

What Stories Do You Tell Yourself?

By Darlene Davies, DTM

When we prepare a speech we hope that our stories will change lives for the better. Sometimes it's the listeners' lives that change and sometimes... through the stories we tell ourselves as we prepare... we change our own.

Every new Toastmaster has to battle with nervousness. The Toastmaster who enters a speech competition often deals with a flurry of butterflies. Do you?

A young woman, Katie, who played clarinet in a summer music camp that I attended a few years ago, taught me a valuable lesson about dealing with nerves. I started to learn to play clarinet at the ripe old age of 56. During concert band rehearsals, I concentrated so hard on learning notes and figuring out dynamics that I never worried about being nervous. That is not until we waited backstage for our turn to perform before an audience. Then the panic would start. By the time we sat down to play, my hands were shaking so much that I could hardly turn the pages of my music. Katie sat behind me and afterwards commented that she had never heard someone be able to play with the clarinet shaking so much. She was afraid I would crack my teeth on the mouthpiece.

Have you ever felt that nervous when you were speaking? I did too, but I thought I had conquered the issue long ago. Paralyzing fear snuck up on me again, like a thief in the night. Katie asked me what I was thinking of when I waited. I replayed the stories I was telling myself backstage. They went like this: what am I doing here? I am so nervous. I'll never be able to play. What if I make a mistake and ruin the concert? I think I am going to throw up. Katie laughed and gave me some advice that I have never forgotten. Your brain is like a computer. It doesn't differentiate fact from fiction. When you tell your brain a story, it believes you. So, change the story you tell yourself before performing. Move away from the people who say they are nervous. Say over and over: "I am doing this because I chose to do it. I know my stuff. This will be fun".

The next time my concert band entered the concert hall for a performance, I felt the same panic creeping over me. I didn't believe Katie's advice would work. But I gave it a try. One of the other players came over and said she was very nervous. I put on a false smile, my teeth chattered and I mumbled "It will be fun." And I moved away from her. I took a few slow, deep calming breaths. I kept saying over and over: "I am doing this because I chose to do this. I know my stuff. This will be fun".

Incredibly, my brain must have believed the story that I was telling myself. I actually was able to play during the performance and I felt good about it afterwards.

If you battle with nervousness or worry that you don't have anything worthwhile to say, listen carefully to the stories that you are telling yourself.

Change your stories so that they give your brain a positive message.

You will be amazed at the results!

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