



## Handling Pressure

*But here you are in the ninth  
Two men out and three men on  
Nowhere to look but inside  
Where we all respond to  
Pressure (Joel, 1982).*

What is a pressure situation for you? Is it attempting a penalty kick? A chance to win a game by making a free throw with no time on the clock? A four foot putt on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole to win a tournament? Taking the ACT as part of the college application process? Being a principal in a musical on opening night?

In my work, I use the following definition of a "pressure situation:" an event that is important to a performer in which he or she feels a strong desire to perform well. In these situations, the body often responds by producing adrenaline, which can lead to physical symptoms such as a racing heartbeat, faster breathing, tightened muscles, dry mouth, and/or "butterflies" in the stomach, even to the point of feeling nauseous. People can also experience mental symptoms in response to pressure including increased worry, negative thinking, and/or intrusive or racing thoughts. Handling pressure starts with the understanding that these reactions to pressure are normal.

Being able to perform under pressure does not mean eliminating the effects of pressure. In fact, most people perform better when feeling some pressure. Instead, performing under pressure means being able to manage the effects of pressure so that you are more likely to get the job done successfully.

You can break down pressure management strategies into four areas: relaxation, attention management, self-talk, and imagery. We will begin by focusing on the relaxation and attention management strategies.

### *Relaxation*

Relaxation techniques form the basis for any routine focused on managing the effects of pressure. If you review the symptoms that can occur when people feel the pressure to perform, many of them act to speed you up from a physiological perspective. Your breathing, heart rate, and thoughts can all get faster. If you think about it, even your muscles can get "faster" because adrenaline causes muscles to tense by increasing the rate that your muscles contract - thus they become tight.

There are many ways to relax. For the purpose of this column, I will describe one. **Regulated Breathing** focuses on slowing your breathing down. Start by breathing in while you count to four in your head. When you reach four, you should still be inhaling. Then hold your breath to another count of four. Then breathe out to four followed by another hold of four. Repeat this sequence two more times (for a total of three rounds). If you feel uncomfortable holding your breath, simply breathe in to a count of four and then out to a count of four. This exercise does two things. First, it helps you literally slow your breathing down. Second, since you cannot breathe and count out loud at the same time, you must count in your head. With practice, counting may help you slow your thinking down by focusing you on the counting process.

### *Attention Management*

Once you have slowed your breathing and your thoughts down, it is time to get back to the task at hand through a refocusing routine.

Managing your attention really means directing your attention away from either mistakes that occurred in the past or worries about things that *could* happen in the future and to what is important at the time. For instance, a fielder could be

focusing on an error she made *two batters ago*. Or a quarterback may be worrying about how terrible it will be if he does not lead his team to a victory, *before the game starts*. In both situations, the athlete's attention is not where it needs to be.

Redirecting your attention starts with the recognition that you are not focusing on what is important at the time. Some clues that you might need to practice refocusing routines may include a tendency to dwell on mistakes or to worry.

The following represents a basic refocusing routine:

1. Take a slow, deep breath. Pay close attention to how the air feels as it goes in and as it goes out.
2. If you made a mistake, quickly assess what could be done more effectively (if anything).
3. Remind yourself of your game plan or goal for the competition.
4. Remind yourself to "focus."
5. Reorient yourself to the situation you are in at present (i.e., what down it is, number of outs, etc.).
6. Rejoin the action.

Try the above and see how it works for you.

In the December issue of *Performance Enhancement News*, we will conclude the discussion of managing pressure situations by focusing on self-talk and imagery. While we have really only scratched the surface of the topic of handling pressure, the information here will get you started. Managing pressure is like any skill: practice is the key to mastery. Best wishes!

For more information about this topic or any other topic related to mental skills or sport and performance psychology, contact your local sport psychologist.

I am exploring the possibility of starting a free monthly brown bag lunch discussion group for local coaches to focus on helping coaches begin (or continue) to apply mental skills with their athletes. Topics would be set by the participants. The group would be meet at UAB-Huntsville (301 Governors Dr, SW), would be conducted in discussion format and would probably start in January, 2010. If you are a coach (at any level) in the North Alabama area and would like to be involved, please send an email to me at [moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu](mailto:moncierj@uasomh.uab.edu). If there is enough interest, I will set something up.

Reference

Joel, B. (1982). *Pressure*. On *The Nylon Curtain* [CD]. New York: CBS Records.

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You can now hear Dr. Moncier on the radio on WUMP (730 AM or 103.9 FM) at 3:30 on Tuesday afternoons during "The Johnny 'Ballpark' Franks Show." If you are not in the North Alabama area or do not have access to a radio at work, you can listen to the show by directing your computer's web browser to [www.730ump.com](http://www.730ump.com) and clicking on the "On Air Now" link at the upper right corner of the page.