



# Desire for success can make you choke

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By **Andrea Kay**, Gannett

So you're about to face one of those make-or-break career moments: An interview for a dream-come-true job. A pitch to your boss for a raise. A speech in an auditorium of 200 or a conference room of two.

The stakes are high and the pressure is on big time.

Most likely, you're worried about messing up. It's called choking under pressure.

Performing poorly — or performing worse than expected given what you're capable of and worse than what you have done in the past. It happens in highly stressful situations and to all kinds of highly competent people.

"People have a desire to succeed. And this can, ironically, cause them to do their worst," says [Sian Beilock](#) psychologist and author of *Choke*.

Choking can occur when you think too much about an activity that is usually automatic — also known as "paralysis by analysis," Beilock says. But people also choke when they don't devote enough attention to what they're doing.

It's clear to Beilock, after experiments with people in high-pressure situations at her [Human Performance Laboratory](#) at the [University of Chicago](#), that people choke under pressure because they worry.

"They worry about the situation, its consequences, what others will think," she says. What they will lose if they don't succeed? They may even conjure images of the unwanted outcome.

Under pressure, worries flood the brain. Then we try to manage what we're doing.

A mountain of worry has all types of ill effects. Worrying and trying to suppress it diverts

brainpower, preventing you from being able to use your "working memory" — cognitive horsepower that lets you hold information in your mind while doing something else at the same time — like making that persuasive pitch to your boss or client.

Unruly worry can lead to so much focus on what's at stake that you're not focused on what you need to do in that crucial moment.

Beilock says worrying can prevent you from keeping unwanted thoughts or behavior at bay.

Say, for instance, you're in a job interview and you don't want to bring up the fact that you and your boss had a knock-down drag-out that led to you leaving your last job. Trying not to think about it can be the worst thing.

When trying not to think about something, two processes are going on, Beilock says, referring to the work of Harvard psychologist [Daniel Wegner](#).

There's the conscious process of trying to find a new topic to focus on and the unconscious search for the unwanted thought. When you're under the gun to perform well, only the unconscious works. So you're more likely to blurt out what you're trying not to say or do.

Depending on what you're doing when under pressure, you may need different "pressure-fighting" strategies, she writes.

If you're delivering a well-practiced speech while fielding questions on the fly, to succeed "you will not only have to combat worries, you will also have

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to make sure you don't exert too much control over your well-practiced speech routine."

Some choke-prevention strategies:

• **Practice making a fool** of yourself (try an acting class, for example), so you experience the feeling of what happens when you mess up.

• **Write out your worries** so they don't intrude when the pressure is on.

• **Prepare well but don't anticipate** too much. The stress you create worrying about what could happen can lead to failure when the stakes are high.

With a better understanding of what's going on in your brain, you'll have a better chance of being stupendous when it matters most.

Career consultant [Andrea Kay](#) is the author of "Life's a Bitch and Then You Change Careers: 9 steps to get out of your funk and on to your future." [Click here](#) for an index of At Work columns. Send questions to her at 2692 Madison Road, #133, Cincinnati, Ohio 45208; [www.andreakay.com](http://www.andreakay.com) or [www.lifesabitchchange careers.com](http://www.lifesabitchchange careers.com). E-mail her at [andrea@andreakay.com](mailto:andrea@andreakay.com).



**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have *some* rules!

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