



**“According to most studies, people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.”**

- Jerry Seinfeld, Comedian

## **Tech Power Conquers Fear of Presenting**

by Laura Erkeneff

If you are a technical person working in the business world, at some point in your career you will be asked to speak up, to publicly give your opinion. It may be as simple as speaking in a staff meeting, or as pressured as dealing with a key customer presentation. Good presentation skills are a competency linked to career advancement. Simply put, if you get so nervous that you cannot explain to customers the benefits of the product you and your team have designed, your company will not choose you to represent them. No matter your brilliance, if you can’t express your ideas, no one will ever be able to judge your expertise or what you can contribute. Poor presentation skills are a career liability.

Given Seinfeld’s observations, how can any sane Techie learn to relax and perhaps even enjoy presenting? The good news is that there is science and research that can be applied to calming your nerves and building your public speaking skills. Once you understand the science of stress, you can learn to control your nervous reaction, which in turn will improve the quality of your public talks.

### **The First Step to Calming Your Stress**

When Herbert Benson, MD, started practicing as a young cardiologist more than 35 years ago, the term “mind/body medicine” was unknown. Dr. Benson’s work linking stress to physical health was contrary to the western medical thought of his day. However, his research at the Harvard Medical School proved that there is a mind/body connection and that understanding that connection is the first step to controlling and diminishing stress.

**“Repeated activation of the relaxation response can reverse sustained problems in the body and mend the internal wear and tear brought on by stress.”**

- Herbert Benson, M.D., Director Emeritus, Benson-Henry Institute, Mind Body Medical Institute Associate Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School

### **Mind/Body Link to Stress Response**

After noticing that most of his patients experienced a rise in blood pressure when visiting his office, Benson wondered if the two were related, if his patients’ elevated blood pressure levels were due to stress over visiting the doctor. To test his hypothesis that there was a mind/body connection, Benson and his colleagues used squirrel monkeys and operant conditioning technology. They found that the monkeys who were “rewarded” for higher blood pressure learned the behaviors that caused the condition and went on to develop hypertension. Their response was much the same as the “Fight-or-Flight Response” first noted by Walter Cannon in 1915. Benson and his colleagues noted that the monkeys trained to elicit a more relaxed response did not develop hypertension.



Simultaneously, Dr. Benson researched practitioners of Transcendental Meditation and their ability to lower blood pressure through meditation. Benson measured metabolism, blood pressure, heart rate, brain waves and rate of breathing - both when the subjects sat quietly for 20 minutes, and when they meditated for 20 minutes. What he found was striking.

Through the simple act of changing their thought patterns while breathing deeply, the subjects were able to slow their brain waves and decrease their metabolism, breathing and heart rates. These physiological changes appeared to be the opposite of the commonly known Fight-or-Flight response, and Benson labeled them the "Relaxation Response."

### **Fight, Flight and You**

The key to our innate Fight-or-Flight Response is that it is automatic when we feel threatened and then resolved once the danger has passed. Unfortunately, this same response is now triggered by our constant, everyday stressors, such as traffic, tight budgets and presenting in front of customers. It is damaging our health and wreaking havoc with our peace of mind. Fortunately, Benson and his colleagues found that we can reprogram our minds and bodies to manage these stressors. Through relaxation, we can actually depress the release of stress hormones that trigger the Fight-or-Flight Response.

The Relaxation Response is a simple practice that once learned can relieve the stress and tension that stands between you and a confident presentation. Benson and others have found that deep breathing from your lower diaphragm allows more oxygen to flow into your blood stream, setting off a biological chain reaction which results in a reduction of stress hormones in your body. Using this technique has other health benefits:

- Lower metabolism
- Slower heart beat
- Decreased blood pressure
- Slowed breathing
- Decreased muscle tension
- Increased levels of nitric oxide

### **Calming Your Stress**

To better understand the mind/body connection, we must first recognize the brain as a stimulus response mechanism that can trigger sensations, emotions, thoughts and perceptions in learned, automatic response patterns. Increased awareness of your body's stress response allows you to relearn a new pattern of relaxation. But, just as when you first learned to walk, it can take some practice to get your body to learn new associations and perform this function automatically.

Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Relaxation will eventually be felt in your body. Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace. When distracting thoughts occur, don't dwell on them. Return to repeating your word. With practice, the response should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.



### Prepare and Practice Your Presentation

Just as practice of the Relaxation Response teaches your mind and body to reduce stress, presentation practice can desensitize your fears and increase your confidence. In *Public Speaking for Success*, Dale Carnegie states, "Practice. This is the most important point of all. Fear is the result of a lack of confidence and a lack of confidence is the result of not knowing what you can do – and that is caused by a lack of experience. So get a record of successful experience behind you, and your fear will vanish."

While opportunities that are not work related may prove to be less stressful, here is a list of ways to gain practice and experience both in and outside of work:

**“The best practice you can get is on the bandstand, but in between gigs I feel I have to stay in shape.”**

- Bill Bruford

- Ask your manager to let you run a section of a staff meeting
- Offer to give a short report on a seminar or course you have taken
- Speak your opinion or ask a question instead of staying quiet during a meeting or another person's presentation
- Take a class on presentation skills
- Join your local Toastmasters club
- Stand in front of a mirror, friend, partner or spouse and give all or part of a presentation
- Join a local theater group
- Join a professional group so that you can publicly share ideas in your field or lead a group discussion
- Offer to do a presentation in your field of expertise at a technical conference
- Hire a coach to critique you presenting

Also, do make sure your presentation is the best quality it can be. If you are not sure, check with someone whose presentation skills you trust. Whenever possible, have someone edit for you. And if you are unsure about how to create a quality presentation, take a class to learn this skill.

### Relaxation Exercise

Set aside 10 or 20 minutes, especially the first time, to try this exercise. You will get better at this technique if you practice it every day, preferably first thing in the morning or at night before you sleep. Once you learn the technique, you can elicit the response of relaxation instead of stress by a few simple deep breaths.

Here is the technique to train your body to elicit the Relaxation Response.

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes and remember why you became interested in science and technology in the first place.
- Remember how excited and enthusiastic you would become thinking about all the trippy stuff you would do with your new skills and discoveries? Think about discussing your topic with some of your other favorite Techies over coffee in an outdoor café or perhaps with a fine bottle of wine and a glowing fire late into the night. Pretty cool stuff when you are thinking and talking about what you love.
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed. Some people do this by simply focusing on relaxing each muscle, starting at their feet and working to the top of their head. For others, it is helpful to tense a group of muscles, hold them tight for 5 to 10 seconds and then release and relax.
- Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word, "ONE," silently to yourself or pick your own word, one that brings a sense of calm. Some people like to use a spiritual term or word that brings a sense of well being. For example, breathe IN ... OUT, "ONE," - IN ... OUT, "ONE," etc. Breathe easily and naturally, letting your shoulders drop and your breath deepen as you relax.
- Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm.
- When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Notice how your body feels, paying special attention to feelings of relaxation. Do not stand up for a few minutes; just enjoy the sensation of calmness.



### **Remember, YOU are the Techie!**

Remember the excitement you felt when you thought about your love of science and technology? Active minds find knowledge and enthusiasm contagious, so be sure to share yours whenever you present. How many years did you study, go to school, and pay dues to be able to do the work you do?! How many people have the privilege or skills to actually do what you do? Your presentation is the time to share your love, your interest in, and your fascination with your technology. Enthusiasm draws an audience in, so this is the time to let yours shine. If you do this, your confidence will return, your fears will subside and your nerves will calm. You will realize that you know what you are talking about and enter your “comfort zone”. Remember: **YOU** are the Techie whose opinions they came to hear.

### **HELPFUL BOOKS**

Be Heard The First Time, Susan Miller, 2006, Capitol Books, Inc

Fearless Public Speaking: Three Simple Steps to Overcoming the Fear of Public Speaking, Anne L Anastasi, 2006, iUniverse

Learn to Relax: Proven Techniques for Reducing Stress, Tension, and Anxiety—and Promoting Peak Performance, *Walker*

Public Speaking for Success, Dale Carnegie, 2005, Penguin

Scientist Must Speak: Bringing Presentations to Life (Routledge Study Guides) Eric Walters, Gale Walters, 2002, British Library Cataloguing

Speeches and Presentations Unzipped, 2007, Petersen's, a Nelnet company

The Cortisol Connection, Shawn Talbott, PH.D, 2007, Hunter House, Inc, Publishers

The Relaxation Response, by Herbert Benson, MD with Miram Klipper, 1975, 2000, (25th anniversary edition), New York: Avon Books, Inc.