

# THE CENTER FOR SPEECH EXCELLENCE

## Speech Anxiety and Management

Bill Smith has just been called into the boss' office and offered a promotion with the company. He is pleased and excited to be selected for the position, but as he thinks about it he begins to have serious doubts about his ability to perform well in his new duties. He will have to make more presentations to other companies and to his superiors, and he is not comfortable speaking in groups. He knows how to prepare a presentation and he knows the information better than anyone. Unfortunately, he gets so nervous that he has trouble breathing. His voice gets quiet and dull so that no one can hear him and he thinks his voice sounds unpleasant. In the past, he had a tendency to hurry through his speaking engagements and went to some lengths to avoid having to do the next one. He even became anxious in meetings when everyone around the table took turns making reports.

### *What should Bill do?*

Should he turn down the promotion and continue to avoid speaking situations?

*A better solution* would be to get an objective speech and voice evaluation and learn techniques to manage his anxiety.

**Definition:** Speech anxiety is a fear of speaking, especially in public, to more than one or two people at a time. Speech anxiety causes the sufferer to avoid speaking situations, and to experience a strong and uncomfortable anxiety reaction to speaking in a group. The reaction may be very intense. Children may also experience speech anxiety, especially if they are afraid they won't be understood. Speech anxiety may cause *selective mutism*. The individual who is unable to express himself confidently is often prevented from advancing in his class work, in his profession, and in social situations.

**Characteristics:** Fear of speaking will trigger a physical anxiety response including a rapid heart beat, rapid shallow breathing, hot flushing of the face, cold or clammy feeling skin, dry mouth and a jittery feeling. This anxiety response is similar to "stage fright" that most speakers and entertainers feel, but more debilitating and uncontrollable. Some nervousness before a performance is desirable because it helps motivate the speaker to prepare and focus on the task that lies ahead. Too much anxiety is paralyzing. The speaker may or may not have a logical reason for the fear of speaking. He/She may or may not have a history of speech problems or any history of trauma that started the fear, but the fear of speaking itself is often the primary cause of many speech and voice problems.

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**Speech and voice problems related to anxiety:**

- High squeaky sounding voice
- Rapid rate of speech
- Low monotone voice
- Mumbling
- Lack of expression
- Stuttering
- Rambling speech
- Hoarseness
- Poor projection, too loud or too quiet

**Assistance:**

- We provide an extensive speech and voice evaluation to give the speaker objective information about the strengths and weaknesses of his/her speaking skills.
- We teach anxiety management skills that enhance communication skills.
- Instruction is given on correct pronunciation, voice control and effective speaking in spite of normal anxiety reactions.
- We offer assistance in preparing for speaking engagements.
- We guide the speaker toward the development of a pleasant, powerful, flexible, and effective speaking voice.

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