

Helping ease public speaking anxiety

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Credit: University of Western Australia

Researchers at The University of Western Australia have found that a simple and reassuring message can help reduce people's anxiety about speaking in public as well as make them feel positive about their nerves before the talk.

Lead researcher Dr Ben Jackson, senior lecturer in UWA's School of Human Sciences, said speaking in public was a task that many people found stressful.

"In fact, it has been reported that public speaking anxiety is the most common social fear among the general population," Dr Jackson said.

The study, published in the international *PLOS ONE* journal, involved a

group of more than 200 university undergraduate students who were due to give a group-based presentation.

Around half the students were provided with a message designed to reduce the onset of public speaking anxiety and help presenters interpret their speech-related anxiety more positively.

Researchers found the students who received the message reported lower anxiety before and during the presentation compared to the students who did not receive the message. The students with the message also reported that it had helped them view their nerves in a less debilitating light.

"This was the first time so-called 'inoculation' messages had been tested as a means of helping public speaking anxiety and it's possible that these treatments may offer a simple and effective [method](#) of alleviating a common social fear," Dr Jackson said.

The message provided reassurance about specific worries that people had regarding public speaking, such as 'everyone will see that I'm nervous'; 'everyone is judging me and my appearance during my talk'; and 'I'm not going to do well in my speech because I'm nervous'.

"For example, the message provided scientific evidence that other people, such as audience members, may not be as good at picking up on our nerves as we all think, and that having some anxiety need not necessarily be a bad thing," Dr Jackson said.

Although some treatments to address public speaking [anxiety](#) had been successful in the past, they were often difficult to deliver broadly, he said.

"Many of these methods are time and labour-intensive and require repeat attendance, trained interventionists and/or one-to-one administration,

such as stress inoculation training, hypnosis-based methods and curriculum-based education," he said.

"What we're hoping is that this might offer a much quicker and easier treatment as well as being a useful way of promoting resilience in the face of challenges. One of our goals is to use this method of inoculation to help boost resilience in adolescent boys and girls."

More information: Ben Jackson et al. Re-Thinking Anxiety: Using Inoculation Messages to Reduce and Reinterpret Public Speaking Fears, *PLOS ONE* (2017). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0169972](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0169972)

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