How Bad is your Public Speaking Anxiety?
Almost everybody suffers from some form of public speaking anxiety or performance anxiety. While a certain level of anxiety is normal and even desirable, a very small percentage of people experience a level of anxiety that seriously affects their ability to speak in public. How bad is your public speaking anxiety? Many people assume their level of anxiety is extremely high, when in fact they are experiencing completely normal symptoms.

The Symptom Picture Scale
Adapted from Marilyn Gellis and Rosemary Muat, Twelve Steps of Phobics Anonymous, from the workbook Performance Anxiety by Eric Maisel.

Functional
1. Butterflies; a queasy feeling in the stomach; trembling; jitteriness; tension.
2. Cold or clammy palms; hot flashes and all-over warmth; profuse sweating
3. Very rapid, strong, racing, pounding, or irregular heartbeat; tremors; tears, muscle tension and aches; fatigue

Decreased Functional Ability
4. Jelly legs; weakness in the knees; wobbly, unsteady feelings; shakiness
5. Immediate desperate and urgent need to escape, avoid or hide.
6. A lump in the throat; dry mouth; choking; muscle tension
7. Hyperventilation; tightness in the chest; shortness of breath; smothering sensation

Very Limited Functional Ability or Completely Nonfunctional
8. Feelings of impending doom or death; high pulse rate; difficulty breathing; palpitations.
9. Dizziness; visual distortion; faintness; headache; nausea; numbness; tingling of the hands, feet, or other body parts; diarrhea; frequent urination

Complete Panic
10. Nonfunctional; disorientation; detachment; feelings of unreality; paralysis; fear of dying; going crazy; or losing control. (Frequently people experiencing their first spontaneous “panic attack” rush to emergency rooms, convinced that they are having a heart attack.)

1. Where do your experiences of performance anxiety fall on this scale?
2. If you experience some symptoms from the various levels on this scale, how would you characterize your experience of performance anxiety on average? Is it relatively mild, moderate, or severe?

3. Under what circumstances do the more drastic symptoms tend to occur?

A Mental Disorder?
Adapted from *Performance Anxiety* by Eric Maisel.

Performance anxiety is not a mental disorder. Displaying a level of nervousness before or during a performance is entirely normal and natural. Such a reaction means, in part, that you’re acknowledging the importance of the event and want to do well. It also means that you’re alert to the difficulties associated with tasks such as remembering prodigious amount of material and presenting it with technical acumen and artistry. Nothing disordered there.

Surely we hold the presence of a little nervousness in a performer who is attempting to perform well as healthier than the absence of nerves in an ill-prepared performer who presents poorly and then blames his ineffective showing on the restlessness of the audience or the vagaries of fate. In fact, there are good reasons to be more suspicious of an absence of some anxiety in such situations than of its presence. Such an absence might mean that the performer has build defenses against the realities of the situation and of his part in the proceedings. His defensive structure shields him from anxiety but may also prevent him from being open to the situation and authentic in his presentation.

Thus an absence of performance anxiety in a presentation situation does not signify sound mental health any more than a lack of anxiety in a person’s day to day life does. Indeed, according to one model of personality development, the complete absence of anxiety is a likely sign of a personality disorder. In this model, the normal range of mental health is placed not at one end of the continuum but rather in the middle.