

## MODULE 1 - FACING YOUR FEARS

### FEAR

You may think you know about fear, especially if you practice one of the therapies dealing with emotions. It is far harder to apply what you know to yourself. When you do so, after all, you lack the very support that you yourself are giving to your client.

Fear is a word which can be defined in many different ways. It can mean anything from a degree of unease at facing the unknown, generalised anxiety, alarm, dread or a feeling of impending doom. The one thing which all of us have in common is that we've all felt fear at one time or another. Sometimes this feeling is mild and transitory, at other times it is quite severe.

You know, however, that fear can be conquered, otherwise you would be cowering in a locked room, doing only what is absolutely safe. Your life would not have progressed to the point it has. At different stages in your life, you have been afraid and gone ahead anyway. Sometimes the results will have proved your fear to be groundless, sometimes they will not. The triumph in each situation is that you conquered your fear and acted. You know for a fact, therefore, that fear can be overcome. This can happen quite easily because in fact, most fear is rooted in our experiences and our perceptions of those experiences. These perceptions can be changed. If this was impossible there would be no psychologists, no counsellors and no hypnotherapists. Many times, the feeling of fear itself is far worse than any possible consequences. Moreover, this fear can actually *cause* those consequences by paralysing you, mentally or physically. Deal with this fear and (a) you can tackle the problem, which might not be so great after all, and (b) you will tackle this problem in a far more successful way.

People face and conquer their fears because they are motivated to do so. If the fear is intense, or is causing them difficulties in conducting their daily lives, they are prepared to submit themselves to personal analysis.

Your problem, being unhappy or even terrified at the thought of speaking in public is in fact far easier to deal with. When we say this, we are not underestimating that cold feeling in the pit of the stomach when you have to stand on a stage or that total dread of drying up or saying the wrong thing. What we are saying is that it is one small aspect of your life. If you never speak in public again, your world is not going to fall apart.

By accepting this, you can start to take the pressure off yourself. You have decided to do this course because you know that, as a therapist, giving talks is one of the best ways both to attract new clients and to generate interest in your therapy. We will show you ways in which your talks will be greatly improved and you will feel far more at ease in public. However, because this ability to give talks is not absolutely central to your existence, you can afford to experiment.

Someone who is agoraphobic knows they *must* conquer this phobia or they will possibly spend the rest of their days imprisoned within their homes. Knowing this, each step to alter their perception carries with it the whole weight of their future, and not just the terrors of the agoraphobia itself. This is a testament to the bravery of people who have phobias and chose to face and conquer them.

You yourself might be nearly phobic about public speaking but you are lucky, in that you don't carry the extra burden of your phobia inevitably affecting your life. If you try and fail, at worst you make a bit of a fool of yourself for thirty minutes. At least that is what you may be thinking – in reality people new to public speaking assume that they are being critically assessed and people are just waiting for them to fall flat on their faces. Nothing could be further from the truth. In general when someone commits a faux pas in public they usually elicit the sympathy of their audience rather than the feared results. You will find experienced speakers making a joke or an amusing reference during their present talk about the slip-up they made during their talk a week ago – it certainly doesn't worry them, and it shouldn't worry you.

Most people discover that many of their fears in life turn out to be imaginary, and indeed it is often their imagination that gives birth to those fears and keeps them alive. No surprise then, that you can employ that self-same imagination to help you to prepare for your public appearances. Why not try some simply visualisation exercises, focusing on a successful outcome?

We want to make the point at the very beginning of this course, therefore that it is not that difficult for you to be able to stand up in public and speak. It is only fear which is getting in the way. You already have the skills required: you are simply unaware of them. Every time you order food in a restaurant, for example, or any other time that you speak in front of a group of people you are speaking in public, without a moments hesitation or preparation. Why? Because this occurs in familiar surroundings and you have done it so many times before that it becomes a habit. What changes when you turn to public speaking is the level of focus: you are still the same person, it's just your environment which is different.

Failure doesn't matter in the overall context of your satisfying life as a therapist. You can experiment with the techniques we will show you without losing your income, your home or your career. You might suffer some embarrassment but that passes, and that happens to all of us, believe me.

By saying this to you, and by getting you to say this to yourself, our intention is take the pressure off and reduce any tension which has built up inside you over this issue. This is an important part of getting things in context and keeping them there.

We talked first about failure because that is what is at the forefront of your mind at the moment as far as public speaking is concerned. It is best to meet this issue head-on, rather than to pretend it doesn't exist. It does. Believe me, we understand. We've been

there and experienced the same thing or we would not be able to write this course from the perspective of a therapist.

Now let's talk about success.

It may be that you have already attained a certain standard with your public speaking but know you can improve. It may be that you can stand up on a stage and deliver a talk but it costs you greatly in terms of stress. It may be that your existing standard is not to do it at all.

By using even a few of the tricks and techniques we will show you in this course, the present standard of your public speaking *will* improve. Reasonably confident speakers will become good speakers, stressed speakers will relax and have confidence in their material and in their ability to deliver it, and those of you who have yet to step up onto a stage will be able to do so, even if for only five minutes.

This course should act as your guidebook in the future. We advise you not to merely complete the course and then put it to one side, but to take a few techniques with which you feel comfortable and use them. Then go back to the course material, select a few more, and add those. When you are able to use all the tricks and techniques which we recommend, you will be totally comfortable on a stage and will be a good and popular public speaker. How long this will take depends entirely on how terrified you are in the first place. Don't expect, or try for, miracles. Take it little by little. Feel safe and comfortable with each step before progressing to the next. By the time you have completed this course, you will have written a successful script. You will, therefore, know you can do it. Knowing you are competent at something is the very best way of giving yourself confidence.

Let's go back to looking at fear, in order to help you bring it under control.

### **How fear is created**

- Fear is the result of uncertainty.

Fear can have many, many causes. In this situation, a major cause of fear is uncertainty, lack of experience and not knowing what to expect. Unrealistic expectations also play a role here.

#### *Uncertainty*

A great deal of this is because you don't know exactly what is about to happen. Oh yes, you know in vague terms, but vagueness gives rise to uncertainty which gives rise to fear.

The fear, therefore, is of what *might* happen and how you will feel if it does. Will you be able to cope? How will you react? You imagine the worst case scenario in every situation. Of course you do - welcome to the human race. Bear this in mind

however: you decide the content and context of your talk, you help decide the format, how long it should take, the level of audience participation that you will allow and so on.

The key to this is preparation. Preparation gives you control. Decide what you will say, when and how. Decide how you will react to so-called unexpected events (there are actually only a small number of things which can go wrong: decide your strategy in advance in case they should happen and the element of uncertainty is removed). We will be talking more about this later in the course.

### *Unrealistic measure of performance*

It is surprising how many people seek to measure their performance by comparing themselves to leaders in their individual fields, often people with years of experience behind them. One therapist we know wished to increase his exposure in his local area and decided to investigate giving talks to local groups. As part of his preparation, he began to watch parliamentary programmes on television and measured his perceived performance against trained and experienced orators. Not surprisingly, he quickly became discouraged.

This approach is more common than you might think. This raises a number of problems for the therapist in the example given above:

- The orators he is attempting to emulate are different from him in perception, beliefs and experience;
- They are discussing completely unrelated material;
- They are often speaking under hostile conditions and continually having to counter criticism;
- Those people were once in the same situation that you are in today.

So know what you want to do and be realistic about the standard you expect to achieve in the short term. Always remember - knowledge and preparation reduces or banishes fear.

### *Fear and the “fight, freeze or flight” mechanism*

You might say that knowledge can be the most frightening thing of all. What happens if you have to face death or some other terrible event?

What happens when you are afraid is that your “fight or flight” mechanism kicks in. Adrenaline floods through your system. Other physiological changes take place. However, when you know exactly what it is you fear, when the fear becomes specific rather than some generalised fear, you are able to focus totally on facing that particular situation. That is what the “fight or flight” mechanism was intended to do. That is why people are able to cope with horrendous events and do whatever needs to be done to save themselves as, for example, in the aftermath of an accident.

Deeply shocked and distressed people are still able to perform tasks which are essential for survival, such as struggling to open doors and clambering over obstacles. They are focused. They are very clear about what it is they have to do and they do it. Knowledge brings about action. Yes, the fear is there and rightly so. However, it is fear of a specific and known situation which drives them to take appropriate action. They are not paralysed with fear, far from it. Yet it is this fear of paralysis on stage, of totally drying up, which is at the root of most stage fright. If, in fact, all fear led to paralysis of action, people would not be able to escape from dangerous situations, but they do.

Thus, you should note two points. Firstly, that fear and paralysis of one or all of your faculties are not irrevocably joined together. You can be afraid, terribly afraid, and still function, in circumstances which are far worse than addressing the local Mothers Union.

Secondly, if you accept this, you can see that it is *you* who have subconsciously decided that your fear will result in paralysis. It is not inevitable. You have chosen fear and that this is the way in which your unease will manifest itself.

In other words, they are cause and effect.

We are all familiar with the concept of fight or flight – so why the reference to fight freeze or flight in the title above? There is a third option which is very important and is probably even more applicable in cases of stage fright than the standard fight or flight scenario. What happens if you are in a situation where you can't fight or run (flight)? In nature, animals freeze as a form of camouflage: if they don't move they might be missed by that predator. The same mechanism operates in humans. It is deeply ingrained, just as much as the fight and flight instinct. Imagine standing in front of a crowd. You suddenly realise that you have not properly prepared and tested your material, and a stress reaction kicks in - you freeze. Subconsciously, you hoping that if you are really still and quiet you won't be noticed. Like many of our natural instincts, it is an ideal response in some circumstances but not much good to us at all under others.

What can you do about this?

Firstly, you can lessen or remove the fear altogether by acquiring more knowledge of public speaking, which you are doing.

Secondly, you can accept that even if you still feel afraid, this doesn't have to manifest itself as stage fright or paralysis. You can, in other words, reprogram your reaction to fear.

- Fear is the result of a feeling of lack of control

If fear arises from a feeling of a lack of control, the thing to do for you as a public speaker is to make sure this situation doesn't arise in the first place. Of course, you can

do this by never speaking in public. On the other hand, you still have your fear of doing so. You are not in control of your fear.

You can take control by knowing exactly what you want to say, how you want to say it, and what effect it will have. You will not be faced with unexpected situations where you don't know what to say or do - in other words, situations where you are not in control, because in fact there are only a limited number of things which can go wrong and we are going to tell you what to do in each of them. You can rehearse these in advance so that if they happen, you just let your training kick in. It is, in fact, exactly what happens when you see a client and you are faced with an unexpected situation. Your mind quickly searches for an answer or a means of coping. Even if you have to say you don't know, you have done the right thing. You have coped. You retained control.

But this doesn't happen in front of an audience..... you're thinking!

Well, we'll deal with stage fright in greater detail below.

For now, though, accept that drying up on stage isn't inevitable even if you are totally panicked. This isn't going to happen in any event because if you apply what we teach you, you will always know you are in control and will not panic in the first place.

### **Pin-pointing the cause of your fear**

When you are afraid, especially where public speaking is concerned, your mind is likely to throw up all kinds of images and scenarios of what might happen.

Now, we've said that there is no inevitable link between fear and the *type* of reaction which follows it. Some people "choose" one reaction, some another. Some people are sick, some people shake and some people dry up.

When your mind throws up all those different scenarios, what you are doing is providing yourself with a menu of alternative reactions. How kind and considerate of your mind!

But if, however, there is no concrete and inevitable link between your fear and your type of reaction, why not just opt to change the type of reaction? After all, it is your choice in the first place.

The difficulty is, of course, that the choice is made by the subconscious. We can almost hear you sitting there saying, "I *want* to react differently. What I want to know is how to do it."

That is a good start. It is accepting that you *can* change that reaction.

Now we will look at the "how" and give you some exercises to work on.

Your subconscious throws up this reaction, or the fear of it, for a reason. What you need to do is to find out exactly why your mind is homing in on that particular reaction. Have

a pen and a piece of paper in front of you and start working through these exercises. They won't take long but they will be revealing.

### *Exercise 1*

Put a name to your fear. Don't generalise it by saying "I'm afraid of all those people". Be more specific. Are you afraid that you will dry up? If so, at what stage in your talk? Are you afraid that you won't be able to talk at all? Are you afraid that you will shake so much the audience will see you, or you won't be able to read your script? Are you afraid your trousers will fall down or the buttons on your blouse will snap open (this actually happened to one of the writers of this course!). Don't think about the consequences or how to deal with it for now, just concentrate on naming your fear or fears. Write down as many as you can and make them as specific as possible.

### *Exercise 2*

This type of exercise will be familiar to you if you practice one of the therapies dealing with emotions. Carry out the exercise nevertheless. This is targeted specifically at your stage fright.

What we are going to do now is to try to find out exactly why your mind has thrown up the particular scenarios it has, to identify that event or feeling in the past which has made you feel this way. You weren't born with stage fright, you learned it. Let's try to find out where and when.

Take the first list you made. Write down each named fear and, for each one, add a question – "... reminds me of....". Thus, you might now be writing down "Standing in front of people and not being able to think of anything to say reminds me of ...."

Do the same for any other fears you have named.

This will let you know that this reaction of yours has a root. Something happened in your life which has made you think that this is what might happen to you again in the future.

Don't worry if you can't do this exercise. For those students who can, it is very helpful in gaining self knowledge. For those who can't we are going to tackle this in a different way.

### *Exercise 3*

Write down your answers to these questions. Be completely honest and don't fudge them in order to make your answers sound more acceptable.

Feeling other people looking at me is like .....

Being the focus of attention is like .....

(Those two questions may sound the same but they aren't. People can look at you without your being the focus of their attention, for example, when there is eye contact on a bus or train. Note that if you dislike people looking at you it doesn't mean that you are paranoid, just a bit sensitive, so be honest with yourself).

Failure is .....

Humiliation reminds me of .....

(That can refer to a time, a place or an event).

The most embarrassing time in my life was when .....

Thus, in those answers, you have named the nightmares behind your fear of public speaking. It all arises from these. They may sound trivial. That doesn't matter: they are not trivial to you and that is what is important. Know yourself, know your demons.

Some of your answers may, in fact, be positive. You may like being the centre of attention. If so, create another question which asks why you hate being the centre of attention on a stage.

Having named your demons, what are you going to do about them?

Well, they all have one thing in common. They are in the past. Even if your most humiliating moment was that time you were giving a talk in front of a hundred people, dried up completely and was booed off the stage, it is in the past.

The next time you give a talk it will be under a completely new set of circumstances and you will be armed with new knowledge. Past circumstances are not being reproduced so there is no reason why the same result should occur.

*The mind doesn't understand time*

Any hypnotherapists reading this will be familiar with the concept.

The problem arises because when the incidents you listed above occurred, you felt embarrassed, humiliated or whatever. These were genuine feelings as a result of a genuine incident.

Your conscious mind can accept that this happened in the past and there is no reason for it to happen today, even if the exact circumstances were to be reproduced. If nothing else, you could ask yourself what you would do differently in those same circumstances to improve the situation for yourself, however little.

However, your unconscious mind doesn't understand time as we know it. The emotional impact of something which happened five years ago can be as real and as immediate to

your subconscious mind as if it had happened five minutes ago. It doesn't factor in that you have moved on, have learned, have acquired new skills. It is stuck in the past and you are living in the present.

Accept this. Accept that the you who existed then was embarrassed but the you who exists now need not be, with some help and training. Accept that the you who existed then learned to dislike people staring at him because of a specific event but that person has long drifted into history. Today's you has no real reason to dislike people staring – except for that ghost of the past.

You are not going to overturn your thinking overnight, but this self knowledge will help you understand that firstly, today's "you" doesn't have to do the same things, react in the same way, even to the same events and, secondly, you are about to acquire a whole new set of instructions and guidelines which will tell you exactly what to do in circumstances which you now fear.

Fear is uncertainty and a feeling of lack of control. You are uncertain because of past events when you were not able to control things so that these uncomfortable feelings were allowed to develop. You are about to acquire the knowledge which will make you certain of what you are doing, and fully in control of your actions and their results.

#### *Memories can't be trusted*

Accept that none of us have perfect recall of events which happened in the past. We may think we do, but we don't. Do you *really* remember every single word which was spoken in that incident which has troubled you for years, each expression on the faces of the participants? At best, you will remember some, even though these memories may seem crystal clear. There will, though, be parts of the memory which are missing. These details might not have seemed crucial or relevant at the time, but the you of today might put a totally different interpretation on events if they were available to you.

Also realise that the incident happened to the you who existed at that time. You experienced it through the perceptions of life you had at that moment. The you of today cannot possibly be the same person because you have experienced so much more in the intervening period. Thus, if the event were to happen today, you would experience it differently and handle it differently. It was a past incident which affected someone who no longer exists.

#### *Reinforcing behaviour*

Habits become habits through repetition. What is often forgotten is that our thoughts are also subject to the same processes – in fact it is impossible to carry out any behaviour without the thought process that goes with it or supports it. Cognition – the way we think – is a very important area of study for psychologists and many therapists suggest that people can change their whole lives by paying attention to the way they think and by developing more beneficial cognitive (thought) strategies. In some therapies, the whole

focus of healing is on encouraging them to do what they do anyway, but in a different way - namely to focus on or visualise an issue and its desired outcome repeatedly until beneficial change occurs. You may be asking yourself why we are saying that this is an adaptation of normal behaviour. Well, think about it like this. If you were constantly thinking about a problem, anxiety or fear, through that very repetition you can easily end up realising your own fears or anxieties, inviting the very result that you fear in a situation because you were so negatively focused on it. With each repetition you make the situation more normal and habitual for you. Eventually, you can become so habituated to this kind of behaviour that it often takes an outsider with an overview to point you in another direction.

You may recognise yourself or certainly people that you know in the example above. Now ask yourself a question - how different might things be if, instead of focusing and devoting my available time and energy to problems, I was instead able to devote them to solutions or more positive ways of coping? You may surprise yourself with the answer.

The point that we are making is that we do a lot of what we do, and think a lot of what we think, without really THINKING about it at all. It is a habit, and becomes more of a habit the longer it continues. In effect, we programme ourselves to expect bad things to happen if we constantly focus on avoiding them or fearing that they are inevitable. Just as we learned to be afraid of certain things at an earlier age, we can learn to be afraid of things as adults.

### **Stage fright**

Some form of stage fright is normal and probably inevitable: don't expect it to disappear overnight. What you can expect is that it won't have any bearing whatsoever on how you perform in public. You will learn to leave it behind when you step out in front of that audience. It will become rather like cleaning your teeth last thing at night when you have been out late. For a few brief seconds your mind rebels and you think that perhaps you won't bother tonight, it is an effort, and the thought of making that effort makes you feel uncomfortable, that you will have to dredge up some energy you don't have. Bed calls, and the sound of that call is sweet.

What you do is to go ahead and pick up the toothbrush. As soon as you do, routine takes over. You remember that it only takes a few seconds and that if you don't do it, you will regret it next day when your teeth feel furry and you feel guilty. In other words, your training has kicked in.

We've used this phrase before and we will use it again. If you train to do something and you repeat those actions, they require less and less effort. In the end, you will carry out that particular task or action even if part of your mind is rebelling because the greater part of your mind is telling you that this action is required.

As you work through your script, you will be learning tricks and tasks which will become easier and easier to you. By the end of the course, things you had to concentrate on doing in the early stages of the course will take no effort whatsoever.

Thus, if and when you suffer stage fright, your training will be there telling you exactly what to do and say next. It will not be a paralysing cloud which comes down on you and sits on your shoulders all through your talk, but merely a door you walk through which causes you some momentary discomfort.

### **Preconceptions**

Don't forget that an audience arriving to hear a talk will have preconceptions about what you are like and what they are about to hear.

They have *chosen* to be there. This means that they come mentally prepared to be interested and to like at least some of what you are about to say.

In addition, they are coming to see a therapist giving a talk. People who are interested in alternative therapy, like therapists themselves, tend to be gentler, more spiritually aware. We know this is a generalisation but you do not tend to have a belief in gentle, non-invasive methods of healing if you have an aggressive personality.

Their assumption is that you too will be a gentle, caring person. They do not expect you to be a brilliant public speaker. Indeed, a certain amateurism can be appealing in these circumstances. Those therapists who have used the hard commercial sell to market their therapy, books and products now tend to be looked upon with some suspicion by most people. They had their place in the scheme of things. They let people know that there was an alternative way. People now are knowledgeable enough to be seeking firm information about therapies rather than wanting to hear sophisticated sales talk. An admission by you that you are not particularly comfortable with public speaking would be very much in line with the audience's preconception of what a therapist is like.

### **Perception**

One other thing you might find encouraging is to remember that the way you perceive yourself is not the way other people perceive you. This links directly with preconceptions. If an audience come to see a gentle, caring therapist, that is what they will see unless you do something which directly upsets that preconception.

People view one another through a veil of their own experiences. Their outlook on life and how they see other people and events is coloured by what they themselves have been through during their lives. What this means is that you will never please everybody all the time. You will never ever give a talk which delights everyone in the hall. That is not because your talk is bad, it is because someone sitting there might react badly to something you have said in all innocence because of that person's own life experiences.

Thus, don't make the mistake of trying to write the perfect speech and give the perfect presentation which is loved by everyone each time you give it. Perfection is unattainable. Many people who dislike public speaking make this mistake. They are measuring themselves against an unattainable goal and, of course, falling short. That translates to

“I’m no good at this.” Of course, the standard against which they are measuring themselves is that of the top speakers who radiate confidence, tell funny jokes and entrance their audience. *Even professional after-dinner speakers fall flat when they speak.* You don’t hear about this too often because of course they try to keep these occasions from becoming well-known but it does happen. It is even worse for them because they have set themselves up as good public speakers. You aren’t doing that. You are there as a therapist who has volunteered to try to talk about your particular therapy. You don’t have to be good, you just have to avoid being bad. Anything else is a bonus. Thus, the good talks you will be giving by the end of this course will be very well received indeed.

The way to approach this is to write your talk, make it as good as it can be, and then put your trust in it. Sometimes it will go down well, sometimes it will go down badly. That is because different audiences will perceive you and what you are saying in different ways.

Thus, if you give a talk and you are less than happy about the way it has been received, you know that at least part of the problem may lie with the audience and not with you or your delivery. It’s good practice to criticise yourself in order to improve. You should, however, be prepared to admit that not everything which can go wrong will your fault.

#### *Exercise 4*

Go and attend a few talks over the coming weeks. The subject doesn’t matter. Just sit back, listen and analyse what is working and what is not.

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## **ASSIGNMENT**

### **Only for students wishing to take the final assessment...**

Write an essay of not less than 500 words on fear and how to conquer it. You may draw on your own experiences or on the application of your particular therapy if you think this is appropriate.