

It never goes away, that adrenaline overload, that 'fight or flight' feeling. But it does get easier to manage. Here's how to manage it.

Back to athletes. They tend to be fitter than other people. How do they get fit?

Did you ever hear someone say, 'I can't go for a run. I'm not fit enough.'? That's an easy argument to demolish. Going for a run is how you get fit. Olympic gold medal winners weren't born fit; they got fit. And they got fit by running, or jumping, or throwing, again and again and again. Public speaking (which is to debating what running, jumping and throwing are to athletics) is no different. You get better at it by doing it. And the more you do it the more confident you will be, not least because you will have done it in the past and therefore know you can do it in the future. Athletes talk about 'muscle memory', the way in which, if you repeat a certain action often enough, it becomes automatic, almost a part of you. Your mind can develop muscle memory too. Speak in public often enough, and it will end up seeming as normal as speaking in private. Like anything else, the more you do it, the easier it gets. Debating will have you doing it a lot.

And there's more.

Public speaking isn't the only thing that debating will give you confidence with. It will also give you confidence with private speaking. I mean the sort of private speaking where someone wants you to do something, or think something, or even be something which you know in your heart of hearts is wrong - wrong for you, or maybe just wrong full stop. If you're not used to seeing the flaws in the other person's ideas, or defending your own way of thinking, then it can be hard to stand up for yourself. You can end up either giving in, or losing your temper and storming off, maybe losing a friend in the process. If you're a debater, though, you will be able to question what you've been told, and then put your side of the story calmly, confidently and assertively.

Debaters are the sort of people who can say what needs to be said without fear or anxiety, but also without having to bully or shout, both in public and in private. People respect them for it.

As one of my students said once:

'Since I've been a debater my parents tell me I've become much more argumentative. That is so not true!'

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Because it will help you to do better at school

When I was at school, 90% of lessons consisted of us sitting there listening to a teacher who told us stuff which we wrote down. If we were lucky, he could keep good enough order for us to hear it all, and if we were even luckier, he made it interesting. Then, when we'd written it down, we learnt it off by heart, and wrote it all out again in an exam. The more we managed to remember, the higher a grade we got. The only time I got to express my views - the only time, almost, apart from break times and lunch times, I got to speak - was in the debating club.

It's different now. Students are encouraged to take much more part in their learning, to be much more active, to work collaboratively, to engage in discussion. However, there's still material to be covered, syllabuses to be completed, exams to prepare for. It can feel (back to hamsters) a bit like being on a treadmill.

Here's where the debating club comes to the rescue (again). None of the stuff you talk about in debating club will ever be in an exam. You're free to try and to fail, to get things right and get things wrong, and your future doesn't depend on it. You don't have to remember any of it once the debate's over.

And yet, at the same time, debating club will send you back to your lessons better prepared to succeed in them.

Why?

What we call humanities subjects - English, History, Geography, Philosophy and Religion, Classics, and so on - all require you to build arguments step by step, supported by evidence, taking nothing for granted. That's what debating does too. A lot of the issues you will discuss in those subjects - big topics about what's right and wrong, about how the world should be run, about what we can and can't know - come up in debating. And don't forget languages, and Maths and science subjects. They require you to think logically and clearly, to go from one concept to another in a methodical way: so does debating.

So, when you come out of debating club and go back to your lessons, you'll find that your subjects will make more sense, that you will know more about them, that you will be more confident in expressing your views in them, and that your essays will be clearer, better planned and better argued. I'm an English teacher, and I can always tell which of my students do debating, from the clarity and rigour of their writing. Debating is not only great fun, it also makes you smarter at school.

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