



GETTY

Only some people manage to find the courage to ask a question.

SCARED TO RAISE YOUR HAND? IT'S NOT JUST YOU

Many scientists responded to my Twitter survey on daring to ask questions at seminars. **By Simon Evans**

It's the pre-pandemic era, and I'm in a sizeable auditorium. The room isn't full but it's still a good turnout, and I recognize lots of senior faculty members in the audience. I'm not today's invited speaker, who is now halfway through their 60-minute presentation – but nevertheless my hands are trembling as I rehearse what I'm going to say. When the host opens the floor to questions, I intend to raise my hand.

This is a familiar experience for me. I am excited about a one-to-one exchange with the presenter, yet I am nervous. This feeling

is driven not by a fear of how they will receive my question, but rather by what the rest of the audience will make of it. From the moment I realize I want to ask a question, I start worrying about their reaction, and, by extension, that they will use it to gauge my credentials, assessing whether or not I deserve a career in academia. For me, asking a short question is more stressful than presenting a talk.

The forced transition to online seminars during the pandemic offered no respite. I recently attended a Zoom seminar with a few dozen people participating, all from my former

research group and many of whom I know well. And yet my hands were trembling as I worried whether the urge to satisfy my curiosity would outweigh my fear of asking a question. As usual, I decided that it was worth raising my hand at the end of the talk, and I spent the remainder of the presentation in a state of nervousness. But afterwards, empowered by other scientists sharing their own stories of perceived weakness, I posted a query on Twitter: "Does anyone else start physically trembling from the point in the seminar at which they realise they're going to ask a question?"

I hoped to find one other person who goes through something similar. Yet for the rest of the day my phone was beeping with alerts, as other people shared their experiences. It carried on beeping throughout the following day, and the day after that. It was clear from the hundreds of replies I received that my question had resonated with people across academia, from undergraduates to heads of department. Many of my academic friends and collaborators were among them. I'm still flabbergasted when I look through the replies and see so many successful researchers revealing that they go bright red and their hearts pound in their ears; shaking and trembling got a lot of mentions, too. One person had even fainted as they prepared to ask a question.

It was particularly striking just how many people felt, as I always had, that they were singularly unusual in becoming anxious at the thought of asking a question. Many said they were relieved or comforted to know that others have the same experience.

There are things all of us can do to make would-be questioners feel more comfortable. One reply suggested that senior academics could make reference to preceding questions from junior audience members, which could help to validate those questions. In the same vein, telling someone next time you pass them in the corridor that you liked the question they posed at a seminar is a gesture that can give a lot of confidence. The speaker can help, too, by offering a simple "good question" before moving on to give their answer.

What about me? Since my tweet, I've gained some confidence: if I start to feel anxious before posing a question, I reassure myself that it's perfectly normal and that plenty of the people in the audience know exactly how I feel. And that really does soothe my nerves.

One thing's for sure: I'm more determined than ever not to let anxiety stop me raising my hand when the talk comes to an end.

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