The Worst-Case Scenario: Using Humor to Give Voice to Communication Apprehension
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Objectives: Students will be able to describe and critically evaluate strategies for reducing communication apprehension.

Rationale: Communication apprehension (CA), or the level of anxiety associated with real or anticipated oral communication, is a common issue for public speaking students (see, for example, Beatty, 1988; McCroskey & Beatty, 1984; Rubin, Graham, & Mignerey, 1990). This activity uses "The Worst-Case Scenario," a card game, to confront students' communication fears in a humorous way. I conduct this activity at the very beginning (typically the first or second class meeting) of a public speaking course. I find that the activity helps establish a supportive classroom environment by making students aware of (and empathetic to) CA. Additionally, the activity promotes active techniques for minimizing speech fears and highlights skills that are important to students' growth as speakers (e.g., developing speech practice habits, working with presentation technologies, etc.). Finally, it encourages students to think about how the ways they adapt to various speaking situations can enhance or detract from their credibility as a speaker.

Materials needed: Photocopies of the "Worst Case Scenario" game card in the Appendix (one copy per group of 4-5 students).

What to do before the activity: First, I conduct a brief lecture on communication apprehension. During the conversation, I stress how CA involves anticipating issues that could occur during oral communication. I remind students that knowing how to respond to common problems for speakers is useful for overcoming some kinds of apprehension. (However, I add a caveat that anticipating issues is neither the source of, nor the solution for, all types of CA.)

Next, I provide students with a brief introduction to the Worst-Case Scenario card game. The game challenges players to identify strategies for overcoming difficult situations (e.g., How can you escape from the trunk of a car? What is the best way to survive a shark attack?). I show students examples of the game cards, and highlight the actions suggested by the cards for dealing with various scenarios. (See appendix for example) Then, I tell students they will be developing cards for the public speaking edition of the Worst-Case scenario game.

Activity: First, divide the class into groups of 4-5 students. Ask each group to brainstorm a list of the absolute worst things that could happen to them while they are giving a speech (e.g., technology failures, memory lapses, hostile audiences, physical discomfort, wardrobe malfunctions, etc).

Once the lists have been developed, ask a representative from each group to write what they have come up with on the chalk board. Then, conduct a class discussion how feasible it would be for them to experience each of the "worst cases" they have come up with. If the worst case does not seem likely (e.g., In the past, students have included "building collapses" or "a fire breaks out"), ask students if the scenario could be removed from the list.

After finalizing the list of likely worst-cases, divide the scenarios between the groups. Ask the groups to develop two recommendations for handling each scenario and two additional suggestions for preventing the situation from occurring (four total recommendations per scenario).