

PREVENTING "CHOKING" AND DOWNWARD PERFORMANCE CYCLES

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Anxiety is a natural part of performing, whether you're on the basketball court, giving a speech, or taking the college boards. Even seasoned veterans get butterflies before the big game. Where problems begin is if you focus on the wrong things. If your attention gets stuck on a mistake you made in the past, or if you zoom in on someone who doesn't seem to like what you're saying, you may forget a play or the answer to a question that you know perfectly well. In other words, it isn't the butterflies that cause you problems, it's the negative thoughts you attach to them that hurt your performance.

When you get anxious or excited, your heart beats faster, you breathe faster, and your muscles tense. You may perspire, or even feel light headed and shaky. These feelings won't ruin your performance, but if you worry about them enough (and that happens when you lack confidence), your worries will join the physical changes to ruin your performance. Athletes and coaches call this "choking."

Failure like this is usually a vicious cycle. Your physical anxiety triggers negative thoughts, which leads to more physical anxiety. These distractions keep you from organizing your thoughts and suddenly you can't solve simple problems, or keep your eye on the ball. Instead of attending to the task, you concentrate on the negatives, and soon you fall farther and farther behind. It's not pretty, but you can take heart in the fact that everyone reaches this point at times.

To prevent choking, you have to keep this negative feedback loop from getting started in the first place. You can do this by taking a slow deep breath from down in your abdomen when you feel yourself getting up tight, or find yourself thinking negative thoughts. On the exhale you direct your attention to relaxing the muscles in your arms, neck, shoulders and legs. Try it now, inhale deeply from down in your diaphragm. As you exhale silently say to yourself "relax the muscles in my neck, shoulders, arms, and legs." As you say those words to yourself let the muscles relax. Good! Try it again, only this time close your eyes as you exhale and tell your muscles to relax.

Breathing Breaks the Downward Cycle

The process you just went through is called "centering". When you center, you use a deep breath to help you prevent and/or break the negative feedback loop I talked about earlier. To keep that loop from reoccurring, however, you need to quickly redirect your attention to the task at hand. What you direct your attention toward, immediately after you center is very important.

You want to focus attention on what sport psychologists call "process cues." A process cue is a technical or tactical self-instruction that is directly related to successful performance. When you get anxious on the college boards for example you might say to yourself "Read the whole question." to get over the tendency to read half the question and panic. Or you might say "Which of the four answers is definitely wrong?" This would help you narrow down your choices and improve the likelihood that you will pick the right answer. If you were about to inbound the ball late in the game with the score tied, you might center and then immediately remind yourself to "Wait for your teammate to clear." When shooting a free throw you might center and say "See the target."

By directing attention to process or task relevant cues, you are avoiding or blocking out those sights, sounds, and thoughts which remind you of the importance of the "outcome." You stop attending to the clock which would be telling you that time is running out for example. Paying attention to outcome cues when you are nervous or when confidence is low, only makes it harder to concentrate. Under these conditions, outcome cues generate more anxiety and re-establish that choking cycle.

Use Outcome Cues as a Reminder to Center

Often, athletes and students know what they should do to be successful, but they become so anxious they forget to do it. You can help yourself remember to center and to concentrate on process cues if you learn to use those highly charged outcome cues (like the amount of time you have left, the closeness of the score, or the importance of your performance to yourself and/or people in the audience), as signals to center and to refocus on the task.

For practice, think about a situation in the past where you paid attention to the wrong things, became anxious, and performed more poorly than you would have liked. Mentally recreate the situation by thinking yourself back into it. Close your eyes and see it, and feel it just like you did then. As you notice the outcome cue (e.g., time left, or a mistake you made), take a centering breath, relax your muscles, then redirect attention to a process cue and see yourself successfully complete the task.

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