

# DON'T SAY UM

*HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY  
TO LIVE A BETTER LIFE*

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balance

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## CHAPTER 17

## NAVIGATING NERVES

*How to Learn to Love Anxiety (and Stop Worrying)*

**G**reetings! My name is Michael Chad Hoepfner, and I'm going to help you communicate better when it counts.

For those of you who have read all the preceding chapters—no, I am not suffering from amnesia; I haven't forgotten that we've already spent hundreds of pages together. But I know some of you are meeting me in this chapter for the very first time—because you immediately flipped to this point the moment you procured the book. Why? Many of you are frustrated—perhaps even at your wits' end—about the maddening, deranging experience of constantly battling nerves in important situations.

Why bury this chapter so near the end, then? Why not address this widespread pain point first so we can get it out of the way?

Because even though nerves may be your biggest pain point, they are not the most important point. And the bigger a deal we make about nerves, often the worse they get. So I have relegated them to Chapter 17. Deal with it, Nerves! You got outranked by Stance. You could probably handle being after Brevity or Eye Contact...but Stance? How dare I not treat you with the terrified reverence to which you're accustomed!

Since this is only the seventeenth-most important chapter in the book, for those of you who have started here, please go back to the beginning and read from page 1. Go ahead, please.

(I'm waiting.)

(I'm still waiting....)

Weird. You're continuing in this chapter even though the author—who has spent no small amount of time fashioning and refashioning each of these words in this precise order—has requested that you do so.

Why are you rebelling?

I know why: even with the explicit instruction not to do so, the pull and promise of having the antidote to severe nerves is too tempting to follow any instruction besides “Get the antidote!”

And yet...I'm going to make you wait multiple paragraphs *more* before you get the antidote.

AGONY!

How could I be so cruel? How could I prattle on at the beginning of this chapter for almost five hundred words just talking about the subject—and now talking about talking about the subject—when I could just cut to the chase and give you the damn antidote?!

Because.

Because even regarding the subject itself, I want to provoke you to interrogate your thinking about “nerves.”

Are your nerves really the villain they seem?

Or could it be that your judgment and critique of your nerves are the actual villains?

Consider two concepts: distance and distraction. The goal I suggest you embrace is not “to make your nerves go away.” You and your nerves do not need to be mortal enemies, forever locked in a battle to the death. In that relationship you try to overcome, conquer, suppress, combat, fight, or defeat your nerves. You might win one skirmish with them, but inevitably they resurface and defeat you, thereby shaking your faith in your own abilities even further as you layer shame and self-loathing on top of your already wicked self-judgment about your supposed failure in a communication situation (I say “supposed” only because your performance may not have been as bad as you think!).

Your shame and self-loathing probably sound something like this: “I’m such a fool! I thought I was better! I thought I had a tool! But I’m a naive, weak sucker. I should never have thought that I was free. I choke; I always choke. I’m doomed to perpetually choke, and I shouldn’t have the temerity to hope not to choke; I should just crawl into my cave of self-criticism and never come out (and certainly never again put myself in a high-consequence communication situation!) because I know what will happen, so I should just spare the world from myself.”

I’m laying it on a bit thick (or maybe not, for some of you). If that inner monologue rings a bell—welcome! You’re at home. Come on out of your shame cave and wrap yourself in the pages of this chapter.

What getting *distance* from your nerves means is this. Imagine you’re on a street somewhere with a violently angry bully; they’re screaming insults, epithets, profanity. You—being the streetwise imaginary city dweller that you are—walk deliberately and calmly away from them. You can still hear their ranting from the other side of the street, but as you continue navigating the city, their voice slowly fades and you return to the *distraction* of your cell phone, attending to the thousands of things on your to-do list.

You probably think you know where I’m going with this: That screaming bully is your nerves. But, no—you’re wrong. That screaming bully is you! That screaming bully is your narrative of impossible instructions (just relax!), catastrophic pronouncements (you always choke!), and belittling insults (you’re a fraud!) that you berate yourself with while you’re trying to communicate-when-nervous. That screaming, out-of-control bully is you verbally assaulting yourself about your nerves. That is you “battling” your nerves.

In the street metaphor, you would of course be insane to walk up to that bully and start a fight. That bully is just hoping that someone will engage with them so they can shout them down and instigate the confrontation they’re oh-so eager to have. In the street, you would simply get distance from the bully. In navigating your nerves, the mission is the same: just get distance from the yelling. You’ll probably still hear it, but the farther away you get (distance) and the more engrossed in your cell phone (distraction), the less you’ll notice it.

That's our goal: distance and distraction. And they reinforce each other. The more fully absorbed you can get in something else (distraction), the faster that yelling bully will fade away (distance).

Not a city dweller? Let's consider a different metaphor, and this time let's give your actual nerves—not just the reaction to and judgment about them—an identity too. Imagine you're an elementary school student, and you have brought a pet (a sweet little dog, perhaps) for show-and-tell. You're in the schoolyard at recess before show-and-tell, and your pet—though you love it dearly—is a mess. It is hyper, jumping everywhere, trembling because it is surrounded by a whole bunch of strangers. Maybe it even peed somewhere it shouldn't have out of sheer terror. A schoolyard bully sees an opening and begins to ridicule you mercilessly. The ineffective response is this: Take the bait and get sucked into the bully's goading. Instead, take the dog and go run a lap. Soon the other kids might even join you as the dog—now occupied with the fun activity of running—transforms from terrified to joyous and playfully tries to grab the leash as it runs.

The dog is your nerves. The bully is your inner tyrannical, mean-spirited critic. If you get sucked into battling the bully, the bully is thrilled to have a co-combatant, and you just get more and more agitated and upset. Meanwhile, the dog probably gets even more freaked out. If, on the other hand, you run the dog, the bully's voice gets physically and psychically farther away, the dog has an outlet for its energy, and you feel better as you run—relieved, relaxed, and maybe even joyous.

So, if you struggle with nerves, let me offer a powerful mindset shift: *stop trying to stop them.*

Remember the lessons from this book's early chapters: (1) thought suppression is impossible; (2) General Don't feedback like "Don't be nervous, just be yourself" is worthless; and (3) you don't need to feel confident in order to project confidence. I remind you of those lessons because people typically go about addressing nerves in a completely counterproductive manner—they try to make the nerves go away.

For those of you familiar with meditation, this concept will resonate. Meditators are encouraged to simply notice their thoughts rather than

prevent or stop them, to observe them as passing clouds that drift into their consciousness and then drift away.

Performers are trained to go a step further. Not only are they coached to notice rather than stop their nerves—just like athletes perfecting complex moves—performers develop positive muscle memory that they can rely on even when nervous. Every drill you just learned in this book has that same purpose.

So, this day, this hour, this moment, I want you to end your lifetime journey of searching for a way to stop being nervous. It's not your job to not be nervous. Your job is simply to communicate capably in different situations. If you're nervous in those situations, fine. If you're not, fine.

That's easier said than done, of course. So let's stop just saying and get to some doing. I want you to try an activity that examines how arbitrary our nervous reactions can be.

What do I mean by arbitrary? With nerves, many, many people identify specific scenarios as the cause or culprit; yet an identical scenario with just one factor changed isn't even challenging. For some, standing up and giving a speech is terrifying, but if they can be seated, they're fine. Or if they're talking to a faceless mass in a remote webinar, they're paralyzed with nerves, but in a room with a live audience, they're fine. Or maybe if they must stick to a precise script, they're earth-rattlingly anxious, but if they can speak using bullet points, they're fine.

The most obvious boundary where we can begin to dissect this phenomenon is “number of people in the audience.” I often make clients commit to a certain threshold number at which point they enter Nervous Land to force them to acknowledge how arbitrary their distinction actually is. Is the boundary between four and five audience members the point at which “just talking” shifts to “public speaking”? Is it between nine and ten? You will soon see that many, many of the distinctions that are supposedly the cause of your nerves are absurdly arbitrary—almost random—maybe even silly.

Consider the following pairings. Please go through each row, and circle which of the two situations makes you more nervous. If neither makes you nervous (or both make you equally nervous), you can ignore that row.

In person	Remote
Using notes	Being unscripted
Presenting with a deck	Speaking without slides
Word-for-word speech	Outline with bullet points
Formal presentation	Free-form discussion
Random audience	Colleagues and friends
Standing	Sitting
Stationary podium	Open stage
No audience interaction	Q&A

I have tried to pack this book chock-full of profound and important questions. But now—regarding all the distinctions you just made—I'm going to ask you one of the only worthless questions in this entire book.

Here it is: *Why?*

Why do you feel nervous in those situations and cool as a cucumber in others?

My answer is the answer I invite you to adopt also:

*Who cares?!*

I have no idea why that one arbitrary distinction makes you nervous and why its opposite doesn't. You will probably want to cling to some highly rational explanation: "Well, I once was kidnapped by a PowerPoint designer and ever since I've been traumatized by slides."

If you want to interrogate that distinction further, here's another provocative question: What about that one time when that specific situation *didn't* make you nervous? You know. That one time when you were surprisingly calm in the situation that always makes you terrified?

C'mon. Be honest with yourself. You don't know why!

*Who. Cares?*

If you really want to plumb the depths of your soul and discover an absolute why in a lengthy and rewarding therapeutic process, be my guest.

But I would encourage you not to hold out hope for nailing down the why. You'll probably learn a lot, but you still may not find a final why.

Because there might not be a why.

(Minds blown.)

Maybe consider accepting that you “just get nervous” in those situations. That might feel like relief.

Regardless of whether you accept and embrace this, here's the most amazing, liberating, thrilling news of all: you don't have to know why you have nerves in those situations to get better at navigating them.

So, let's leave the realm of the why and consider the how. How are you going to get better at navigating nerves? Like a much-hyped self-help book that touts the secret to enlightenment, self-actualization, or instant wealth, this book has a secret. *Shhhhhhhhh*. But unlike other snake oil sales devices, this secret works wonders, and works permanently. But it is hard work and takes time and diligence.

Here it is: The thing that will allow you to navigate your nerves is finding concrete, actionable, and useful things to focus on in place of obsessing about them—essentially, gaining distance via useful distraction. What kind of things? For starters, you can begin with all the stuff you read and learned in Chapters 1 through 16! All those exercises and tools are far more useful places to put your attention than “Don't Be Nervous.”

If it's a tool from this or any of the previous chapters, here's what you're looking for: you have to learn to focus on something that is physical, unmistakable, and integrated.

Those are three big adjectives. What the heck do they mean?

1. You must find a physical focus; it can't just be a thought.
2. You must find an unmistakable focus; you must be able to accurately diagnose whether you did—or did not—do it.
3. You must find an integrated focus; it must be integrated into the act of communicating and therefore aligned with your purpose rather than unrelated or even oppositional.

Never fear—I will explain how each of these work as we go.

What *do you do* with this point of focus once you have found it? You



must *do* it and *do* it relentlessly. This will allow you to use your squirrely, misbehaving brain against itself.

Your brain—contrary to what you might think—is not great at multitasking. In fact, multitasking is an illusion. It's really task switching. We think we're multitasking; we're actually just switching between tasks very quickly and chronically. Each shift exacts a cognitive toll (that is, it uses a bunch of energy and concentration). If you've paid attention to recent research about digital notifications, our under-siege attention spans, or the effect newsfeed doomscrolling has on your brain, none of this is a surprise to you.

Great news! You can exploit your brain's inability to multitask. When you find something more immediate and actionable than your nerves and then continually focus on it, your nerves will fade and fade and fade and fade. . . .

As I introduced earlier, this is what performers are trained to do. (And now you are too!) They don't vilify their nerves; they simply make another point of concentration more important.

Let me share an example. My wife is an incredible, world-class singer. Yet the first time she sang at Carnegie Hall, she was so nervous her knees were literally knocking, bouncing rapidly like a rock climber with "typewriter leg" at the end of a grueling pitch. As she stood in the wings waiting to take the stage, she reminded herself to walk to the mic and then put every ounce of her focus on using her lips to fully enunciate her final voiced consonants (technical speak for the ends of words). Sounds deadly simple, doesn't it? Yes. That's the point.

And it might surprise you to know that accurate, percussive enunciation isn't even a struggle for her! Rather, it's easy. In that moment of absolute terror, it was the quickest, easiest thing to focus on. She focused on enunciating every word as clearly as possible (instead of fixating on the nightmare scenario of forgetting the lyrics of a song). As she did, she was able to tap into the Virtuous Cycle of Good Communication we examined in Chapter 4, and—in a matter of a few musical bars—she was able to breathe, look in her concertgoers' eyes, and actually enjoy a moment of performance she had worked her entire life to earn.

That's not to impress you about her or her musicianship; it is rather to impress you about her approach.

You're likely not singing at Carnegie Hall. But the same tools can help you sing the music of your professional communication.

I'll share another example. I have tried to use a very accessible tone in writing this book. I want you to feel (because it's the truth!) that I am in your corner and can relate to your victories and struggles. But you might also think I'm not relatable—"That dude coaches presidential candidates and gives presentations around the world. I'm sure he never gets nervous."

Well, to put that hypothesis to rest, I'll share a ridiculous, absurd situation in which I felt outlandishly nervous: speaking at a local school board meeting. That's right. Speaking to a viewing audience of *zero* (trust me, no one was attending this particular school board meeting), I felt my heart rate skyrocket and the butterflies in my stomach flutter like streamers in a hurricane. But here's the biggest difference about where I currently am as a speaker and where you likely are: I never asked myself why I was having that reaction, nor did I try to make it go away. Why was I nervous to speak at the school board meeting? I have no idea. And truthfully—who cares?

All I focused on in that moment was posture. That's it. From a lifetime of speaking in situations that matter, I have built the muscle memory to use more of myself (not less) when nervous, and so I focused on my head floating toward the ceiling, opened my mouth, and spoke.

And you can do the same thing.

What specific focus should *you* choose?

Let's return to the criteria I introduced earlier.

- ♦ You must find a physical focus. It can't just be a thought.
  - \* Why must it be physical? As you know well at this point in the book (or as you're learning now if this is your first chapter), when it comes to speaking, your body is more reliable than your brain. So identify a physical practice rather than a mental one.
- ♦ You must find an unmistakable focus; you must be able to accurately diagnose whether you did—or did not—do it.
  - \* Why must the focus be unmistakable? You need to be able to distinguish when you are doing the behavior.

Importantly, that is not the same thing as qualitatively evaluating your performance, for example, “I was ‘good’” or “I was ‘bad.’” I don’t care about subjective impressions of good or bad. I care about something far simpler and more accurate. For example: Did your lips move sufficiently when you made *p*, *b*, *w*, and *m* sounds, or did they not?

- ✦ You must find an integrated focus; it must be integrated into the act of communicating and therefore aligned with your purpose rather than unrelated or even oppositional.
  - \* Why must you find an integrated focus? It needs to be in service of your communication rather than merely a competing, alternative subject.

To put those criteria into stark relief, let’s consider a popular—even famous—strategy that sounds like it fulfills the need for another focus: imagining your audience in their underwear. We’ve all heard this. Purportedly, it’s an imperceptible, sly way to unlock better performance. The speaker has an irreverent secret that allows them to see their audience as a sea of emperors with no clothes, robbing the audience of its threat and status.

The problem? For most people, it doesn’t work. Let’s examine why.

- ✦ Is it physical? No. It’s a mental activity.
- ✦ Is it unmistakable? Probably not. If you accept that we are bad at multitasking, it stands to reason it will be very hard to think about both naked people and the words you should say at the same time.
- ✦ Is it integrated into the act of communicating? No! This is the measurement it fails the most. It is essentially a different topic, totally unrelated to the act of turning air into words, and in fact practically a non sequitur.

## FIRST, FIND YOUR FOCUS

If you're not going to use the ol' Try to Picture Them in Their Underwear technique, what should you choose as your point of focus?

At this point in the book, you may have already chosen it! (Or rather, it may have chosen you.) If in the first sixteen chapters you have discovered a specific tool that absorbs your concentration, shifts a behavior, and improves your overall performance, that may be it. Here are just some examples:

- ✦ Grounding your feet on the floor (stance via book standing, the shoe exercise, or “nailing” your feet to the floor)
- ✦ Pausing intentionally at the end of thoughts (pausing via Lego block exercise or variations thereof)
- ✦ Using freer, more expressive gestures (gestures via Silent Storytelling)
- ✦ Eliciting specific responses and reactions from your audience (audience focus via ball throwing)
- ✦ Using more variety and energy in your voice (Five Ps of Vocal Variety, via Silent Storytelling, Play Your Horn Hand, Lego blocks for variety, etc.)
- ✦ Feeling your back side ribs expanding with air when you breathe (breathing via balloon exercise and Play Your Horn Hand)
- ✦ Using your lips and tongue as precisely as possible to ensure your diction is exact (enunciation via cork/impediment exercise)

You don't necessarily need to choose something that is challenging for you. It can be something you're good at. If you'll recall my wife's story about singing at Carnegie Hall, she didn't choose enunciation because she knew hers was sloppy or poor; she chose enunciation because it was actually quite easy for her to execute. The essential measurement here is not level of difficulty but level of commitment. You must commit 100 percent.

And if you choose one focus and then you find a better one later, great! There is no final exam in this book. You're not going to be asked to pass the bar. So choose the best, most-likely-to-succeed tool for you, and recognize you might find even better ones as you experiment.

In fact, it's quite likely as you get better and better at this (which you will), your focus will naturally shift. You will begin to unlock the Virtuous Cycle of Good Communication and, for example, enunciation will lead to breath and breath to posture and posture to vocal variety and so on and so on. You may grow to enjoy, even, how your focus grows and shifts over time.

### **DIP YOUR TOES IN THE WATER**

Once you have found what your focus is, now you must practice it—a lot. To start that, I recommend you begin by wading into the shallow end first. This means embracing what I call low-consequence opportunities. Choose scenarios in which you have no or almost no risk. Use those as your practice arena. Become excellent at remaining laser focused on your skill in those situations. Then broaden. Next choose some situations that are slightly higher stakes. Keep going with that process, slowly but surely, as you increase the difficulty level of your scenarios.

If you have chosen something that is inappropriate to practice in public situations (you can't talk with a cork in your mouth during meetings), adjust the focus so it is imperceptible. With the cork example, focus solely on your enunciation, and do it so deliberately that you can feel the corners of your mouth moving and working as decisively as when they have a frustratingly large impediment (the cork) in their way. As an example, I coach the leader of a famous university. The Lego drill was transformative for him. So we practiced it enough that he was able to shift it to an imperceptible activity. He built the muscle memory to find a tiny moment of physical stillness at the end of each thought. To commit to this 100 percent, when on video calls—and when nervous or anxious—he places his hand on his desk, subtly and imperceptibly. This muscle-memory skill has allowed him to pause and consider what he wants to say next, even in fraught situations.

## LET YOURSELF OFF THE HOOK

Once you have found your focus, practiced it in low-consequence situations, and built some muscle memory, you're ready to give it a test drive in higher-stakes situations. Here I recommend being as inventive as possible and finding an on-ramp to start from a position of comfort. Let me explain what I mean.

It is very rare that you have absolute restriction on what you can and cannot do as a speaker. Remember all those arbitrary distinctions you circled at the beginning of this chapter? When speaking, give yourself a helping hand—if possible, start in the mode that is easier for you and then shift to what is more challenging. I'll give you some examples.

- ✦ If a formal script is difficult for you, start by freelancing a bit, and then segue into your formal remarks. Perhaps even tell your audience, with full transparency, that you now “want to read some prepared remarks because it's so essential I don't leave any of this out.” Is there a law that you can't tell people you're reading from a script? No! Might that statement liberate you from having to pretend that you're not reading? Yes!
- ✦ If speaking free-form is challenging, mark up your notes in three places and give yourself a precise task for those instances: Maybe one is “share anecdote,” another is “offer to answer any questions,” and the third is “walk through the numbers.” Might bracketing where you need to speak in a free-form manner help you feel some security? Yes!
- ✦ If talking into a video camera is nerve-racking, tell the person running the camera that you want to do two full run-throughs of what you're going to say, and they should just let the camera keep recording throughout. As soon as you finish the first, just keep going and do a second “take” immediately. Might having the first, slightly stiffer version of your content out of the way make the second one that follows looser? Yes!

- ✦ If talking to a large audience is scary, begin by talking to one person. As you're walking to the front of the room, tap someone on their shoulder, shake their hand, and say something extremely positive to them: "Good to see you!" or "Glad you could make it" or "Right at the front—I like it!" Might giving your body a chance to say some words out loud to one person before addressing many give you a baby step into your remarks? Yes!
- ✦ If standing is scary, find a way to begin seated and then gravitate to standing. You can tell your audience you're doing so. "In a moment I'll stand up and walk us through some material on the large screen, but I'd like to begin just with a discussion to find out more about what's on your minds." Might giving your body a few minutes to present while seated ease the transition to standing? Yes!
- ✦ If "presenting" makes you nervous, but "discussing" doesn't, begin your presentation with questions to the audience. Again, you can tell them you're doing so. "I'd like to make today as applicable to you as possible, so I want to start off with a couple questions." And then ask your audience some questions. Once you're in the flow of the Q&A, segue into your content. Might giving yourself the reminder that all presentations are ultimately a response to a question help you present conversationally? Yes!
- ✦ If copresenting helps you feel more secure, enlist a copresenter or demonstrator/volunteer at the beginning. Then challenge yourself to have that volunteer take up less and less of the initial time at the beginning of your presentation and eventually shift to solo presenting. Might having a partner in crime de-escalate your perception of pressure? Yes!

These are all examples of how to do something you probably haven't done to this point: Be nice to yourself. No one says you must execute the very-highest-level-of-difficulty act. So don't—yet. Find your focus, practice it a ton, slowly transition to higher-stakes opportunities, and build on-ramps

for yourself that allow you to start with something you're more comfortable with and then shift to what's less comfortable once you're cookin'.

We're almost to the end of this chapter. You may be surprised by a few things we haven't covered, like visualization, breathing exercises, and/or drugs.

Many people: (1) visualize their performance in advance; (2) use box breathing, 1:3:2 performance breathing, or some other type of intentional breathing to center themselves; and/or (3) rely on blood pressure medications to medically manage their heart rate before presenting.

If visualizing, meditative breathing, or beta-blockers are tools you use and realize benefit from, far be it from me to remove effective tools. I don't make those tactics a focus of my coaching practice because I don't see them deliver the level of utility that everything else I have just offered in this chapter does. Hence, my approach.

Beta-blockers, as an example, are medications some people use to alter their blood pressure before presenting. The net result is they get less of the racing-heart symptoms that often frustrate them in high-stakes situations. Sounds like a miracle cure, right? Consider this though: Many actors who use beta-blockers during a period of their career for important auditions or performances drift away from using them long-term because the medication can also dull some of the quicksilver moments that heightened attention—and, yes, nerves—unlock. So the electricity of their performance might dim.

I make no claims, recommendations, or diagnoses about anything pharmacological—I have no qualifications to! I only mention beta-blockers because you may have encountered or will encounter them in discussions about nerves. If you did use, are using, or will use medication to navigate nerves, I neither suggest you do or do not use them. I am not a doctor (nor did I ever play one on TV), so I will sidestep the subject matter entirely.

I will examine each of the other tactics in case you want to try them. Every word in this book is intended to help you find a level of liberation and freedom with communicating and a release valve from perfectionism and self-critique. Explore these tools, too, if you like.

Please keep in mind that the following activities are preparatory activities. They are things you do before you do the thing. This is part of the



reason why I recommend them as optional and not mandatory. For some people, they're helpful preparation; for others, they're not. For everyone, they aren't in-the-moment adjustments. And the ultimate test of whatever nerves strategy you employ is this: Can you do it while you're communicating when nervous? That test is why I recommend the approach that I do in this chapter. So the mandatory, primary lesson from this chapter is *finding, practicing, and mastering your physical, unmistakable, and integrated focus*. The optional ones are in these next few paragraphs.

- ✦ First, just as we did moments ago, you can rely on the warm-ups in the previous chapter—full-body movement, tongue twisters, yawns, etc.—to both wake up and relax your body physically before communicating.
- ✦ Second, you can do a series of tense-and-release activities. They're as simple as they sound: Tense all your muscles as much as possible, and then release them. Tense for three seconds, then release. Do that three times. Then do it for six seconds, also three times. You can experiment with the length of time that feels ideal to you.
- ✦ Third, you can explore box breathing and 1:3:2 performance breath. Box breathing is simply using equal time in four stages of the breath cycle: inhale, hold, exhale, hold. For example, you can inhale for a count of three; hold for a count of three; exhale for a count of three; and hold for a count of three. You can then tinker with the length of time but keep it identical for each of the four stages.

1:3:2 breathing is similar, but this technique uses unequal amounts of time in three stages of the breath cycle: one count of breathing in; three counts of holding the breath; and two counts of breathing out. To unleash the benefit of this drill, keep in mind the following technical requirements. First, breathe in as much as you can in the first stage. That means the first round of doing this will feature a very quick and expansive first breath; get as much air into your body as possible in one count. The second phase is straightforward:

hold your breath. In the third phase, focus on evacuating all your air in the time allowed, and to help you do that, exhale on a sustained *s* sound.

Next, double and then triple the length of time in each stage. So, the time allocations become 2:6:4 and then 3:9:6.

Unlike in other sections, I'm not going to try to motivate you to do the techniques and exercises in this chapter or the full approach of finding, practicing, and mastering your physical, unmistakable, integrated focus or the warm-up and breathing activities just outlined. I'm guessing that if navigating nerves is a challenge for you, you have all the motivation you need to implement and experiment with these tools ASAP, without any nudging! They are to be practiced and performed; they apply when you are live and when virtual.

This means we can move on to an essential related topic, which is the source of a lot of speakers' nerves in the first place: the fear of "What If I Make a Mistake?"

And that's the topic of our final skill-building chapter.