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## Going under

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Matt, a young trader at a Midtown hedge fund, will never forget the moment he botched his chance at a job with a top investment bank. Despite boasting top-notch credentials and thoroughly prepping for the interview, he found himself tongue-tied by a “no-brainer” question about financial markets.

“My mind just went blank,” he recalls. “I ended up trying to explain the concepts in a roundabout way and got more and more confused. I looked like I had no idea what I was talking about.”

Whiffing with the bases loaded is an all-too-familiar situation for many in the working world — and not just sweaty-palmed entry-level candidates.

But why? What causes otherwise intelligent, competent people to drop the ball just when their performance is most important?

The answer lies in understanding the effects of stress on the brain, says Sian Beilock, author of a new book on the subject: “Choke: What Brain Science Reveals About Getting it Right When We Have To.”

“When we’re under pressure, we often start worrying about the situation and its consequences,” explains Beilock, a psychologist and head of the University of Chicago’s Human Performance Lab. “This eats up important resources that could otherwise be devoted to thinking at our best.”

“Choking” occurs when worrying affects our prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for our “working memory,” or the ability to analyze and comprehend. When anxiety co-opts the working memory, we have less cognitive horsepower to devote to demanding tasks like fielding questions from clients or reasoning with a boss.

The more worry, the more the brain gets hijacked, which is why even relatively simple undertakings such as reciting an oft-delivered sales pitch can turn people into stammering wrecks if they’re particularly stressed about the outcome.

“We start monitoring every word coming out of our mouths, when we should really just leave it on auto-pilot,” says Beilock.

The bad news is that certain people are more prone to choking than others: Chronic worriers, for instance, “are so good at worrying that they do it more effectively under pressure,” says Beilock.

Ironically, according to her and others’ research, people with the most working memory — in other words, those who should be predisposed to do the best — also often flounder in clutch situations.

“These people rely heavily on the thinking and reasoning resources of the prefrontal cortex,” she says. “And when they all of a sudden don’t have the brain power to do what they normally do, they fail.”

The good news? Not only are the effects of stress on the brain reversible, but by knowing the science behind choking, researchers have been able to develop tools to prevent it from happening in the first place. Beilock shared her tried-and-tested anti-choking techniques with @work.

\* Practice. “Practice makes perfect” is an time-worn adage — but it only holds true if you’re practicing under realistic conditions, notes Beilock. After all, giving a speech to a room full of execs is a far cry from rehearsing it in the shower.

“People need to get used to performing in pressure situations,” she says, thus “closing the gap between training and competition.”

The good news is that you don’t have to mimic the high-stress situation exactly — adding just a small amount of stress can do the trick. For instance, give a practice pitch to coworkers in front of whom you don’t want to look foolish. When you get in front of actual clients, the all-eyes-on-me pressure won’t be as novel or scary — and the chances of buckling under it will drop.

\* Write it out. Terrified of how you might fumble during a crucial interview? Put your fears down on paper. Taking ten minutes to put your worries into words before a nerve-rattling task can prevent them from sapping your brainpower when the pressure is on.

“You might think writing about your worries would make them more salient, but the idea is that you outsource them,” Beilock explains. “You’re then less likely to dwell on them under pressure.”

\* Meditate. There’s a reason biz bigwigs like Oracle billionaire Larry Ellison and Ford head Bill Ford Jr. practice meditation regularly: Studies show that even a small amount of it can help thwart the negative thoughts that can lead to choking. Beilock’s research shows even meditation novices can benefit from ten minutes of practice before a high-stakes meeting or interview.

The point, she says, is not just to ignore or suppress your worries, but to “acknowledge the thought, name it and then let go of it”.

\* Think positively. Instead of anticipating the what-ifs of a looming challenge, focus on “something positive that has gotten you where you are, such as your qualifications or credentials,” suggests Beilock. It offers “evidence that you really do

have the qualities to succeed,” and can even enable you to bounce back if you start to blank out.

Another trick is to consider positive aspects of your identity unrelated to your job — say, that fact that you are an excellent writer, a great friend or a skilled cook. It can help curtail anxiety by reminding you that you’re a multifaceted human being whose identity isn’t defined by the outcome of a major interview or test.

\* Practice being public. For many, public speaking is the stuff of nightmares. And given the related fears of being judged — whether it’s a casual sitdown or an auditorium speech — occasions for public oratory are prime times for choking.

To lessen anxiety about what others think, Beilock recommends regularly making a fool out of yourself through activities like acting classes, improvisational games with your friends or frequent impromptu toasts.

“It will get you used to thinking on the spot, and used to some of the emotional reactions you might have when all eyes are on you.”

\* Learn to hit the pause button. If your heart starts to race and your mind goes blank as you approach the dreaded podium, you’re not necessarily doomed. You can “pause” a choke as soon as you’re hit with physiological symptoms like sweaty palms and dry throat by reinterpreting these reactions as positive adrenaline, says Beilock.

If you feel yourself struggling to respond to a tough interview question or an angry boss’s accusation, slow yourself down, she suggests. Even a pause between sentences “can give you enough time and brain power to successfully work through every step,” she says. If possible, step away from the pressure-cooker situation and take a deep breath. Sometimes a few moments are all your brain needs to break the spell of performance-busting anxiety and recharge.

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