

## Types of Anxiety

**Brief:** While public speaking is commonly associated with anxiety, not all speakers who experience anxiety experience it for the same reasons or in the same way.

**Learning Objective:** Identify the various types of anxiety as they relate to public speaking.

**Key Terms:**

- **Anxiety:** An unpleasant state of mental uneasiness, nervousness, apprehension and obsession, or concern about some uncertain event.
- **Context anxiety:** Anxiety that triggers communication apprehension due to a specific context.
- **Performance anxiety:** Anxiety, fear, or persistent phobia that may be aroused in an individual by the requirement to perform in front of an audience, whether actually or potentially.
- **Situational anxiety:** A short-term form of anxiety triggered by a specific event, such as public speaking.
- **Trait anxiety:** A consistent tendency to respond with acute anxiety in the anticipation of threatening situation (whether they are actually threatening or not).

## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety can be defined as an unpleasant state of mental uneasiness, nervousness, apprehension and obsession, or concern about some uncertain event. While public speaking is commonly associated with anxiety, not all speakers who experience anxiety experience it for the same reasons or in the same way. There are a number of types of anxiety including situational anxiety, context anxiety, performance anxiety, and trait anxiety.

### ***Situational Anxiety***

Situational anxiety is a short-term psychological reaction sparked by a specific situation—a reaction that may or may not reflect how the person would respond in other contexts. Take for an example the anxiety someone might feel when they go on a first date. Although a person may not usually suffer from anxiety, the situation of spending time with a person who they might have feelings for, in a new environment, could increase stress levels and create the experience of communication apprehension.

### ***Context Anxiety***

Context anxiety refers to anxiety that triggers communication apprehension due to a specific context rather than a one-off situation. The most known example for context anxiety is public speaking; almost 70% of students suffer from a certain level of communication apprehension

triggered by public speaking. Other classroom contexts might create a similar response, such as speaking in front of class, in small group discussions, or in meetings.

### ***Performance Anxiety***

Performance anxiety, also known stage fright, is the anxiety, fear, or persistent phobia that may be aroused in an individual by the requirement to perform in front of an audience, whether actually or potentially. Even experienced performers of all kinds—musicians, singers, actors, and athletes to name a few—report having performance anxiety. In the context of public speaking, this anxiety may precede or accompany participation in any activity involving a public presentation.

In some cases, stage fright may be a part of a larger pattern of social phobia or social anxiety disorder, but many people experience stage fright without any wider problems. Quite often, stage fright arises in a mere anticipation of a performance, often a long time ahead.

The performance anxiety exacts a huge toll on self-confidence and self-esteem and causes some people to leave school or a job or pass up a promotion. Many people, including seasoned professional performers, suffer in silent terror. And because they feel embarrassed, people try to keep their fear a secret, even from a spouse or other close family members or friends.



### ***Trait Anxiety***

Anxiety can be either a short-term state or a long-term personality trait. Trait anxiety reflects a consistent tendency to respond with acute anxiety in the anticipation of threatening situations (whether they are actually threatening or not).

In relationship to public speaking, trait anxiety is found in the individual who has an orientation to feel anxiety during the communication act regardless of the situation, audience, or context. For this reason, these people with trait anxiety will often avoid exposing themselves to any communication situation, since communication apprehension is part of their daily experience.

There's evidence that some people have a higher vulnerability factor for communication apprehension due to genetics. It's generally agreed that 80% of communication apprehension stems from our neurological structures, which are determined genetically. And another 20% is influenced by environmental stimuli. Therefore, this type of communication apprehension can be improved with practice and other techniques; however, it will not be completely eliminated because it is inherited.

## From Concept to Action

Think of an area of your life in which you routinely perform in a communication situation without anxiety. Perhaps you're always the first one to strike up a conversation at your family dinner table? Or, perhaps you're confident speaking up in class when you know a lot about the topic being discussed? Now, think of an area of your in which you do experience some anxiety. Perhaps you avoid starting conversations, no matter how well you know the people at the table? Or maybe you make it a point to never speak up in class? Take a moment to compare your comfortable communication experiences to the ones that cause anxiety. What are the characteristics of each that might contribute to how you feel?

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