



HOW OLYMPIC ATHLETES AND MANAGERS CAN AVOID CHOKING UNDER PRESSURE

6 WAYS TO BE MINDFUL AND ALLEVIATE STRESS

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Imagine you are competing at the winter Olympic games. You have just arrived at the starting blocks of the race. All you need to do is to patiently wait for your turn to get down the hill. Cameras are on you. As the current leader, you are expected to win. You know how to do it, after all, you have executed these maneuvers thousands of times. Weather conditions are optimal and training for the race has been going well, everything is perfect but still... This time is different. Instead of listening to the last words from your coach, you start thinking about all the people counting on you to perform. Your country is still waiting to get its first medal and your family have travelled to see your live performance. What if you miss a gate? Or turn a second too late and fall? As these thoughts come streaming in, almost outside of one's control, your focus shifts away from the task at hand. This leads to choking under pressure on the big stage. Although this is an example from sports, this can happen to anyone who is under high pressure.

The phenomenon of "choking under pressure" is not new and has been well studied by academics. It refers to poor performance, relative to what is expected, at a time when the incentives for optimal performance are at their highest level. The expectations of the performance, the level of pressure and the timing are key to this phenomenon. The Olympics is a typical context where choking under pressure can occur. It can be a particularly stressful period for athletes, as it can represent a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to get a national/international recognition and is a dream for many sportswomen and sportsmen. But this phenomenon applies to many other contexts, like when you have to do an important presentation in front of your boss, pitch in front of important investors, introduce yourself during a job interview, etc. In all these examples, the stakes are so high that you should be at your best. But when less-than-optimal performance occurs, it is interpreted as choking under pressure.

Mindfulness & stress

The Yerkes-Dodson law of performance is often cited to explain choking under pressure. It is an inverted-U shaped relationship between performance and physiological or mental stress (see chart below). While an increase in your level of stress can have a positive effect on your performance (e.g. by increasing your level of attention and interest), it does so only up to a certain point. High levels of anxiety can indeed drain mental resources and strongly impair your performance. The challenge then is to remain in an optimum zone of stress. But how does one do that?

Researchers in organizational behavior and psychology have been examining the role of mindfulness in helping people manage their anxiety. Mindfulness is a concept derived from Buddhism which essentially trains the mind to remain alert and attentive focusing on the "here" and "now". With sustained practice, Mindfulness has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve performance at the workplace. A number of athletes have used this technique to manage their anxiety before a big sporting event. Most famously, the basketball player, Michael Jordan credits George Mumford, the author of the book – *The Mindful Athlete* with transforming his ability on the court. MJ is not the only one. Other athletes who have claimed to use mindfulness are Novak Djokovic, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Misty May, Kerri Walsh, and Tiger Woods.

Organizational actors frequently face situations in which they are expected to deliver under extreme high pressure under the spotlight. In such situations, choking can occur even if you are extremely adept and skilled at the task at hand. A brief moment of mindfulness can help you bring focus and attention back to what you're doing. This can help put you in an optimal performance zone.

The next time before that big meeting or presentation, consider doing the following.

1. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed for a few minutes. Set a timer to 10 min if that will help keep track of time.
2. Close your eyes and settle down into a comfortable position.
3. With purpose and intent, take a few deep breaths in and out with your attention focused on the breathing.
4. If thoughts arise about the impending meeting or presentation, allow it to be there, but gently shift your attention back to the breathing.

5. As you do this practice, you will notice that your mind calms down. As your mind calms down it becomes easier to engage in this practice.
6. Becoming aware of the upcoming meeting, presentation, with a sense of well-being open your eyes and you will be ready to take on the world.

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