GC CELEBRANCY
Gabriella Coote - Marriage Celebrant

A GUIDE TO PUBLIC SPEAKING

Introduction

Fear of public speaking is one of the most universal fears out there, so if you're starting to worry about that part of your marriage ceremony, you're not alone! This guide is intended to give you some pointers on how to deal with those nerves. The truth is though, that you will undoubtedly go through an array of feelings on your wedding day, including nerves about speaking in public.

My Background

I have always been drawn to public speaking. It's perhaps partially a reason why I became a lawyer. After competing in various public speaking competitions throughout high school and university, I became the founding president of the Adelaide Students Toastmasters Club. Toastmasters International is a public speaking and leadership organisation which fosters public speaking and leadership skill development. If you have the time, and the interest, I highly recommend finding out more about this organisation.

Through my role in Toastmasters International, I had the opportunity to better my own public speaking skills, and eventually go on to mentor a number of students and young professionals. I have seen the devastating effect that a fear of public speaking can have on a person individually, and also in their professional life. I am passionate about helping people face this fear, in order to learn and grow from it.

My Top Tips

Public speaking is not an exact science. I am also not a psychologist! Many of these tips are either drawn from my own personal experience, from others, or from techniques taught through Toastmasters International. There are many techniques on how to deal with public speaking anxiety, so I recommend doing your own research to supplement this guide.

1. Practice makes perfect

I'm sure you've heard this cliché before, but there really is something to it!

Practice what you have to say repeatedly. Practice it in front of the mirror, in front of family or friends, or before you go to bed at night. Practice achieves these purposes:

- It solidifies the information in your mind, making it much less likely that you will forget your words (even if they're in front of you);
- It familiarises you with the vowel sounds and phraseology, making is less likely you will stumble or stutter; and
- It can give you some confidence, just in knowing you won't just be making stuff up on the spot.

If you really want to take practice to the next level, I recommend seeking out the assistance of your local Toastmasters club. They'll let you attend and participate in a few meetings for free, and it'll give you a good idea of the kind of techniques lots of different people use for public speaking anxiety.

With this all in mind, *don't over-practice.* Obsessing over something you are anxious about will eventually only cause you detriment. There's no perfect number for how much one should practice though, so I recommend pausing every now and then to take stock of how you're feeling. If you feel deep down that you *do* know the words, but you're still anxious, it might be a good idea to slow down.

2. The Power of 'Pause'

While the spoken part of your ceremony does not have to be a monologue fit for a Shakespearean play, you do want to feel like you've given it your best at the end of the day. By remembering to take a breath, and pause, you achieve these purposes:

- You give the audience a chance to absorb what you're saying;
- You give yourself a chance to breathe; and
- By breathing throughout your speech, you give yourself a chance to relax.

Steady breathing has been shown to have a calming effect on our psyche. Remembering to take a breath (for example, at the end of a sentence), will naturally ease your anxiety (even if just by a little).

If there's one thing to remember it's this: **a pause during a speech will feel like a million years to you, but only a few seconds to your audience.**

Remember this if you have a moment of anxiety too, such as if you pause because you are overwhelmed or have lost your place. That pause that feels huge to you, is really only a few seconds to your audience. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter.

3. Remember Your Audience

For the most part, your audience will consist of friends and family who are there to support you and show their love. The people in your audience (the ones that matter), won't be laughing or judging you for any slip-ups. Even if they did, those judgments don't matter. This leads me to my next point:

4. Eyes on the Prize

Your mantra for that day if you will, is to remind yourself that your goal here is to *get married*. You are not here to perform for your guests. If you do make a mistake, lose your place, shake, stumble, or stutter, it really won't be remembered in the grand scheme of things. What people will remember is the day as a whole, so try not to focus too much on those tiny details.

A technique you can use here is to try and stay in the moment. You can practice this when you're talking about mundane things with your partner. Concentrate on your partner and really focus on that person only. The idea there is for everything else to just fade away into background noise.

5. Audience Naked?

An age-old tip is to imagine your audience naked. Personally, this doesn't work for me at all. I don't want to be thinking about other distracting (possibly gross) things while I'm supposed to be focused on what I'm saying.

This being said, the logic goes that visualising your audience naked adds a level of whimsy to this event, and makes your audience vulnerable in your subconscious. If you think this will work for you, go for it!

6. Caffeine / Alcohol

People deal with nerves in different ways. If you absolutely need a coffee, I won't stop you, but I'd recommend having it straight after the ceremony, not straight before. Coffee increases your heart rate, and can just make anxiety worse.

I don't recommend alcohol as a way of dealing with your nerves. Depending on your tolerance though, I don't see a problem with a glass before the event, but be careful not to have more than that. Alcohol can impair your ability to process thoughts quickly and efficiently, and if you are particularly nervous, there is always the danger that you may overdo it.

Remember also, a marriage celebrant cannot marry a couple if a party or both appear to be intoxicated. This is a matter of legal ability to consent, and a marriage celebrant is not legally permitted to solemnise the marriage if they suspect a person is intoxicated or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

7. Talk About it… or Don't!

Have a chat with your partner, or with your celebrant, about your fears. What is it that you're so afraid of? Is it failure, embarrassment, or a combination? Sometimes talking about our fears can help relieve that tension. By challenging our beliefs about what logically might happen if something goes wrong, we can challenge the actual source of our fears.

I do however recommend that you try to monitor how much you talk about this. While we don't want to keep things bottled up, obsessing about things by making this the focus of conversation can also cause you more harm than good.

8. Breathing Techniques

Steady, calm breathing is scientifically proven to have a calming effect on the human body. In the lead-up to your event, I highly recommend attempting some 'mindfulness' techniques such as meditation, or breathing exercises. There are many ways to do this. I enjoy the 'Headspace' app, which has a lot of free introductory content.

It can be surprisingly difficult to practice breathing techniques. The reality is that the more you practice this, the easier it will get over time. The way I like to imagine 'healthy' breathing, is the way a puppy breathes. You'll notice that when a puppy breathes, it does so through its belly. Healthy breathing means breathing that makes your stomach area expand, instead of your chest.

Here's how I do this:

1. Place one hand on your chest, and one on your stomach;
2. Let a sigh out through your mouth. Whilst doing this try to actively relax your shoulder and back muscles;
3. Pause for a few seconds;
4. Inhale *slowly* through your nose. Concentrate on expanding your stomach, instead of your chest. This is easier for some people than for others, so don't worry if you don't get it straight away (sometimes lying down helps).
5. Pause few a few seconds again;
6. Exhale through your mouth this time, pulling your stomach inwards;
7. Repeat this process around 5 times.

There are LOTS of different breathing tutorials online, so feel free to explore what works for you. Practice this technique in the lead up to your event, to 'train' your body to react better to steady breathing.

9. Shift Focus

A lot of my anxiety about public speaking comes from wanting to do well, and not wanting to embarrass myself. In other words, I want to *perform* at a certain standard. It's important to remember that at the end of the day, public speaking is *communication*. You have a message you are looking to communicate with an audience.

In a way, it's really not that different from your day-to-day conversations. Try to remember this next time you're in front of an audience. You are not performing…you are communicating. And communication is something you practice every single day.