

# 5 Ways to Get Over Your Fear of Public Speaking

by Mark Bonchek and Mandy Gonzalez

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We all want to be fearless public speakers. We dream of confidently striding onto the stage to give a speech or presentation, breaking the ice with the perfect joke, captivating the audience with compelling stories, handling the most difficult questions with ease, and exiting to cheers and applause.

But the reality is usually less than perfect. Often, our fears take over and we imagine ourselves stumbling on the stairs, forgetting our lines, drawing a blank, or losing the audience. It's easy to interpret these fears as a warning that something will go wrong – a sign that we weren't meant to be on the stage in the first place.

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If you find that fear inevitably gets in the way of your ability to speak in public, we have some good news for you. You don't have to overcome your fear in order to be a good public speaker. It never goes away entirely. Instead, it's about having *less* fear – think of it as being fear-*less*.

We both have some experience in what it takes to be fear-less. Mandy has a lead role in *Hamilton* on Broadway, performs highly acclaimed solo shows, and has a regular role in *Madam Secretary* on network television. As a business speaker and adviser, Mark presents to thousands of executives a year and leads high-stakes off-site meetings for executive teams.

Even with all of the experience we've had getting on a stage and facing a live audience, neither of us

has ever found a way to get rid of the fear. But we do have some tips on how to keep it from getting in the way of delivering that perfect performance.

The first two steps are designed to dial down your fears:

**Be prepared.** It sounds obvious, but the first step to quieting your fears is being prepared. This means knowing the material so well that you don't have to think about it. It also means making sure all the logistics are set well in advance. You want to be relaxed and focused, not scrambling to get the audio working. Checklists are helpful to make sure you have all the details covered. If possible, arrange to do a dry run with all the audio-visual equipment ahead of time. Enlist your friends to help

you rehearse your speech. They can help review your material, ask you tough follow-up questions, or act like an indifferent audience. Play out the toughest scenarios in advance, so you won't have any surprises when it's show time. Rituals and routines can also help you get in the flow. You might listen to a favorite song just before you go on. Mandy has a mantra that gets her in the right state of mind: She says "You got this" to herself right before she goes onstage.

**Be real.** Some fears are real; some are not. If you have 100 slides for a 30-minute talk, your fear of running out of time is quite real, and you need to cut some material. But the chance that someone will boo you in the middle of your talk is pretty slim. Mandy has a trick to help her be realistic about her fears: When she can't sleep before a big performance, she draws three columns on a piece of paper. The first column has her fear. The second column has the worst thing that could happen if that fear came true. And the third column has the best thing that could happen if it came true. For example, her fear might be stumbling onstage. The worst thing would be that someone films it, posts it to YouTube, and it goes viral. But the best thing might be that it shows her fans everyone is human and makes mistakes, and more people discover her latest album. As human beings, we tend to catastrophize and see things in the extreme. Make sure you are being realistic about your fears.

Being prepared and being real can help to turn down the noise on your fears. The next steps help to turn up the volume on your confidence:

**Be vulnerable.** It's tempting to think that confidence means preventing anything from getting to us. But the truth is that our vulnerability can be our greatest strength. The way to connect with an audience is by being human. That means having flaws and making mistakes. It means allowing your audience to get to know you. You can't connect with them if you don't enable them to connect with you. They aren't there just for the information you have to convey. They are there to feel something and make new connections. The more connected *you* are to what you have to say, the more connected they will be, too. They will feel what you feel. In concerts, Mandy shares her story and why each song has meaning for her. In workshops, Mark shares the journey of how his career led him to his current thinking. Sometimes the best way to make something universal is to make it personal.

**Be present.** Just because you are physically onstage doesn't mean you're all there. Your audience follows what you are thinking and feeling even more than what you are saying and doing – which means you have to be fully present to make a real connection. Find the things that help you get present. This might mean doing something before you even get to the venue. Mandy has embraced some advice she got from her mother to “get out of her own head.” When she's on the road and feeling anxious or uninspired, she finds something fun and different to do. Recently, she was in Memphis and went to visit Graceland, which put her in a completely different frame of mind. Mark finds that a hot yoga class does the same for him, clearing out the mental fog and forcing him to be present. When you are onstage, a quick way to get grounded is to feel your feet on the ground, take a breath, and find a friendly face in the audience to connect with – anything that gets you back in the present moment.

**Be generous.** More than anything, the way to be fear-less is to be generous with what you have to give your audience. Surely, there's a reason you want to deliver this talk or give this performance that goes beyond just doing your job. There's a message you want your audience to walk away with – to bring back to their own jobs, teams, families, and communities. Maybe it's an insight, an inspiration, a direction, or an experience. For Mandy, it's moving people's souls with her voice, and she is inspired by any opportunity to do that. For Mark, it's giving people new ways of thinking. What is the gift you want to give? How can you tap into your passion for giving it to others? How generously are you able to share it? How vulnerable will you be in the process?

As you put these five steps into practice, be aware that there's a bit of a balancing act you'll need to address. Your ego can be your enemy. Too much ego, and you won't be vulnerable enough to connect with your audience. Too little ego, and you won't earn your audience's trust enough to deliver your gift. It's a fine line, and a reason why being present is particularly important. You need to constantly calibrate yourself to be what we like to call “confidently humble and humbly confident.”

Finally, it's easier to be fear-less together. Find people who help you feel that way – they are your fear-less squad. Help each other to be prepared, real, vulnerable, present, and generous. Bring out each other's gifts. We all have something to give; speaking is an opportunity to give it. Remember, you got this.



**Mark Bonchek** is the Founder and CEO (Chief Epiphany Officer) of Shift Thinking. He works with leaders and organizations to update their thinking for a digital age. Sign up for the Shift newsletter and follow Mark on Twitter at @MarkBonchek.



**Mandy Gonzalez** can be seen on the stage, TV, and film, and is currently starring on Broadway as Angelica Schuyler in *Hamilton*. She just released her debut album *Fearless* and is the founder of the #FearlessSquad, a movement for inclusion and positivity in social media.

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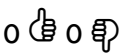
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