready and not before. Couples who don't share a similar time frame tend not to wed regardless of how well they get along. Age alone is not the criterion, but rather readiness and maturity, and a clear desire to be with their special significant other permanently.

I've been happily married to a wonderful man for six years. I really love him and I'm sure he cares just as much for me. We enjoy being together and share a good relationship with a lot of physical



intimacy. He's caring and tender, but I can't seem to relax. I get very tense and I feel uncomfortable in my body. I was sexually molested by our neighbour when I was a child. I don't believe I have ever had an orgasm. My husband is considerate, but he doesn't know what to do to help me feel more pleasure. What do you suggest?

Both psychological and physical issues need to be addressed in your situation. With regard to your emotions – people who've experienced sexual trauma need to work through the pain of the situation, especially if the abuse occurred during childhood. Re-examining a sexual ordeal out loud with another person who can listen and provide support is vital. It helps by eliminating shame, stopping blaming oneself and taking away a feeling of being stigmatised and victimised.

Seeing sexual abuse through an adult's eyes can put a very different spin on the pain of your memories. A molested person needs to become freer and more relaxed. After revisiting the abuse with the perspective of time and maturity you can hopefully feel and function better. A trained

therapist or counsellor can be a significant and useful factor in coming to a resolution about sexual abuse.

As to the physical issue: it's important to have a medical checkup to make sure there is no physical reasons for your sexual problems. Additionally, your doctor can explain the function of all your parts and the kind of stimulation needed for you to achieve an orgasm.

You need to be able to give yourself pleasure and to know what you enjoy before you can share with your husband. Some women use various massagers or vibrators, especially when experimenting to find out how their body works.

Sharon Glick is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice. She is listed with the Community Advice Bureau. Send questions to susan.schwartz@scmp.com