



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

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Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Karen Kangas Dwyer
Pat Gehrke
Suzy Prentiss
Joshua Westwick

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Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hello, I'm Trevor Perry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association and I'm your host on *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. Thanks for joining us for today's episode.

Hey, listeners. Have you ever wondered what first-year university students, actors, and politicians have in common? They may all experience some form of communication apprehension, and today's episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*, addresses issues related to communication apprehension including speech anxiety and how these issues affect both students and professionals. Joining me today is an all-star panel of experts in public speaking and communication education names that may be very familiar to many of you, Professors Karen Kangas Dwyer, Pat Gehrke, Susie Prentice, and Josh Westwick. Let me tell you a little bit more about this all-star panel.

Karen Kangas Dwyer is now Professor Emeritus, former basic course director, graduate certificate program chair, and assistant school director in the College of Communication, Fine Arts, and Media at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The program Dwyer directed won NCA's basic course divisions top program award and Dwyer was the University of Nebraska's State System Outstanding Professor. Dr. Dwyer has written several articles published in NCA journals on speech anxiety and instructional communication as well as books and book chapters on speech anxiety, public speaking, speech centers, and communication apprehension. Hi Karen and welcome to *Communication Matters*.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Karen Kangas Dwyer:

Hello. I'm glad to be part of this wonderful podcast.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Pat Gehrke is a professor in the department of English language and literature at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Gehrke's research includes topics such as communication education, the history of the communication discipline, and public engagement. Gehrke has published a multimedia textbook for teaching the first year communication course online. Hi, Pat. Welcome to the podcast.

Pat Gehrke:

Thanks, Trevor. It's great to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Suzy Prentiss is a distinguished lecturer in communication studies and a communication faculty member in the physician executive MBA program in the Haslam College of Business at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Dr. Prentiss specializes in teaching business and professional communication with a focus on effectively managing speech anxiety. Prentiss' approach to presentations emphasizes the power of storytelling, connection, and authenticity. Hi, Suzy. Welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Suzy Prentiss:

Hi, Trevor. It's great to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And Josh Westwick is an associate professor of communication studies, associate director of the School of Communication and Journalism and co-director of the basic communication course at South Dakota State University. Dr. Westwick researches assessment in the basic communication course as well as public speaking anxiety. Hi, Josh. Welcome to the podcast.

Joshua Westwick:

Hi, Trevor. Thanks for having me.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So let's talk a little bit first about what communication apprehension actually is. And Karen, I'm wondering if you could start us off. How do we define communication apprehension? Tell us a little bit about what are the feelings and the behaviors that are associated with comm ap?



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Karen Kangas Dwyer:

Well, first of all, to define communication apprehension, our research in communication studies is very clear about what it is. It's been researched for over 60 years. And so communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others. It's one of the most researched areas in communication studies. And basically, we've looked at research over all communication apprehension, and we've also looked at specific contexts. And by context, I include public speaking, group discussions, meetings, and interpersonal communication. And those are four major contexts. We've also done a lot with interview anxiety just so that people know that it's common. All of these anxieties about communication is common. We also know it doesn't make you strange or derelict or someone that is bothered by other anxieties. It's a very specific anxiety. And actually, what's interesting about public speaking anxiety is we're finding now that up to 80% of our students have a speech anxiety. They're reporting it in many of our studies. Businesses are reporting it. A lot of it has to do with technology. For example, Generation Zs are actually getting more anxious about speaking because they're so often able to communicate with technology and not have to speak in front of others. So this is something that really impacts our students.

And so to answer the second part of the question about what are the behaviors or feelings and actually, it's also cognitions, I want to say that people that have anxiety know about it. For example, even if you weren't afraid to communicate in front of others, what if I said there's a large hornet in our room now? How would you feel if you knew there was a hornet, maybe a murderous hornet in the room? Can't you just feel how you would feel? I mean it's gone past your mind. Could he bite you? It's now you can feel it in your body. You can feel it in your nervous system. So those are some of the feelings that students have. It may be concerning public speaking. It may be dry mouth. It may be just an overwhelming nervousness. It may be a pounding heart or blushing or shaking or perspiring or a wavering voice or even indigestion. And so they feel it in their sensations. They feel in the nervous systems. But they also think it. One of the biggest, biggest thoughts that actually pervades a public speaking anxiety is I can't meet the expectations of the audience. They're judging me and I won't be able to meet what they would expect. They'll give me a bad evaluation. They'll think that I'm stupid. I can't be what they might expect. They'll see my nervousness. Some people even experience an imagery, strong images, some of us image more than others, but if you have a strong image, you might picture yourself being laughed at or people making fun of you or I had one student tell me she pictured herself passed out and she could never get over it. And the interesting thing is rather it's online or face-to-face public speaking, it's still an anxiety that a good part of our population experiences and it really goes along with the whole idea from our counselors at UNO, there is a great increase in anxiety. In fact, it's the number one problem students report on our campus is they have anxiety in general. So having to give a speech is one more stressor and they'll feel it everywhere.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Trevor Parry-Giles:

NCA has some videos about speech anxiety that we've made public and known to everyone. In one of those videos, it asserts that 75% of the global population may suffer from speech anxiety. And Suzy, beyond how common speech anxiety is, what are some of the other reasons why and how this should be fundamental to sort of communication research and communication teaching?

Suzy Prentiss:

So you did mention the 75% and Karen mentioned upwards of 80%. And I just looked at some numbers that I collected this year and in my classes, I came out with about 75% of students who reported on a scale of 1 to 10 numbers 5 to 10 as their speech anxiety level. And of that, another 30% ranked at an 8 or higher. So this goes and connects right to what Karen was saying that we're just kind of seeing an overall rise in it. Might be just because of COVID. Might just be things like grade pressure, other things. But our students are experiencing it. And it's really important that we talk about it and it's not just day one or chapter two. But it's this conscious and intentional we're going to unpack this, we're going to work on it, we're going to figure out ways to help you in our classes but more importantly, when you go to another class or you go speak at a meeting or you interview for a job. So that transferability that I think we all agree is so important in a basic course, that really comes to play when we talk about speech anxiety. And I think inherently we all want to empower our students. And so our students with speech anxiety, just like the 75% of the population, they have stories to share and they have contributions to make and they have innovations that can help all of us. But yet, if they don't feel empowered to share those, then we all miss out. So I think for all of us, the call is not just to help those students who come to our classes, excited about public speaking. There are a few of those. Or the ones who are like, I just need to get through this. But the ones who see this as a challenge they don't feel they can encounter or something that's so debilitating. We owe it to them to empower them.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, what I hear both you and Karen suggesting is that we're not just talking about a little nervousness. This is a significant dynamic that a lot of our students face. And Pat, you've taught a lot of these students and we know how they feel. Both Karen and Suzy alluded to different contextual factors that are having an impact on communication anxiety and apprehension. Are you seeing that, that students are experiencing different forms of communication apprehension as a function of say COVID or the increase in social media? How has speech anxiety changed?

Pat Gehrke:

Some things about speech anxiety have really remained the same. The kinds of experiences that Karen and Suzy were talking about, we find those going back in the literature really all the way back to 100 years ago, before we even called it public speaking anxiety and some of the research terms have changed. But really like that experience is pretty consistent and it's even consistent



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

across different kinds of anxiety. Those feelings happen, like Karen said, if a hornet's in the room or you'll find it in the research on math anxiety or tennis anxiety or there's anxiety of everything in the research out there. I think that it's important to hold onto some of those aspects that don't change as we move into different contexts. So one in particular I want to emphasize is called the inverted-U hypothesis which has been around for about a hundred years, a little more. It's also called the Yerkes-Dodson law. And it says that optimal performance happens at a mid-range of anxiety, not a low range of anxiety. And that's one of the empowering things I like to share with students early on. Although today, more people are familiar with that concept through something like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow. But it's incredibly well-documented. And one of the things I find really fascinating about anxiety is a lot of the experiences, especially the bodily feelings, the affective experiences, and the behavioral experiences between anxiety and excitement are the same. We have a lot of very similar experiences and researchers sometimes account for this by using a general category called arousal when they're studying these two. Because you can't separate these phenomena very well. But it does mean that we've found some tools recently and there's been some recent research really in the last five, ten years about helping students cognitively reframe their affective and behavioral experiences as excitement. Just to say to themselves, instead of saying I'm anxious about my presentation, saying I'm excited about my presentation. And some of the research indicates that they perform better and enjoy speaking more.

Now of course, some things have changed dramatically in the last hundred years. One, of course, is that students today represent a greater diversity of backgrounds and standpoints. In the early 20th century, only about 10% of Americans ever attended college of any kind even for one semester and a far greater percentage of them were male, affluent, white, cisgendered, neurotypical, and without disability. At the same time, fewer faculty back then displayed as much of any sympathy for anyone who is anxious or any interest in helping them. And I think that situation's improved a lot, especially in the last 30 or 40 years. But in my opinion, speech anxiety is still too often pathologized and stigmatized in the classroom. I think there's been some fantastic work in positive psychology which is creeping in through the positive communication literature into the communication studies discipline and in strengths-based pedagogy which there's been just a tiny bit of work in the communication studies discipline on. But there's a lot of room and a lot of work left to do in order to try to think about standards and views of communication competence that are less biased, less gendered, less ableist, less sexist, and so forth. There's also some research that indicates that students with historically marginalized identities face unique barriers in the public speaking classroom. Anxiety is not distributed evenly in our society, even if none of us are really immune from experiencing it. Josh said really beautifully in a meeting we had a couple weeks ago, public speaking is an equity issue. That's really struck me.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

I think that's so right on and I might extend that just a bit further to say that even while public speaking textbooks in the 80s and 90s provided greater representation of diverse speakers, they held onto standards for communication competence that reflect a narrow range of standpoints. We're seeing some headway there but things like standardized rubrics based on specific behaviors like eye contact and gesture will always fail the test of accessibility and universal design and amplify the experience of anxiety for some of our most marginalized students. Improving that part of communication pedagogy is I think our biggest challenge today and one that's going to require a big paradigm shift for a lot of teachers. It's one I'm still struggling with in my classroom. And finally, I know this is a long answer but it is kind of a big question there. How has it changed in 100 years? You're right. The changes in technology produce new kinds of anxiety experiences and speaking dynamics for our students as we've all learned really firsthand in this shift to online learning during COVID-19 pandemic. But we want to talk a lot more about that. I can talk a great deal more about the online learning space and how the COVID-19 rapid shift online has affected anxiety. But I'm going to stop there for now and come back to it later if you like.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Oh yeah. We'll come back to the online teaching part. I was fascinated with something that you said, Pat, about the way instruction has changed and the way the sort of mindset of instructors has changed. Back when I was in college, there was sort of the Charles Kingsfield model. Right? From that old movie, *The Paper Chase*, as this hard-edged and very masculine, very white, very dominant, very controlling, very inflexible. And you're right. I think we have to change. We have changed. And Josh, I guess the question for you is in all of those changes, how have we improved the ways that we can recognize, assess, and properly I guess confront or instruct about communication apprehension? I mean how do we know it when we see it?

Joshua Westwick:

Right. And that's such a great question, Trevor, and I think it's important to recognize that recognizing the importance and significance of assessment when we are working to help students manage these issues. If we want to be able to implement best practices, we need to be able to have documentation that those practices actually work. And the best way that we can do that is through actual assessment in the classroom. And so there are several different tools that we have traditionally used to assess communication apprehension or speaking anxiety in the classroom and I'll talk just briefly about a couple of those. But I think it's important for our listeners to recognize that before we begin assessment, we need to make sure that we have a clear understanding of what it is exactly that we want to assess so that we can choose an appropriate assessment measure or tool to assess that. Right? In the public speaking classroom, our concern primarily focuses on helping students address specifically public speaking anxiety. In a communication survey course, we might look more broadly at the different contexts associated with communication apprehension.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

So once you've decided what you are assessing, you can select the appropriate tool. Right? So for a public speaking course, we have traditionally relied on the personal report of public speaking anxiety and in survey courses, we might use the PRC 24, the personal report of communication apprehension, both of those tools developed by the late Jim McCroskey. However, those are great tools. They've stood the test of time. But they are becoming dated and I was really happy just at this past NCA conference and the conference before that, I heard two different papers that were presented about assessing these particular variables. And there's some research that I hope is going to be coming out in our NCA journals in the near future that introduce the public speaking fear scale and the public speaking attitude scale, really new approaches that I think will allow us to provide hopefully more authentic and accurate assessment of what's going on in this particular area. But having that data is insightful and without the data, without the assessment, we don't have a way of knowing if what we're actually doing or trying to do is actually helping the students. At my institution, we worked very hard to implement a very specific course design and practice a course design that is targeted at helping students reduce their anxiety. So there are elements of skills training, cognitive modification, and exposure therapies built into the design of the course and it is through assessment of our course that we've been able to show that success. Right?

And you talked about the impact of COVID-19 and we are currently now re-looking at that assessment with that particular variable in mind because we suspect, and I think we've all probably seen, that there has been a change as a result of the pandemic, the way we teach, and the way we're communicating in our classrooms. And the best way to get at that is through assessment.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Good assessment. Yeah.

Joshua Westwick:

Good assessment.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right, right. Josh alluded to some techniques that can be used, some approaches I guess. Technique sounds a little technique-y but approaches to helping our students confront and manage speech anxiety and communication apprehension. And in one of those videos that NCA has, Stephen Lucas of *The Art of Public Speaking* fame, Stephen Lucas at Madison suggests that one technique is to really work hard on the introduction so that you reduce the anxiety that you might be feeling at the beginning. Suzy, are there other notable techniques that we can apply? And Suzy and Karen both, I mean are there success stories from your students of where these techniques have really worked?



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Suzy Prentiss:

One of the things that I use with my students and I think it is a compilation of some of the other things that we'll talk about today, but a big one is the idea of reframing and just how we look at it differently. And I just have a few examples. The first one we do is we talk about, as we've done today, how common this is. Because for so many of our students, they truly believe they are the only one in a classroom or in a boardroom or an interview that has it. And once we start to talk about how common it is, that just immediately empowers them and it validates their feelings. They're not the odd one. They're actually in the majority. And that flipping the script if you will or flipping the power dynamic, that can be so empowering. And it's so simple but yet students consistently say that that was a turning point. Another thing we can do with reframing is we reframe presentations more as conversations because most of our students will say, I'm good one-on-one. It's the one versus many. And it's like yeah, the numbers don't work well for that. But if we say really, it's still, you're still talking to one person. You're just doing it for the convenience of time and logistics all at once. That really helps as well because for most of us, like Pat mentioned, and Pat and I've had these conversations we will continue to have these conversations, platform oratory is not natural. It's not natural for most of us. It's not the way most of us will ever communicate. Yet we do it in our classes. So we're setting students up in a situation that is unnatural, unfamiliar. You add that with anxiety or it compounds the anxiety. So let's take that away from it and just say, hey, you're having a conversation. You're talking about something ideally you love, you're passionate about, that you want to make a difference. Include some story, include some details. Let's have fun with this. And again, that reframing can be very empowering.

The final way that we can reframe it, and I think Karen mentioned this earlier, the audience is not against us and yet in the research I've done, students consistently say fear of the audience as one of the number one concerns. But when we talk in class and I ask them, well, how do you feel when you hear a presenter, especially one that's nervous? They say, oh, I want to take it away from them. I want to tell them it's okay. I'm empathetic. I'm supportive. And then we pause and we let that sink in. And it's like okay, so if you're part of the audience and you want the presenter to be successful, don't you think they want the same for you? And so again, that reframing as a conversation with people who want to engage and support you, a lot of that really reduces the anxiety. But I'm going to tag team Karen because I know she has some thoughts about this.

Karen Kangas Dwyer:

Techniques, I know, Trevor, you said, oh, techniques, it sounds like such a, maybe a counseling word or something out of our field. But it's really not. I go back with 25 years of research when I first started doing my dissertation on communication apprehension and communication anxiety. And that is really the word that you hear throughout the communication discipline is techniques. And I totally believe in what Suzy was saying reframing. That's really a cognitive technique, getting people to think about it differently. But we do have some really well developed and well researched



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

techniques that will never go away. They will always help people be successful in public speaking. Back in 2000, the whole journal of Comm Ed was all about speech anxiety and how to help students. And I wrote an article for that and it was on the multi-dimensional approach. And so here's the bottom line, is that students have to find out where their anxiety is. Are they thinking of this as a performance? Are they thinking the audience is one big ear? Are they thinking the audience is going to hate them? Or are they like those of us that know a hornet's in the room, they're not even thinking. Their body just starts shaking. I had a student say, and he was actually a counseling major. And he tried to tell himself everything but nothing would work because his stomach would contract and his whole body would feel nervousness. And he could never get over it and that's because the actual source in multi-dimensional therapy, which is counseling, but it's well researched in many areas including our communication anxiety. And that's what, like my whole conquer your speech anxiety is based on that and there was such a revelation to me when I found out that oh, we are a seven dimensional being and we could experience anxiety at any of these dimensions. And whichever dimension is experiencing the anxiety, we need to learn a technique that targets it.

So I want to just remind people of a few techniques that are really important, that there's no reason why every instructor, professor, or GTA cannot incorporate it into the classroom. Again, I just want to say to every person that's listening to this, you are an expert. If you're a communication studies major, GTA, graduate student, professor, instructor, you are an expert in our field in communication. If you haven't read all of our literature on helping people overcome speech anxiety, just do it. Just do it. And if you don't like a lot of the research is quantitative. I'm a quantitative researcher. So what? I always tell my students, read the introduction, read the literature review, and read the discussion which will rehash what was done. So you don't have to be a quantitative researcher. So here we go. I'm going to just tell you some fast things technique wise. All right. So when you're dealing with sensations and effect, if you're like the student who was the counseling major and all the reframing didn't work. Right? It didn't work. Because you have a sensation and effect or part of your personality that is being disturbed. All right. So one of the big techniques, easy, is called diaphragmatic breathing. It's not simply a deep breath. It's a technique. Medically, it's been proven to reduce blood pressure when people practice it five minutes a few times a day. It reduces panic attacks. It prepares people that have anxiety for surgery because it soothes the sensations. And so it is a technique that really starts with focusing on breathing out to a slow count of six, breathing in eventually, holding it, and then breathing out again. Good techniques are well developed and you just need to read it and teach it to your class. All right. So diaphragmatic breathing targets sensation effects. Some students, all the reframing in the world doesn't help because it's sensations. It's the hornet in the room. All right.

Cognitions, the reframing is great. One of the things that I added to my little I conquered speech anxiety book for college students is this whole idea of positive self-statements and that's kind of



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

new since 2015 in our literature. It's a form of cognitive restructuring but it involves if then statements. If I feel like the audience won't like me and I say to myself the audience isn't going to like this, I then have a statement that I tell myself instead. I have researched this, I'm offering the best I can, and I will do a great job. I will help some. So it's just, it's a list of positive self-statements that are available and you put them into your mind right before and right after a speech. And that's one easy addition that anybody can include in the classroom. And then third of all, and it's usually in a lot of our textbooks, is this whole idea of visualization. Again, well researched, well researched. Teaching students to go through a visualization process of five minutes, their scripts, everywhere, just to go through and see themselves in a positive experience.

Anyway, I really believe that the multi-dimensional approach is the way to go. Help students find their source and then create a climate where students are helping each other in that they're supportive. And we can talk about that more later. But I do believe we can't get away from the word techniques and I teach students about the techniques because when I'm no longer there, they get out of my class, then what are they going to rely on? They have to go back to the techniques. They have to go back to the reframing. Diaphragmatic breathing, most of my students said if they practiced it, I started the first day of class, five minutes before every class, before the first meet and students then are assigned to do it at the beginning of every day and in the evening if they can. Research not only in communication studies with public speaking—look up how and David and Dwyer. Anyway, we know it changes our classes. It changes their feelings. And we know it actually changes their anxiety level. But we're mostly concerned about public speaking. So I just say learn some of these well-researched techniques, bring them to your classroom. It'll change your students' lives. And if you're new to it, get over it and read some interesting information in our discipline about what you can do in the classroom.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

The classroom is an interesting place to think about in terms of all of the changes that have happened over the last year. The classroom climate, the ways in which we teach techniques have all been shifted I guess by the COVID pandemic and by the explosion of online teaching. Pat, I know you have some experience in this realm and you alluded earlier to wanting to talk about speech anxiety and communication apprehension in an online classroom. I'm envisioning some kind of Zoom anxiety.

Pat Gehrke:

One thing I think to recognize right away is that teaching and learning online during normal conditions and teaching and learning online during a pandemic are different in some important ways. During the pandemic, most students don't have access to the same support services and resources and even if those facilities are open and available, many students might face significant health risks by using them. More students and faculty are sharing limited bandwidth or computers



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

with siblings, parents, and children who are also working and learning from home. More of them are doing childcare or homeschooling and many of them have encountered financial hardship. And of course, all of that makes for one giant anxiety avalanche for some folks. And honestly, there have been times during this pandemic when I've just said to a student or even a colleague, like your mental and physical health are more important than this class. We have to remember that distress is cumulative. We each have a certain amount of distress tolerance and every bit of stress in our lives eats away at that. So we really have to cut everyone including students and teachers a break when everybody's feeling the strain of not just COVID but the dumpster fire that was 2020. I think public speaking education is incredibly important but survival probably needs to be a bigger priority.

That said, even in the best of times, online learning does change the anxiety experience. As you mentioned, direct address into a camera is a different experience and can produce different anxiety responses than brick and mortar presentations. Recording can heighten anxiety for some students and online learning even without the public speaking part sometimes introduces ambiguity that increases anxiety, what's known as the hidden syllabus of college that produces challenges for first generation students especially expands and affects more students when we move online. So for faculty, I recommend an extraordinary level of explicitness and checking one's assumptions about students. Many of our students had little or no experience with recording video or video chat tools before COVID. In an asynchronous class, they don't have the same chance to hear each other's questions and online students generally have less peer support from their classmates. And all of that means we have to build a lot more into the course and be more explicit and frequent in reminding them that they can always email us with any questions.

Now for student learning online, I recommend five pieces of advice to students. One, ask if you're not sure. If the assignment assumes a skill you haven't learned, ask the instructor for a tutorial. If you haven't done, recorded, or edited a video before, you're not expected to just suddenly know that out of nowhere. If something in the assignment is unclear, ask for clarification. Just send a quick email. Uncertainty reduction is a great anxiety management tool. Two, practice using the technology casually before using it formally. I built this into my online classes. They goof around and do something small with the tech before they have to use it for a big assignment. The same technology they're going to use for a public speaking class is used for making makeup tutorials and videos of dogs and cats playing keyboards. So just have some fun with it before you do something serious with it. Third, remember that you can curate your space. That live video chat or even recorded video can be a really intimate medium. It often invades private spaces and students sometimes can only record in a dorm room or even their bedrooms. So I encourage them to choose your spot to record and only show us what you're comfortable revealing. You only need a few feet of blank wall and a little experimenting with a camera to really hide all of your room. You have a right to keep your private spaces private. Fourth, remember that a human connection



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

is more important than technical wizardry. Great YouTubers build followings because they connect with people, not because of their cameras or lighting or graphics or any of that. It's because they make a human connection and I would argue that's even more important in online public speaking than brick and mortar platform oratory. But I think it's also now become definitive of all successful communicators in our age. That kind of human connection is now transferring into large-scale platform oratory and brick and mortar spaces as well. The standards for online are becoming the standards for offline communication. And fifth and finally, most of those traditional anxiety management practices that Karen and Suzy were talking about, they still work. Like the old nuggets like diaphragmatic breathing and visualization help with just about any kind of anxiety including tech anxiety. So keep using them. I mean heck, I was doing them this morning to prep for this broadcast.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, and that's an interesting segue to my next question. I've always, when I used to teach public speaking, I've always been pretty honest with my students about my own communication apprehension and my own speech anxiety. I went through a period in my 30s when I'd go to a conference and I'd just freak out for some weird reason. I was a speech debater. I never had that problem when I was a kid. But then I don't know what happened. Something happened. I probably shouldn't tell this story but I gave a paper once on a panel and it was this long, narrow room and a friend of mine was in the way back. And when I went to reach to get a glass of water, my hand was just shaking. And I quickly gulped the water and went on. And I thought, I'm okay, nobody saw it, nobody saw my hand shaking there. And afterwards, I said to my friend, I said, well, what'd you think? And he said yeah, I don't know, you were a little nervous. Your hand was really shaking. And I'm like, no. So I'm curious, without getting too personal, do we have experiences that we're willing to share about our own communication anxiety and do you think it's a good thing for people to share that with their students? Karen, you've done a lot of work on classroom climate issues is that a dimension to the classroom climate that works?

Karen Kangas Dwyer:

I have and you're probably referring to the connected classroom climate surveys that myself and my colleagues launched over a decade ago and it's really taken off because it's measuring the connectedness, student-to-student connectedness. So I do think two things to keep in mind is that with your classes, we mostly intuitively know this but especially for highly anxious students, is that you need to really develop climate. Number one, it starts with the teacher being immediate. It starts with the teacher reaching out to each student to even in the way that you talk, that each student realizes that you're aware that they're there and that you care. That one-minute manager that was out like I think in the 90s. I started really doing it when they had a one-minute teacher/ Every student in my class, I would try to say something positive to at least every other day. And I think I began to develop a really great climate with my students. And then of course, just being



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

myself, I always say, why is it that I don't feel anxious speaking to you but I do feel anxious when I go to a national communication conference and there's other researchers and published authors in the field? Why would I get anxious then? And they're real quick to respond that it's people that are higher status which we can talk about or they say that in so many words or it's people that are going to be evaluating you more sharply, things like that. And so I do think it's important to share that you did have it but you know ways to overcome it.

And I want to say one more thing about climate especially since I am a researcher and have been a researcher in connected classroom climate especially student-to-student. Students don't come in always wanting to connect with each other. The extroverts want to connect with everybody. The introverts, the busy ones, they don't care really if they connect except with the teacher. So we really have to teach students-to-student connectedness which is what have been brought out, especially the students that have CA. When they feel more connected to the classroom, they have more change in anxiety levels throughout the semester with the connection. We have to teach students how to connect. We have to develop activities where they're doing work in dyads, where they're maybe, I always had my students turn to each other and say something positive, like tell them something you appreciated about their speech or have them tell them a positive self-statement and say it in a way that they're going to want to use it or small group mini speeches. I teach them SOFTEN from the get-go. SOFTEN is an acronym that came out of a book in like the 80s that had to do with listening. But I teach it to teach students how to both deliver kind of a bit more of an expressive delivery but also how to show the people they're listening. And if you have an audience that's responding to the speaker, it's much easier. So if you don't know SOFTEN, it's smile, open body position, forward lean, not head down in the cell phone, and reaching out with maybe a touch, not necessarily a touch but some sort of a manner that's reaching out, eye contact, at least looking up at the audience, and an occasional nod. And it's amazing how just some small things but teaching people how to be supportive, ruling out negativity in the classroom. After every speech, asking people that spoke, that didn't speak to stand up and go to each person in the classroom and tell them something you gained from their speech and you appreciate it. So I do think climate goes a long way and it starts with the teacher. But we have to teach the students how to connect with each other.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm going to use that SOFTEN for the podcast. You just leave it online. Right? Josh, SOFTEN sounds like a great approach to creating a good climate and working with communication anxiety. There are a lot of myths and misconceptions though out there. The familiar one, the one we see throughout popular cultures imagine the audience naked. Are there others? Are there other misconceptions or myths about communication apprehension that we should be avoiding?



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Joshua Westwick:

Yes, great question, Trevor, and I just put it out there. This is not a practice that I've engaged in. I just want to have that on the public record and certainly not a strategy that I recommend especially for those of us teaching public speaking to a collegiate audience with hormonal young adults. Right? There's better techniques, many of which have been shared here. But the reality is this is prevalent. Right? There are people, a lot of people who think this is the best way forward. So I was doing a little digging because I was like where did this come from. Right? And I can't document it all the way back historically but I could tell you that it appears this myth was popularized in a 1974 episode of *The Brady Bunch* in which one of the characters was preparing for a school debate and told just imagine your audience naked. Right? So a better strategy for Jan and folks who are really feeling anxious about those public presentations, just to reiterate some of the things we've already heard today, is to consider your audience as equals, to visualize your success, to remain focused on your message. Right? But I also want to recognize there are other common myths out there that that we need to avoid as well. Some of them include using alcohol before a presentation to calm your nerves, memorizing your presentation, avoiding eye contact with your audience, and assuming that introverts cannot be effective public speakers. I am an introvert. I've suffered from communication apprehension and public speaking anxiety my entire life. I know how to deliver an effective public presentation. So I think rather than focusing on myths and misinformation, we really need to rely on the tested strategies the techniques that have been well documented in our research, many of which has been discussed today, as we work to continue to address apprehension and anxiety in our classrooms.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's good. Boy, you learn something new every day right on the podcast. I did not know that *Brady Bunch* anecdote. That's really useful information for all of us. Oftentimes, when I'm talking to my friends in philosophy or in history or even in English literature, they will ask why our majors continue to grow. And my response is always that we live in a communication age and that communication is everywhere and that students can get a job. They want to major in something that that feels relevant to the times in which they live. And so we always ask on the podcast about how communication matters in the context of what we're talking about. And I'm wondering if you all might offer your own final snippet about how all of what you've been saying about communication apprehension and speech anxiety is a demonstration of how more broadly communication matters and it makes a difference?

Suzy Prentiss:

I think throughout our curriculum but especially in our basic course, this is where we really have to intentionally talk about speech anxiety and help empower our students. For a lot of them, especially with cuts in the high school public speaking curriculum, our class is like a one-and-done. So they come to us not really having had much experience and then they leave. And so we



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

really have to take that time to talk about how common this is to do a lot of the techniques that we've talked about, to empower them when they go on. And it goes with really the mission. If you look at our documents in NCA and just kind of what we all believe is communication professionals is that this is about empowering them for life, their role in society, and just kind of improving everything for all of us. So they can't do that if they don't feel invited to the table, if they don't feel like their contribution matters. So this is about removing hurdles and empowering them and it really helps all of us. And I'm going to add a quick quote and then I want to hear what everyone else says. But this is one of my—I love Maya Angelou and I love so many of her quotes. But this one I think is particularly important in the frame of our speech anxious students. And her quote is, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” And when I think about that and I think about all our students who have so much to offer but yet speech anxiety prevents them from sharing that, that to me is a shame and I take the mantle, as all of us do, to do everything I can to remove those barriers so their stories can be told.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, Pat.

Pat Gehrke:

I think that's so powerful, Suzy. And I've been a highly anxious person my whole life, especially I experience social anxiety which tends to correlate strongly with public speaking anxiety. It's one of the reasons I did my master's thesis on anxiety. Over the years, I've been through therapy, done hypnosis, meditated, medicated, read everything I could get my hands on that helped. But really the first place where I found tools and techniques to help with anxiety were the public speaking classrooms. My very first public speaking classroom with Dr. Jack Perella out at Santa Rosa Junior College way back in 19... . But one of the things that really has stuck with me from that time and carried me through my whole career is I think about communication education as equipment for living. And I don't think that's anywhere more true than in the anxiety education that we provide. For many of our students, the public speaking classroom is the only class they will take maybe ever that gives them tools for channeling, using, and managing any kind of anxiety. So much of what we teach are universal skills that are essential to a successful and happy life but one of the most important in my opinion is working with anxiety. And that inverted-U hypothesis was life-changing for me. Being able to see anxiety as a strength, that even if it makes me a bit frenetic at times, I can channel it into a presentation and make the presentation more powerful because I'm anxious, that was paradigm shift for me when I was younger. I do want to give a quick shout out also to the resources that Suzy's put together for students and faculty at the UT-Knoxville website in addition to the stuff on the NCA website. I think I've got this right, Suzy, but I think it's at SpeechAnxiety.utk.edu. There's some great material there, both for teachers and students who'd like more strategies in their toolbox.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And we'll be sure to link to that from the podcast page when this episode actually drops. That's great. Josh, did you want to add any communication matters final thoughts?

Joshua Westwick:

Sure. I would certainly echo the comments of Suzy and Pat about the importance and relevance that the introductory communication course plays in helping students work towards managing their anxiety and apprehension. But the work can't stop there right and I hope that that is a takeaway for our listeners today, to one, recognize that on a lot of our college campuses, students don't take an introductory communication course. Right? So within our discipline, we need to continue to tackle these issues in our upper level courses for our majors but I also think we have a responsibility to work harder to educate and help train our colleagues across our campuses on how they can also help students who are dealing with these issues in their classes. We are not the only ones who teach courses in which we ask students to orally communicate. We are the experts. However, we need to use our expertise and help our peers across campus. Doing so I think will have a broader impact on helping students manage and be successful once they leave our institutions.

Karen Kangas Dwyer:

I'm on the tail end of my career even though I started with a dissertation in this area. I want to tell you I'm willing to share anything and everything. If you are interested in how to create a one-credit online course for the whole university, I'm willing to share the whole Canvas course. If you're interested in teaching an online class, we've got that down. If you're interested in teaching an upper level class that requires some speech advanced skills plus focuses on speech anxiety, I can send you that course. I'm willing to share and send everything. So feel free and I think most of us are. But just don't be afraid to reach out and contact any of us.

Suzy Prentiss:

And I'm also going to use this opportunity to shamelessly plug that though we all agree that communication anxiety is so important in our discipline, we don't have a division to it. So I have a petition that we are trying to get that. So if anyone is interested, they can contact me and I will send them the petition and I will keep sending that out because I think this podcast and the many resources on our website just really highlight how important this is as an area of research and study and scholarship where we can do a lot of good. So thank you so much for giving us this opportunity today.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

No, that's great. And listeners may not know but NCA recently made a change that allowed members to select up to five divisions as a part of their membership rather than the old three



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

divisions. So that should help the prospects for communication anxiety or apprehension division. So contact Suzy Prentiss if you're interested in signing that petition. And again, thank you everybody for joining me. Listeners, I hope that this episode was useful, helpful, contributed to your capacity as a teacher, as a student, as a citizen, as a person in dealing with communication apprehension, communication anxiety, and all of the associated effects. So thank you as always for listening to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

In NCA news, as a reminder, submissions for the NCA's 107th annual convention are now open. The convention will be held November 18th through the 21st, 2021 in Seattle, Washington and the theme will be Renewal and Transformation. This theme focuses on how we can engage in the essential tasks of restoration and change. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic strife, political turmoil, and struggles for racial justice challenge us as communications scholars, teachers, and professionals to consider why our contributions matter more than ever before. So read the full call for this year's convention at natcom.org/convention. And complete your submission by March 31st, 2021 at 11:59 PM Pacific Time.

Also, listeners, I encourage you to visit the communication apprehension resources page on the NCA website. The page includes two concepts in communication videos about speech anxiety, one presented by Dr. Stephen Lucas, professor emeritus of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and one that is animated. Both videos are suitable for use in online or in-person teaching. And in addition, the page includes other classroom resources including strategies for reducing communication apprehension and speech anxiety. So visit this page today at natcom.org/communication-apprehension.

And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters* which will drop next Thursday, March 18th. I'll be chatting with health communication scholars Katharine Head, Christy J. W. Ledford, and Xiaoli Nan about public health communication and the COVID-19 pandemic. This timely episode will explore how public health communication about the virus has changed since our first episode about the pandemic a year ago and the insights that communication research can offer into public health communication strategies related to the COVID-19 pandemic. I really hope you'll join me for this very important episode next week on *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 28 – Communication Apprehension

Trevor Parry-Giles:

The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles. The podcast, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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