

VIRTUAL PRESENTATION MASTERY

TIPS FROM THE COACH TO
SOME OF THE WORLD'S
BEST SPEAKERS—AND ME



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Nerves

Let's first have a look at what gets in the way of a good presentation—virtual or live. For some people, virtual presenting has taken away some of the fear. Hurrah. But that's just because it no longer feels as if people are watching you all the time. For a huge number of people, virtual presenting, which holds a higher potential that stuff could go wrong, is even scarier.

You're not alone. Of the people I work with, ninety percent-plus would put their main issue as nerves.

I've been performing for over thirty years, so, trust me, this is the single biggest thing that gets in the way of speaking like a human being and landing your presentation—virtual or face to face.

So, what causes nerves?

Human beings need to feel in control. It's fundamental to who we are. Not being in control, or not feeling as if you are, is what creates most of our stress and anxiety.

You may feel exposed and vulnerable. You will lose face and be found out. You may want to control facets of the presentation—like your broadband connection, your CEO's opinion of you, or your Zoom platform—but you can't.

Breaking the nerves-anxiety spiral.

First breathe.

We need to calm ourselves down so we can think through things a little more clearly. That way, we can get our conscious brain to help deal with the more dominant, pesky sub-conscious that's telling us the whole thing's going to be a disaster.

It's not going to be a disaster. The world will keep spinning. So, breathe.

Yes, I know you breathe, or at least I hope you do. But breathing slowly and deliberately, aiming to make the out breath as long as you can, will make a huge difference in your

chances of reducing your nerves.

Try deep breathing. It should instantly make you feel better.

Stand or sit upright and focus only on your breathing. Nothing else. Make sure your feet are placed squarely on the floor.

I'm going to ask you to breathe in for three seconds, taking the breath right down to your tummy, then hold the breath for three seconds, then breathe out slowly over six seconds. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. Ready?

- Breathe in (for three seconds)
- Hold (for three seconds)
- Let the breath out (over six seconds)

Now repeat three more times.

How do you feel now? You should feel more relaxed, less tense, more at peace. And that took less than a minute.

Now, you've calmed down. Let's understand what's making you anxious. Maybe you haven't had time to prepare, or you don't know the subject matter as well as you could, or you feel you will look a fool in front of colleagues.

We need to gain some control or accept that we can't control whatever is causing the anxiety and find a way of accepting it and do something else. Using this little hierarchy chart can make a huge difference.

First, write down your problem. Doing this will reduce your anxiety.

Then ask yourself if you can affect the problem in the present moment. If the answer is no, make a plan for dealing with it later.

If you can affect the problem in the here and now, break it down into smaller, manageable

problems, either in the moment, or later. If you choose to do it later, plan for when you will tackle it. Continue breaking the problems down into smaller, more manageable quadrants, dealing with each as time and energy allow.

For instance, let's imagine that the problem is that you don't know the subject matter as well as you could or should. Your solutions could look like:

- Realising you know your subject matter better than most.
- Doing some work to get to know your subject matter better.
- Asking colleagues to have a rehearsal to get you back in control.

Here's another example: Imagine you don't know how to share your slides in Teams. This makes you feel guilty as, surely everyone knows this. Terrified that the slides won't work, you spiral into an anxiety vortex in which you imagine losing your job. Your solutions could look like:

- Asking a colleague for tips or watching a YouTube film on how to share slides.
- Practicing.
- Rehearsing with colleagues and asking for their feedback.
- Getting back in control.

Are you a technophobe?

For a lot of virtual presenters, the key issue is a fear of the technology. Some will view the matter of presenting via camera, using Zoom, Teams, etc. as bit of a nightmare.

I had a business trainer link up with me the other day. She was adamant that when it came to virtual training, she would only use the camera; everything else would be done with paper and pens.

Now, there are good reasons for using this approach. It's different and takes people away from the screen. However, her reasons were based in fear of the technology. She wasn't interested in computers, she just needed them to work. She had reluctantly invested in a microphone and Zoom software.

Some of you may recognise or share these traits. You've got yourself acquainted with Teams or Zoom, but that's all they are for you—an acquaintance. Taking your knowledge a step or more further seems impossible. It will take time, which you don't have. It will probably go horribly wrong when you use it, and you'll look a complete idiot. If you stick to what you know, then no problem.

This is not you. Chances are you can do a number of these things: ride a bike, cook, drive a car, look after children/babies, play an instrument, read, write an essay. There was a time when each of these things was an impossible mystery. How did it feel when you first learned to drive? Were you out of your comfort zone?

Do you remember the agony of first learning how to start a car, putting your foot on the accelerator as you let go of the clutch? Boom. Stall. Try again. Same problem. Try again. Same problem. Then, the car lurches forward, you cling to the steering wheel, and you're moving. Now, move it into second gear. You reach for the gear stick. Put your foot on the clutch—no, not the brake, the clutch. And don't look down. And stall. But you got there. And now driving is the easiest thing in the world.

It's the same with Zoom or Teams. First time you use it, it's hey, the camera works and oh, they can't hear me, and I can't hear them. Stall. Try again. Same thing. Stall. Oh. Now I can see that if I click the microphone button, they can hear me. And we're ready to go. Now, how do I put up slides? Oh my God, that is so hard. Where's the button? Found it. But breakouts? No way. Too hard. And so, you stop.

First time I used breakouts was with a group of friends and family. To my amazement, it worked. But not the first time. The only way you will reduce your technophobia and embrace virtual presenting is by doing it. By practicing, failing, and trying again. But just like learning to drive a car, you should try it in a safe place. When you're learning to drive, you don't head down to the M25 and think, "Hey, let's give this a go."

Ideally, you use either a private road or one that's got very little oncoming traffic. Then, with a supportive instructor, you try out some of the rudimentaries of driving a car. You get feedback and try again. The reason you've chosen a safer environment is that, if something goes wrong, you won't crash the car, and you won't endanger your life or that of your passenger. It's the same with virtual presenting, except—and this is something presenters sometimes forget—if it goes wrong, no one will die. The world will carry on spinning. Friends, family, colleagues, or even the cat are good enough for feedback or trying out your techniques (admittedly my cat sleeps through most of my rehearsals). Then when you've become more competent at presenting and improved your confidence, you can take your virtual presenting out on the road.

So, let's get you started.

Where to set up your "podium."

In delivering a virtual presentation, the most important considerations are:

- Aiming for a neutral room or space in your home.
- Having a desk space reserved for work, as that will help you focus. Working at the kitchen table or on the couch looks comfortable, but it'll damage your back and bring down productivity.
- As regards acoustics, add soft cushions or furnishings to the room to absorb some of the sound. My actress wife records audio books from the playroom and hangs duvets in front of the walls to absorb the echo. And it works.
- Use a proper desk chair, so you can sit squarely in front of your webcam, at eye-level, while presenting.

More tips for the virtual technophobe.

- Teach yourself the basics and beyond by using online tutorials in YouTube, the app or programme's Help feature, or books such as those in the Dummies series.
- If something baffles you, ask an expert. There are plenty of them out there. If you don't know any experts, you're bound to have a friend who can help get the ball rolling.
- With presentation platforms, pick and choose what suits your personality, business, and lifestyle. You don't have to sign up for every type on the planet.
- Get decent broadband and a computer you can trust, if you don't have these things already. Neither needs to be amazing, but they need to be fast.
- Explore more. Look into the ever-growing list of virtual presentation tools to make your life easier.

Go forth into this brave new world with gusto. These are exciting times.

HERMAN'S ACTION PLAN

- Don't compare yourself negatively to other virtual presenters. It's not useful and will just increase your anxiety. Comparing yourself to you is far more useful. As in, "I'm better than I was a month ago and miles better than last year but still room for improvement."
- Breathe. Slow down your breathing.
- Go through your anxiety reduction plan.
- Spend some time learning the technology. If you can't, then find someone who can help or ask for help.