We’ve all been there. For many of us, it is a nightmare when it happens.

It usually is enough for most of us to get through a presentation successfully — that means, without forgetting what we wanted to say, sticking to our outline or in extreme cases, not fainting.
Bob Stowers, clinical professor of management and leadership communication at the College of William & Mary. (Courtesy photo)

Here are some examples of rude or distracting behaviors: someone in the audience can’t stop coughing, a person has headsets or earbuds in and doesn’t seem to be paying attention, a couple of people are having a side conversation not realizing that everyone can hear them and a person in the front row emits an obnoxiously loud and very distracting yawn.

There are an endless variety of these types of interruptions. Many of them are electronically based.

Unfortunately, there are no easy cures for these. However, there are some strategies that speakers can use to handle them when they do occur.
First, what will you do if while you are speaking, you notice someone in the room who is not paying attention or may have dozed off? You have a few options.

One option, is to ignore the person if that person is not bothering anyone because waking up that person may cause serious embarrassment for them or for you. This is one of those cases where you have to determine if that person’s inattention is important or not.

In some cases, everyone needs to pay attention, particularly if some crucial information or instruction is being discussed. On the other hand, waking that person may disturb what you are communicating.

Pausing when you are speaking works wonders in certain cases.

For example, when an audience member texts, stares at their cell phone or types on their laptop when you are speaking, it can be very distracting. A simple break in what you are discussing and an obvious stare at the offending person will usually get their attention. A lighthearted comment and a smile will quickly diffuse the situation.

One note of caution for this, however. I once asked a student to stop typing on his laptop while I was lecturing. Unfortunately, the student told me that he was taking notes on what I was covering. I apologized.

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The pause technique is also effective if some people are having a private conversation in the audience while you are presenting. It does not matter if they are loud or not. They are disrespecting you as well as other audience members.

Your main speaking responsibility is to respect your audience. If you allow anyone to interfere with this prime presentation objective, you are failing your audience.

If the pause and the “evil” stare does not stop the rude behavior, then you must politely ask them to stop talking or ask them to leave if they do not do so.

Whether intentional or not, interruptions can hinder a presenter’s effectiveness. One way or another, presenters must handle them to maintain speaking control.

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