

A man in a suit is shown from the chest up, looking down with a somber expression. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. A dark grey horizontal bar is positioned at the top, containing the text 'IT'S YOUR TURN TO SPEAK' in white, bold, uppercase letters.

IT'S YOUR TURN TO SPEAK

***DEALING
WITH THE
PEANUT
GALLERY
THAT IS
YOUR
INNER
CRITIC!***

Jerry Seinfeld has done a standup routine where he joked that people's number one fear is public speaking. Their number two fear is death. So, they would rather be in a casket than giving the eulogy.

And it's true. Chapman University recently conducted a survey which uncovered America's top fears. Among those were corruption of the government, terrorism and natural disasters. However, at the top personal anxieties was the fear of public speaking, well above the fear of death as Seinfeld joked.

Whether you are in front of an audience or sharing thoughts during a meeting, and you see all those eyeballs leveled at you, employing the principles of improvisation will save you. **The greatest improv principle for overcoming this fear?**
Silencing your inner critic.

THE RELIABLE INNER CRITIC

That inner critic of yours never goes on vacation – it's there constantly giving opinions on anything and everything you do. In the case of speaking, the closer you get to the time you have to speak, the louder and more incessant the critic becomes. For a lot of people, they can actually get sick from the stress that the critic brings their way.

So what can you do? Well, first you have to change the conversation in your head and start programming your brain to use “yes, and...” instead of “yes, but...”. What do I mean by this? Think about the difference between “but” vs. “and.” Using “but” introduces a contrasting thought and stops the other in its tracks. “And” connects one thought with other – allowing both to be considered jointly. So for instance, you could be saying to yourself, “yes, you have been asked to give this presentation, but you'll do awful.” Or, you could turn it into the following, “yes, you have been asked to give this presentation, and you can do it.” When you make this switch, you develop confidence.

Consider the classic children's story, *The Little Engine That Could*, that teaches this very principle. Each of the different locomotives in the story could be considered inner critics – each pointing out a reason the little engine couldn't accomplish the task at hand. Eventually, the little engine, which had been told she wasn't fast enough, big enough or powerful enough, was actually the best locomotive for an important job. Despite the doubts and criticism, the train, as we all know, chanted repeatedly to herself, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” And she did.

“You're not fast enough,” “You're not smart enough,” “You're not interesting enough.” Your inner critic needs to be reprimanded and corrected. And guess what? You have the power to do it. Tell yourself, “I can do this,” and the more times you repeat it, the more you will believe it. This positive programming of the brain is real and can be used to overcome your immediate fears. The more you say it, the more you will silence that droning voice of doom that cycles through all your fears: “You can't do this, you don't know what you're talking about, you're a fraud, you're going to fail, something will go wrong...”

THE PERFECT INNER CRITIC

That last part of the inner critic's diatribe, “something will go wrong...” is actually very likely to come true. If you expect perfection, you are likely to be disappointed. Yes, you will make a mistake, probably more than one, and most of the time, unless it's a real blooper, the only person who knows about it is you. Your listeners won't pick up on it.

When you're overly focused on perfection, you can go into a downhill spiral if you do make some minor mistake such as forgetting to make one of your less important points. If you maintain your confidence, something like that won't trip you up. You need to accept the fact that you will make some slips. Think of them as opportunities to learn to do even better.

Also, keep in mind, a certain amount of vulnerability goes a long way in winning over your audience. An excellent example of this is a TED talk given by Megan Washington, a premier Australian singer/songwriter. When she opens her speech, you are immediately aware that she has a speech impediment, or stutter. She goes on to say that, while she has no qualms about singing in front of people, she has a mortal dread of public speaking. Throughout the presentation, the audience watches her struggle from time to time to get certain words out, but it doesn't matter. Her vulnerability on the warmed the audience to her, keeping them engaged up until the moment she disclosed a deeply personal fact: you can't stutter when you sing. At this point she plays and sings a beautiful song perfectly, ending with a roaring applause from the audience.

While we may not have the opportunity to leverage a vulnerability like this, it's important to remember: the inner critic will tell you far more than you need to know. You will hear what you simply cannot do or how you will screw up. And here is what you can tell that naysayer: “Yes, I know I will make mistakes, And they will not hamper me. Yes, I will not be perfect, And that means I can only get better.” Even today, whenever I get up in front of people, I get butterflies, but I can control them now and make them flutter in the direction of my choice.

REASONING WITH INNER CRITIC

With all this bad-mouthing of the inner critic – it does serve a purpose. If I were to consider delivering a speech on nuclear physics, I would hope that my inner critic would start screaming at me long before I stood at the lectern. The critic doesn't know when to shut up, however and that's where you need to train it. You might know enough about a topic to deliver a decent speech, but the critic keeps nagging: “Your nose hair is showing. Your tie is crooked. What a nitwit.” If you pay too much attention, the prophecies of failure could come true. You get hung up on your shortcomings rather than focusing on your strengths.

Sometimes the key is to just confront it: “Shut up! Shut up!” You can accomplish this through the “yes, and...” approach of improv. “Yes, I hear what you're saying, And I'm going to do it anyway.” The critic may still try to undermine you but not as loudly. You'll build up self-esteem. You'll feel confident. You'll go and do it.