Nerves are normal; here’s how to deal with them

It is normal to be nervous before an oral presentation. You are doing something unfamiliar, and you are being graded or judged in some way. It feels risky. The human body kicks in with a fight or flight response that helped keep our ancestors alive but that can also be disconcerting.

Extra adrenaline is pumped out by your adrenal gland to ready to you for fight or flight. Your heart and breathing rate increase. Blood flow increases to your major muscles but decreases elsewhere. Digestion slows down, which makes your gut feel bad. Your skin may be usually hot or cold. Your pupils dilate. Your mouth becomes dry. You may need to get to the bathroom urgently. Some of these responses are useful if you need to run from a predator, but they are also strange, uncomfortable, and even scary as you prepare for an oral presentation. So, what can you do?

* Recognize that these symptoms as normal. Everyone has them. Some people feel these responses more strongly than others.
* Take several deep, slow breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Breathe slowly.
* Relax your muscles. Work systematically from face, to neck, shoulders, arms, chest, and all the way to your toes. Focus on relaxing each body part.
* Visualize a successful presentation.
* Get a good night’s sleep before your presentation.
* Get some exercise.
* Cut back on caffeine.
* Complete your draft presentation at least two days early and then spend time in those two days practicing. The more practiced you are, the easier it will be to control your nerves. See the section on Practice and Delivery for more ideas.
* Arrive at the place where you will deliver your presentation early, so that you can settle in and get comfortable with the space.
* Project a calm exterior even if you are nervous inside. Acting calm helps you become calm.
* If you see a counselor for anxiety or stress, seek the advice of that professional who knows you best. Do this long before you are scheduled for the presentation.