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## “Every Public Speaker Is An Athlete!”

By Mary Anne Dorward

Just as an athlete prepares for a competition, every public speaker needs to develop a ‘pre-game prep’ that they can repeat before every speech. Whether you are swinging a golf club or giving a speech, you need a balance of relaxation, focus and technique. First let’s look at some relaxation techniques that you can use to manage your anxiety and get focused before you speak.

### Basic Relaxation

Right before a speech, most people try to tell themselves, “Just relax!” However, when your heart is racing, your muscles are tight, and you can barely breathe, no amount of positive affirmations will convince you or your body! While it is impossible to completely eliminate the stress involved in giving a speech, it is possible to reduce the stress to a level that is survivable.

When people are in a state of fear or anxiety, they usually stand or sit in a collapsed, hunched-over position. In this position, the chest and diaphragm are contracted, making it difficult to breathe and the windpipe is folded over, which causes the pitch of the voice to change. When the windpipe is constricted, it is hard to bring air up from the diaphragm to speak and this makes it hard for you to be heard.

Just like a wind instrument in an orchestra, the body is the instrument through which the sounds of your speech are literally vibrated. Practicing relaxation techniques will warm up and make the most of your own unique physical instrument.

### Jaw Tension Release

One of the major places we hold tension is in our face, and particularly in our jaw. Here is a tension release exercise for your jaw:

First, find the little bump of bone at the outside heel of your hands. If you were to draw a line from the tip of your little finger to your wrist, this tiny round bone is right where the hand flexes at the wrists. Take that bony part of both your hands and place it at the base of your earlobes. This is the far end of the masseter muscle.

Draw the heel of your hands forward slowly along your masseter muscle from your earlobe forward along the lower jaw line. With both hands, start again at your earlobes and this time draw the heel of your hand along the upper jaw line. Do this a few times, being sure to apply moderate pressure with that tiny bony part of your hands. Most people carry a lot of tension in their jaw. It should feel great to release that tension. Just don’t



overdo it with extreme pressure. Even a mild to moderate massage will do you plenty of good.

### **Chair Tension Release**

Here is a tension release exercise you can practice just before going up to give your speech. First, grab hold of each side of your chair with both hands. All at once, holding your breath, squeeze every part of your body into a ball of tension. Contract your face, shoulders, arms, hands, belly, buttocks, thighs, knees, calves, and feet. Hold your breath, count to five, and then using a loud explosive exhalation of the word “Ha”, totally and completely release your body and your hands from the side of the chair. Do this sequence three to five times.

### **Shoulder Release**

For those of you who find your shoulders creeping slowly up to your ears as the time you need to speak approaches, here is a great exercise to help you release that tension. First, place your arms at your sides. With your left hand, reach around your back and grab the wrist of your right arm and pull your right arm down gently. Now tilt your head gently to the left away from your arm you are stretching and hold for a count of five. Don't forget to breathe while you are doing this exercise. Release your head back up to the center and let go of your right wrist. Repeat on the other side.

By now, hopefully you are feeling more centered, focused, and a little more at ease. Your ability to calm your stress and tension levels more quickly will improve with practice. Try these exercises before you give a speech or get out on the golf course. I guarantee they will help calm your nerves and focus your mind so you can give a great performance.