

Facing Down the Fear Factor in Interviews

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Q: *I've been job interviewing for three years without success. I become anxious and the feeling can be overwhelming. Please help.*

A: Few situations are more stressful than those in which you're being judged. Ask anyone who's ever paraded down a red carpet or in front of a prom date. Feeling anxious about an interview is as normal as feeling sheepish about a coffee stain on your shirt.

"It's a natural emotional reaction to feeling some threat to one's welfare," says John Binning, a psychologist and president of the DeGarmo Group, a human-resources consulting firm in Bloomington, Ill. "It's not the saber-toothed tiger getting ready to pounce on you. It's the interviewer who may think negatively about you."

Even though most interviewees may be somewhat jittery, those who think highly of their qualifications are likely to be calmer than those who don't. If you believe you're the best person for the position, you'll be less anxious. If you feel your skills are no better than other applicants', your heart is likely to pound harder.

"Anxiety can be compounded when they perceive they can't meet the threat that faces them," says Dr. Binning. Thinking that you're only average may be one source of your anxiety, he says.

In competitive situations, some people have a tendency to tell themselves they won't be able to meet the challenge, says Dennis Doverspike, a psychologist and professor at the University of Akron, who specializes in personnel testing and selection. Instead of focusing on why the company may not hire you, do an inventory of your skills and accomplishments, and repeat this list to yourself.

Saturday Night Live character Stuart Smalley's mantra that, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me," may have been a joke, but it's not that far off from what you should be thinking before you walk into an interview. Psychologists call this "positive self talk."

Of course, just telling yourself how great you are won't get you the job. Like an important game, interviews are something you have to practice for. Ask a relative or friend to act as the interviewer and help you rehearse your answers to basic interview questions.

There are certain things asked in almost every interview, such as where do you want to be in five years, says Dr. Doverspike. If you can't answer questions such as this, the interviewer will think you're unprepared.

Since you tend to panic during interviews, running through the basic questions a couple of times before turning on the television is not good enough. You need to be prepared to

the point where you can list your best qualities in staggering detail while parallel parking a Cadillac in a tight spot.

"The performance needs to be so routine you can do it in your sleep," says Dr. Doverspike.

It will also help, when you're in the interview, to fake confidence. Your body language should not suggest that you want to bolt from the room. When people are anxious, they tend to sit forward and sometimes tap their foot, says Dr. Binning. Check your posture and practice sitting with your arms in the chair or hands folded in your lap, he says.

Even though it may seem as if all of the pressure in an interview is on you, it isn't. To find someone else who's on edge, just look at the person sitting across from you.

Employers often can be as anxious to hire you as you are to impress them, says Dr. Doverspike. Interviewers may spend as much as half of the meeting trying to sell the company to you. "You have to have the idea, 'Yes, I'm nervous, but this company is trying to sell themselves to me, also. I'm a valuable employee, and they want to hire me.' " And if you think this way, they may be more likely to.