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### Performing under pressure

#### **During times of stress, there are ways to avoid embarrassment**

By Becky Yerak, Tribune reporter

October 25, 2010

Everyone has been there at one time or another: blowing a job interview, flubbing a pitch to a client, flunking a test.

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During stressful situations, even people who are capable of performing better and have done so in the past have dropped the ball.

James Sprayregen, a Kirkland & Ellis bankruptcy lawyer who handled the United Airlines reorganization, recalls how he froze during a key presentation before directors of a Fortune 100 company.

Sprayregen said he started his talk by saying there were three major reasons the company he was representing should avoid a certain course of action. Spelling out the first reason was easy. Then his mind went blank.

"I stood there for about 30 seconds, with everyone staring at me, trying to remember two and three," Sprayregen said. Finally the two other reasons popped into his head.

"Ever since then, I never say there are 'three major reasons,' but rather there are 'several reasons,'" he said.

Sprayregen prefers speaking extemporaneously, even though he knows that's risky. Occasionally, he'll keep a piece of paper with a handful of key points, "sort of like Sarah Palin with the writing on her hand," he said.

Another way to prevent choking is to practice in comedy or acting classes, said Sian Beilock, a University of Chicago psychologist and author of "Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To."

"Pressure-filled situations can deplete a part of the brain's processing power known as working memory, which is critical to everyday activities," Beilock said. Such memory serves as a mental scratch pad that temporarily stores information relevant to doing a math problem, responding to a client's questions or carrying out other stressful tasks, she said. When worries creep in, the working memory can become overburdened.

And you know what happens next. Your mind goes blank, you become tongue-tied, your heart begins racing, and your face turns red.

Here are some tips on how to avoid such embarrassment:

**State your take-home point immediately:** That's particularly useful advice in job interviews and business meetings.

"If I tell you what I'm trying to get across at the beginning, everything else can be hooked onto that," Beilock said. "Research shows it matters when you give people the take-home point."

Also, think about what you want to say, not what you don't want to say. The ability to inhibit unwanted thoughts is compromised during stress, Beilock said.

**Meditation:** The process can help people let go of negative thoughts and worries that can deplete mental resources that could otherwise be devoted to performing well under stress, Beilock said.

Meditation "has been shown to change the function and the wiring of the brain," she said. Even 10 minutes of meditation training can improve performance under stress, she said.

Locally, the Chicago-Kent College of Law has a meditation room in its library. Chicago-based Vosges Haut Chocolat offers weekly yoga classes, including meditation, on site.

**Tell yourself you're good enough and smart enough:** Remind yourself of your credentials and the reason you've been asked to give a speech, make a presentation or address a weighty matter during a meeting, Beilock said.

Kirkland & Ellis' Sprayregen said when nerves arise, such as before a speech, it's useful to remember that "most of the people in the crowd would be 10, 20, 100 times as nervous making the speech."

If you know your subject, there's little reason to get nervous, he said.

"Somebody asked once, 'How long did you prepare for that speech?' and my answer was, '20 years,'" Sprayregen said. "I usually speak on what I know about."

For court, he said, you can never really be finished properly preparing.

"But you need to be able to present almost not like a lawyer, but in an understandable way that will grab the judge's attention to try to focus him on why you're right," Sprayregen said. "I try not to get mired in legalese."

During negotiations, he believes in listening closely and watching body language.

"It's easy to talk a lot, but the best thing you can do in pressure-filled negotiations is to listen and watch," said Sprayregen, an avid reader of books on negotiating tactics. "It tends to relax you also."

**Practice making a fool of yourself:** Practicing under mild or even low levels of stress can help people prepare for the real thing, Beilock said. But if practicing leads to negative anticipation, that can be counterproductive, she said.

Marybeth Wolff, product implementations manager for Allstate's Midwest region, said she recalls a time when she choked giving an update on a project to a group of co-workers.

"I was reading my notes word for word, and during the presentation my voice was trembling, and I was visibly shaking to the point that the paper I was holding was shaking too," she said.

That was the wake-up call to improve her public speaking skills. To hone her ability to prepare, practice and convey confidence, she joined Allstate's Toastmasters group.

"It gives me an opportunity to practice a variety of speaking styles," Wolff said. "It's a way for me to continue to develop my skills in a safe environment where I receive feedback and grow."

**Put worries to paper:** Spending as little as 10 minutes writing about your worries, such as, "I'm worried I'll fail this test and not get my license," can make performers less likely to fizzle.

Students who do that before a big test perform 15 percent better than students who sit and stew in their worries, Beilock has found.

What about just spending that time studying more? "We've tested writing versus studying more," Beilock said. "I can tell you that the writing works."

**Pause:** While taking a demanding test or trying to solve a difficult problem, pausing can help prevent going down the wrong path or getting distracted by irrelevant details. Even walking away for a few minutes can lead to an aha moment, Beilock said.

Bob Stegmann, partner at Tatum LLC, was recently supposed to headline a two-hour training presentation, on how to make effective presentations, to about 50 people. He rehearsed.

But "I got up in front of the room and just drew an absolute blank."

He looked up and smiled.

"I think when you smile at people, particularly when you're stumbling, it's disarming and puts people at ease and sets yourself at ease," Stegmann said. "I said, 'I've got to be honest with you. I've just drawn an absolute blank on what I was going to say next.'"

He excused himself, took a minute to mentally regroup and got back on track.

Trying to fill the silence, rather than taking the time to collect your thoughts, will likely dig a deeper hole, he said.

"The immediate reaction in that situation is just to be honest, and people will respect that," he said. "And the reason that people are there listening to you still hasn't changed."

Karolina Patino, a college student and intern at the Better Business Bureau in Chicago, also knows the value of taking a break.

"When I am overwhelmed and just feel like what I have to study is too much, I stop for around a half hour and go do something else, like eat ice cream." She returns to her studies feeling calmer.

**Know when to put it on autopilot:** Football teams often call a timeout when the opposing team's kicker is about to boot a field goal.

It's because people who know a subject or a procedure well, and who should be able to execute it fluidly and flawlessly, can get tripped up if they overthink a well-practiced speech or sales presentation or dwell on it too much to try to control every word or aspect of their performance, Beilock said.

They can suffer what she calls "paralysis by analysis."

Take John Roberts, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, who flubbed giving the oath of office to President Barack Obama.

Beilock bets that Roberts practiced administering the oath to perfection.

"Then he got in front of everyone and started paying too much attention and trying to control everything that came out of his mouth," she said. "He should have let that go on autopilot."

Similarly, for well-practiced procedures that you've done countless times, whistling, singing a song or speeding up can help prevent interfering with movement or processes that should run on autopilot, she said.

Also, during a sales presentation or a speech that you've practiced, avoid the temptation of trying to control every word.

Jason Tyler, research operations director for Chicago-based Ariel Investments, recently gave the commencement address for the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in front of about 1,000 people.

He was more nervous before he wrote the commencement speech than before he delivered it. He read it probably 50 times and practiced it in front of people about 10 times. So by the time he took the stage, he felt confident.

"You never feel completely relaxed, because practicing doesn't perfectly replicate the experience of standing in front of a live audience, but you can reduce nervousness by having trained yourself to be in that moment," he said.

He had a copy of the speech during the event but rarely looked down at it and didn't obsess over every word.

"That's where a lot of people miss, when they try to get every nuance as opposed to the theme," Tyler said. "All I'm trying to get to is an outline in my mind that I can work from. The words are always going to change."

An Ariel colleague recently gave him a copy of "Clutch: Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Others Don't" that he has begun reading. Another Tyler favorite is "Everyday Survival."

And "even martial arts has helped me a lot because it's all about focus and control," he said.

"To the extent you can, do things where the subject matter is within your expertise," Tyler said. "It's amazing how much calmer I feel about speaking when the content is related to the one or two areas where I know a lot about the topic."

**Don't worry about what you can't control:** Terry Keating, managing director for Amherst Partners, makes presentations six to eight times a year.

To calm his nerves, he tries to seek out a familiar face in the audience. "Mentally, I'll look at that person and pretend I'm talking to them," he said. Once he gets going, he tends to relax.

During one presentation, the slide projector failed.

"Instead of getting bogged down in trying to fix it, I just moved on," he said. "Had I stood there and waited for the tech guy to fix it, it would have started rattling around in my brain."

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