

Autos Careers Classifieds Homes SUN TV

SEARCH

## BRAIN TRAINING GAMES

Memory  
AttentionFocus  
SpeedSpatial Reasoning  
Problem Solving

Play Games

www.lumosity.com

Ads by Google

## Learn how to worry properly in order to succeed

By JOANNE RICHARD, SPECIAL TO QMI AGENCY

Last Updated: October 19, 2010 2:00am



Poor performance under pressure can be the difference between moving up and moving on, says Sian Beilock. "Moreover, failure breeds failure, meaning once you start choking, it can be hard to stop it from happening again." (Courtesy Sian Beilock: Choke, Free Press)

Afraid of flubbing? Terrified of choking?

Well, if you totally blew that speech last week, failed an important test or choked on that once-in-a-lifetime job interview, don't take heart 'cause you're likely to do it again.

Worry is the culprit - even when we're prepared, worrying makes it harder to access information needed to perform, and also impairs brain networking resulting in information logjams in the brain - and ultimately cracking under pressure, says researcher Sian Beilock.

Imagining a malfunction can actually make it come true. "Regardless of the activity you are performing, over-analyzing the negative consequences of a flubbed performance can send you down the path to failure," says Beilock, a University of Chicago psychologist, who's come up with ways to overcome performance lapses at critical moments.

Getting choking in check is essential to success in many areas of life - not just for the big stuff. Pressure-filled situations are all around us every day and we're often judged on one instance of performance: "These range from having two minutes in an elevator to impress your boss, to a student solving a problem at the board in school, to a parent standing up at a PTA meeting trying to voice his/her opinion without looking like a fool..."

Poor performance under pressure can be the difference between moving up and moving on, says Beilock. "Moreover, failure breeds failure, meaning once you start choking, it can be hard to stop it from happening again."

When the stakes are big, you have to bring the proper pressure fighting techniques to the table, she adds. "They don't realize that performing in a high pressure situation is not the same as performing when the stakes don't matter."

It really helps to practice under pressure in order to improve performance, adds Beilock, author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting it Right When You Have To* (Simon and Schuster, Free Press).

According to Beilock, "choking is not simply poor performance, however. Choking is suboptimal performance - worse performance than expected given what the individual athlete, actor or student is capable of doing, and what he has achieved in the past."

Meanwhile, research in her book shows that students who have the most potential to succeed are actually most likely to choke. "These high-powered students don't necessarily feel any more pressure than the low-powered students, but they rely more on the types of brain resources that pressure compromises," says Beilock.

[They] rely heavily on working memory and the prefrontal cortex in the brain where working memory is housed. Under pressure, this region doesn't work as well as it should.

"Students with less working memory rely less on the prefrontal cortex to do demanding thinking and reasoning tasks to begin with, so they are less impacted by pressure."

Learning to reinterpret signals like increased heart rate and clammy hands as an asset, not as a dreaded occurrence, can help manage worry. And reinterpreting the situation as less "do or die" can actually turn a potentially poor performance into a winning scenario.

"Think about the journey, not the outcome," Beilock says. "Remind yourself that you have the background to succeed and that you are in control of the situation. This can be the confidence boost you need to ace your pitch or to succeed in other ways when facing life's challenges."

#### Memorable sports chokes:

- \* Golfer Greg Norman choked at the 1996 U.S. Masters. Going into the final day in the lead after three days of genius performance, he flopped and ended up five shots out of first place.
- \* Canada's premiere hurdler Perdita Felicien tripped over the first hurdle in the 100-metre hurdles final during the 2004 Olympic Games hosted in Athens.
- \* At the Wimbledon final in '93, Jana Novotna led in the sixth game of the deciding set. She cracked under the pressure and double-faulted against the all-conquering Steffi Graf, plus had a major meltdown too.
- \* The dreaded choke happened to Scott Norwood, of the Buffalo Bills, during the Superbowl XXV. With a mere eight seconds of the game left and trailing the NY Giants 20-19, Norwood sent his kick wide right, missing the 47-yard field goal - and choking off victory.
- \* The New York Yankees were up 3-0 in 2004 play-off series against the Boston Red Sox, but they blew that game and the next four to give the Red Sox their first World Series in 86 years.

#### Tips on how to succeed

Snatch victory from the jaws of defeat with tips from Sian Beilock. Perfect for those who seem to perform poorly under pressure on sport tasks already mastered, like a simple forehand in tennis or an easy pass in soccer.

\* Close the gap between practice and competition - practice under stress. "This gets you used to the pressure so competition is not something you fear," says Beilock. Also, by understanding when pressure happens, you can create situations that will maximize the stress in your opponents. "Even practising under mild levels of pressure - with your friends and family watching you - can help you get used to the real pressure when it comes your way."

\* Focus on the outcome, not the mechanics. "Focusing on the goal, where the ball will land in the net, helps cue your practised skills to run off flawlessly. This outcome focus also helps prevent your prefrontal cortex from muddling in the unfolding of your fluent performance where it doesn't belong."

\* Don't dwell. "Take that past performance and change how you think about it," she says, adding that failures are a chance to learn how to perform better in the future. Research suggests that dwelling on "past failures can send the mind and body into a helpless state and, as a result, you are not able to get as motivated for subsequent performances."

#### Overcome performance lapses on the job with tips from Sian Beilock:

\* Know what you know. "If you have memorized the introduction to your speech or what you are going to say in its entirety, just go with it and try not to think too much about every word. If not, pause before key transitions to allow yourself time to regroup."

\* Remind yourself that you have the background to succeed and that you are in control of the situation. "This can be the confidence boost you need to ace your pitch," says Beilock, adding that this works in academics too. "Before a big test, students who reaffirm their self-worth - especially if they are worried about their performance to begin with - score higher."

\* Write it out. "Writing about worries and stressful events in your life can help increase working-memory and may even prevent other parts of your life - spouse, kids, house - from creeping in and distracting you under stress," she says, adding that a mere 10 minutes of writing before a big event or regularly for 10 minutes a week boosts brain power.

Copyright © 2010 Toronto Sun All Rights Reserved