

Exercise: Verbal Tics and How to Cure Them



Verbal tics keep you from communicating effectively.

“Umm ... uh ... like ... you know”

We’ve, umm, all sat through the, you know, kind of presentation that gets, like, unbearable because the speaker just can’t, you know, stop sticking umms and uhs and likes and other junk into every sentence or idea. These habitual verbal tics are sometimes rooted in problems with content, preparation, or confidence. But if you’re afflicted, you need not despair – there is a cure.

Enlist an audience to signal your tics.

Sit down with a trusted friend, colleague, or family member and start talking. You can run through a presentation you’ve done before, describe your plans for one you have coming up, or just talk about a recent event. But before you begin, make a contract with your audience of one that he or she will interrupt with a loud buzzing sound or snap of the fingers every time you say “umm” or “you know” or the like.

Learn to replace each tic with a brief pause.

Warning: As you’re interrupted again and again, you will be aghast at how often you fall back on your tics. You may get upset, even angry, and lose your train of thought more than once. But keep at it. As your awareness of them grows, so will your concentration on suppressing your tics. You’ll find that you need to slow down and think ahead. At first, you will probably have to “stop yourself” and replace each “umm” and “uh” with a brief pause.

Practice!

Break down what you’re saying into units, or sets of ideas, and try to get through one at a time without a single tic. You’ll soon be on your way to success. But don’t rely on a single such session to cure you. You must remain vigilant about your tic. Ask those you trust to remind you when you slip. You should be able to completely purge your communications of all verbal tics in three to six weeks.