What are some of the things that make you nervous? Make your heart skip a beat? Make you feel like you can’t breathe, or there’s a knot in your stomach, or you’re about to throw up (or worse)? What are your phobias?

What about things you pay for that give you these feelings of fear and dread?

Now think about all of these things. What do they have in common?

In every case, we perceive that WE ARE NOT IN CONTROL.

A perceived loss of control—whether real (for example, almost falling off a cliff) or not (for example, at a scary movie)—CAUSES THE FLIGHT OR FIGHT RESPONSE to kick in. This is a natural, innate, part of being a human mammal; it is built into our systems as a survival technique.

Now, let’s think about human beings in the animal world. Are we very well equipped to fight bigger, more ferocious animals? Are we really very fast, compared, say, to a deer, to run away from an enemy? Do we have claws, fangs, hooves, or other ways to fight off or outrun an enemy? We do have superior brains, but this won’t do us much good unless we have a weapon. And when the fight or flight response became part of us, we were just one of many, many kinds of mammals—all of which have the fight-or-flight response in them—no matter how intelligent or not each of us mammals happens to be!

So, our bodies are equipped with a response we commonly call “fight or flight” that enables us to become Super Humans for a very short period of time. Here’s how it works:
Step 1: With at least one of our five senses, we PERCEIVE DANGER! For example, suddenly we hear a long BANG outside the classroom door. We look out the glass next to the door to see what caused the noise.

Step 2: This sensory input is sent, via the nervous system, to the brain for processing. The brain asks itself, “Do I know what this is? If so, is it dangerous?” For example, if we see that someone has dropped a heavy box of books, and the situation is therefore not dangerous, all systems return to normal. If, on the other hand, we see a person holding a smoking gun, or if we can’t determine what caused the noise, then the brain says, “ALERT! ALERT!” The fight or flight system is engaged.

Step 3: The brain sends a message to the adrenal glands to release adrenaline. Adrenaline to the human body is like STP to your car—it supercharges the system by “upping the octane” of the fuel in your body. Our bodies run on the same things as your car—fuel (glucose) and oxygen. So, in order to be Super Humans, we have to increase both of these.

The body’s primary goal is to increase muscle strength just long enough for us to escape from or fight off the danger. Most people experience a variety of the following symptoms, all of which are the result of being “supercharged” with adrenaline.
Dry mouth, “Butterflies in the Stomach,” a knot in the stomach, a sense of urgency (to go to the bathroom, or to actually go in extreme cases!) – These are all because the digestive system actually shuts down during the fight or flight response. Hence, no saliva, bowels stop moving, stomach stops digesting—everything quits in order to divert energy to the muscles. In fact, the liver even releases an excess store of glucose—sort of a “reserve fuel tank”—because there’s no time to eat and digest a new source of fuel.

Shaky hands, wobbly knees, facial twitches, jitters, nervous pacing or movement – The muscles are supercharged, but you have nowhere to go. You are like a car waiting at the starting line of a drag race—the driver has one foot on the gas (adrenaline) and one foot on the break (the situation, such as being in front of the room). The muscles shake just like the “revving” car—it’s the only way for the energy to get out.

“Draw a blank,” stutter, feel stupid, lightheaded, forget things, feel like you might faint – Normally, the brain uses more energy than any other body function. But when fight or flight kicks in, the body actually diverts oxygen and glucose away from the brain and to the muscles: we don’t need much thinking ability to run away from or grapple with an enemy, so we give up smarts in order to be strong!

Sweating, blushing, flushing, hair stands on end: All that extra blood is coursing through your body at a faster rate than normal which raises body temperature; sweats or cold sweats result. Blood pressure is also elevated causing small capillaries to dilate, then swell shut, resulting in blushing and flushing.

Heart pounding, rapid or shallow breathing, out of breath, heart races – The adrenaline causes the lungs and heart to increase their workload by up to 2 ½ times their resting rate—just like if you were sprinting.

So, it sounds like we’re all doomed to being nervous wrecks, right?

The bad news is that the fight or flight response is natural, innate, and impossible to prevent.

The good news is that there are some things you can do to help you deal with it:
1. PRACTICE! Think of something that made you nervous or scared the first time you did it. (Ex., jumping off the high diving board, your first kiss, driving a car, etc.) Were you as scared the second time? The hundredth time? Why not? Our brains do learn from repetition (remember the part earlier about the brain asking itself, “Do I know what this is?”). Each time we do something and we are not harmed by it, we become a little more confident and less fearful. You’ve probably heard of classes designed to help people overcome phobias such as flying—they use repetition and positive discussions after each exposure.

2. MOVE! Once adrenaline is in your bloodstream, just like once STP is in your gas tank, you can’t get it out—you can only burn it up. So do what your body wants to do—move around! Don’t anchor yourself to a podium—use your large muscle groups. Work the room, make gestures, use visual aids, even clench your buttocks (no one can see it!) to allow your muscles to use up the adrenaline in your system.

3. PRACTICE! (Did we say this already? 😊) We are always more confident when we know the material well. Deliver the speech to anyone who will listen, especially someone whose opinion matters to you. Thinking the speech in your head or practicing in the car on the way to the speech doesn’t count. Practice it in front of real people; figure out where the rough spots are and rewrite if necessary. Make it something you know well.

4. PRETEND YOU’RE THE TEACHER. Why do students who speak in front of a class get nervous but teachers don’t? The teachers feel like they are in control of the situation, even if only by virtue of title or “rank,” they know the material well, and they have been asked (or paid) to be there. Pretend your audience has invited you because they really want to hear or learn what you have to say.
5. PRACTICE! (Did we mention that yet?)

6. Finally, change your mindset about that feeling you so dread. Remember when we talked about the times you have paid for this feeling? Is there a person in this room who has not once done something—and paid for—the thrill of it? THIS IS THE SAME THING but you get it for free! Say to yourself, “Oh, boy! I could have spent $7.50 to go see the latest horror movie, or risked getting a very expensive speeding ticket by driving really fast, or even risked my life by jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, but instead, I’m going to give a speech and get the same thrill—whoopee!” 😊