

When sweat breaks out in a job interview

A client is sitting opposite me during job interview training. A short while later I notice his forehead starting to glisten. He looks nervous, his eyes dart back and forth. I try to ignore the fact that a bead of sweat is forming on his brow. The atmosphere is tense; it feels as though all the attention in the room is focused on that single drop of sweat. You almost expect to hear it fall.

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The discomfort was palpable. How well I know this situation! It reminded me of my former fear of public speaking, which caused me many embarrassing moments. Once at university, 200 pairs of eyes were fixed on me. I was supposed to give a short presentation. It was deathly quiet – and my voice failed me. It was humiliating.

Later, I was able to work through my fear of public speaking therapeutically. It never disappeared completely – but I learned how to deal with it. Until one day, during a seminar I was leading.

Old fears can resurface unexpectedly

After a successful first day of the seminar, I asked the participants on the morning of the second day for their impressions and questions about the previous day, as well as their wishes for the upcoming second part. I received many positive comments and expressions of anticipation for the continuation.

About halfway through the contributions, one participant openly voiced his disappointment with the course of the seminar so far and clearly articulated his expectations for the rest of the day.

I had not seen that coming. I was thunder-struck and felt my stomach tighten and my throat constrict. My fear of public speaking was back. What to do? Simply brushing it aside was not an option. My shortness of breath left me barely able to speak.

Name it to tame it

The twelve participants noticed my distress and were clearly uncomfortable themselves. I put my cards on the table: I apologised and explained that an old fear of public speaking, which I had believed myself to have overcome, had just caught up with me again, and I asked them for a moment of patience. The participants relaxed – and I, too, was able to take a deep breath again. After a few halting sentences, I found my rhythm and was able to continue moderating the seminar without any problems. Speaking the fear out loud broke its power.

Back to my client in the job interview training. Behind my back, I reached for the box of tissues, held it out to him and said with a smile: "I'm sorry I startled you – that wasn't my intention!" He gratefully took a tissue, laughed, and told me how stressful job interviews were for him. We talked about it for a while. Afterwards, we continued the interview without any further problems.

Name it to tame it. What is named loses its power. If, on the other hand, you do not address the elephant in the room, it does not go away – it simply grows bigger and bigger.

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