

BREATHE TO INSPIRE

For many of us, public speaking causes “fight or flight.”
Do you know how to turn it into “Purposeful Tension”?

By Margie Zohn

“Relaxation is the soul of the art, because it arouses receptivity rather than defensiveness in an audience.”

— Arthur Miller, *On Politics and the Art of Acting*

Arthur Miller, one of the most celebrated playwrights of our time, does not give any scientific proof of his statement. He merely asserts that a relaxed actor makes for a relaxed (and therefore, receptive) audience.

Public Speaking Anxiety and the Science Behind It

For scientific proof, we might look to evidence that “mirror neurons” in our brains fire when we are watching someone do or feel something, and these are the same ones that fire when we actually do or feel that same thing. Thus, if we want people to feel relaxed in our presence, we should experience relaxation ourselves.

For many of us, speaking in public causes the opposite of a relaxed state, perhaps even a “fight or flight” response. This is the name for the physiological changes in response to a perceived threat in our environment.

We experience increased adrenaline flow, raised heart rate, muscular tension, sweaty palms and butterflies in the stomach.

Perhaps most troubling is that fight or flight results in diminished higher brain function as the blood flows to the lower, primitive part of the brain. While this state is crucial if a bear is chasing us in the woods, it is unhelpful when stepping onto a stage to speak, especially as higher brain function helps us think on our feet or win over a hostile audience.

Purposeful Tension

Yet, is achieving complete relaxation when speaking the ideal?

What if you are trying to rally the troops into battle – do you really want the audience to have a relaxation response? In this case, I call the desired state “purposeful tension.” All of the tension in your body goes toward hitting the right emotional and emphatic tones for your message.

This is a useful kind of tension, the way that psychologists talk about “eustress” as a positive form of stress. And if we go back to the premise that we are hard wired to feel what the presenter feels, part of your job is helping your audience feel the kind of tension that will serve your goals, not the tension that, as Miller says, creates defensiveness.

Purposeful Tension — in Action

So how do we let go of this destructive kind of tension and orient ourselves toward purposeful tension?

The best way is by practicing deep, diaphragmatic breathing. There is much scientific evidence that this kind of breathing helps reduce negative stress.

Beyond that, it just makes us feel better, more present, more grounded. In my many years of traveling the world helping leaders deliver powerful messages and build better relationships, a

huge number of them cite breathing as their most powerful and immediately useful learning.

While we may think we know how to breathe properly, many of us are only filling up our chests when asked to take a deep breath. Breathing diaphragmatically means sending the sensation and movement of the breath lower and deeper in your body. You expand both belly and ribcage when you inhale, and feel these areas deflate when you exhale.

Various exercises that encourage the breath to go deeper include pretending you are sucking in on a straw, or lying on the floor and observing the rise and fall of your belly (and you can train yourself not to go to sleep in this position!).

Taking even a few minutes to practice this type of breathing can make a huge difference in the amount and kind of stress that you feel.

Even When You Go Blank

Last but not least, if you become flustered in the middle of your speaking and go blank, returning to deep breathing instantly delivers that higher brain function.

The word “inspiration” does not have a dual meaning by accident: taking in a deep breath physiologically paves the way for those “aha!” moments. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to deliver those moments to your audience as well? An audience that makes discoveries while you are speaking is the most receptive audience there is.

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