



Trouble Coping With Stress Under Pressure? Train Your Brain

Why school or work stress can cause us to choke—and a prescription from an expert

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"Pencils down." Even years later, recalling those words can bring back painful memories of choking on tests, knowing you were sunk no matter how hard you'd studied. Stress still makes your brain freeze in a job interview, during a critical presentation, or going up to bat with bases loaded.

Hey, you're human. You can't win 'em all. But the stakes are getting higher, with more students fighting for college spots, more applicants for increasingly scarce job openings, and more layoffs looming.

[\['Type D' Personality: How Distress Affects Your Health\]](#)

Surprisingly, perhaps, the likeliest chokers are the very people who should be best equipped to succeed, says Sian Beilock, an assistant professor of [psychology](#) at the University of Chicago who studies human performance. They were the "smart kids" who could drill their way through a complicated problem in class but got hung up during tests. Already uncertain when they started, they would make a small mistake, panic, and spiral out of control. Such individuals should have a huge advantage. Their brains house more working memory than the average person or, as Beilock calls it, "cognitive horsepower." But under stress, some of those resources are shunted into "worrying about the situation and its consequences," she says.

[\[Relax! Stress, if Managed, Can Be Good For You\]](#)

A star basketball player who misses a shot at the buzzer suffers from a different variety of brain cramp, Beilock writes in her new book, *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*. He may have been thinking *too* much. Top athletes are so well-practiced that thinking throws off their game. They need to simply do what they do so well, like putting the ball in the net, she writes, and not suddenly focus on the technique. Musicians face the same danger. Woe be to the pianist who thinks about her fingers in the middle of a complicated run, or to the [surgeon](#) who thinks about his knotting technique as he sutures instead of letting his hands do what they've done a thousand times.

The ordinary, garden-variety choking most people suffer has a more obvious source, however: inexperience—no exposure to an audience, not enough times confronting a critical deadline. Here are some of Beilock's strategies to prevent crumbling under pressure in school or at work.

Practice. Rehearse in front of a friend or, better, a few colleagues. Have someone quiz you on your material. "Research has shown that you don't have to practice under as much stress as you're going to actually feel," Beilock says. "Just a little bit, mild stress maybe, is enough to get people used to what's going to come their way when the pressure is on."

Confront your demons. Jotting down what worries you—facing an unexpected curveball of a question, tripping on the steps leading up to the podium—may weaken the effect. A study from Beilock's lab found that students who spent 10 minutes before a math test writing about their concerns did 15 percent better than those who had not.

Free up your brain. Make it easier to pull facts and concepts out of your memory with the help of tricks such as mnemonics—which can be a sentence or phrase in which the first letter of the words joggles the memory. "Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain," for example, is a mnemonic for recalling the colors of the visible spectrum in the right order (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet).

Think win, not lose. Listing your accomplishments and interests can improve your confidence going into a test or interview. Once on the spot, Beilock writes, begin by explaining why you are the best person for the job.

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