

Inspiring Young People in STEM: Activities and improving communication

Top tips for STEM Ambassadors on handling presentation nerves: a how-to guide

Feeling nervous before a presentation is completely normal. The result of feeling nervous and the production of adrenaline can be useful as an energizer and help create a great presentation.

However, the negative effect of adrenaline is to create a fight-or-flight response which is useful when faced with a herd of elephants but unhelpful for a non-life threatening presentation! It can produce unwelcome physical and emotional responses e.g. nausea, 'butterflies', sweaty palms, dry mouth, pounding heart and panic that you can't remember the content of your presentation!

These top tips aim to help you control nervousness and channel your energy in a positive way.

Prepare – materials, presentation and know your audience. Rehearse the presentation, speak the words out loud. Practice really does make perfect!

Sleep – try and get enough sleep, particularly the day before any STEM Ambassador activity. Lack of sleep can cause a profound effect on nervousness and produce negative physical and psychological symptoms.

Travel – check the route and set off early. Nothing induces stress more than last minute panic to find a venue and having to start a presentation with an apology that you are late.

Visualisation – imagine yourself delivering your presentation and visualise it going well. Picture the students reacting positively and imagine it as a complete success. Research suggests that if you imagine it being successful prior to the event, you are more likely to make it happen.

Practise breathing deeply – especially before the presentation. Adrenalin causes your breathing to become shallower. Breathing deeply will send more oxygen to your brain and trick your body into believing you are calmer. It also helps with voice wavering, which can occur when your breathing is shallow.

Breathing deeply means inhaling air slowly in through the nose and exhaling slowly out through the mouth.

Smile – try to smile and make eye contact with your audience as this will automatically reduce your nerves. Don't try and tell jokes if you are nervous, it can backfire.

Move around during your presentation – this will expend some of your nervous energy. Exercise is great to combat the effects of stress generally.

Speak slowly – at the beginning of your session, speak more slowly than you normally would, as nerves tend to make people speed up and will be a clear indicator to your audience that you are nervous. Take lots of pauses to give you time to think, your audience will think they are all part of your well-rehearsed presentation.

Drink water – adrenalin can cause a dry mouth, which can make it difficult to speak. Have a glass of water to hand.

Plan a simple activity early on – it's easy to feel nervous if lots of eyes are on you. Why not do a quick introduction then an ice breaker or activity that gets the audience involved straight away? Choose something which is easy to explain – and keep it quick and fun. Whilst they are busy on an activity you will get a few moments to re-group after any initial nerves. You will be amazed by how much calmer you feel when you gather the audience back together. The initial activity can be something linked to a bigger practical or it can be a simple icebreaker, but choose something you are confident with. There are loads of ideas for icebreakers online.