



# Book Choke

## The Secret to Performing Under Pressure

Sian Beilock  
Constable & Robinson, 2011

### Recommendation

Psychology professor Sian Beilock answers many compelling questions, among them: Why do people choke, and what can you do to avoid choking under pressure? Beilock points out steps you can follow to hold up better in a pinch. Some are small and easy, others more complex and systemic. Though the author makes the same points – or the same sort of points, in different ways – her ideas apply to many fields. *BooksInShort* recommends her book to athletes, salespeople, leaders, speakers, teachers and anyone who wants to perform well in the clutch.

### Take-Aways

- Choking is failing in a situation when you have a lot on the line.
- You get in your own way by thinking about your goals the wrong way.
- You choke when you think too much about skills that should function below the surface of your consciousness.
- You’re more likely to choke if you focus on the possible downsides of a situation.
- You’re more likely to choke if you think about your negative attributes, or the negative stereotypes attributed to any group to which you may belong.
- You can avoid choking by changing your thinking about your circumstances.
- To succeed under pressure, practice under pressure.
- Achieve more by framing your performance appropriately. Focusing on major goals rather than small details helps you start well and finish strong.
- Retrain your mind to increase your “working-memory” and make you better able to handle pressure.
- Meditation can help you let go of negative or troubling thoughts.

### Summary

#### What Is Choking, and Why Does It Happen?

Like everyone else, you want to succeed, especially when the stakes are high. Whether you’re trying to score the winning run in the last game of the World Series or giving a presentation to potential investors who can make or break your start-up company, you want to perform at the top of your ability. However, too often, people who should deliver superior performances – people who have the talent, the preparation and the experience to do well – choke. That is the definition of choking: not doing badly when you’re new to a field or unskilled, but fumbling when you have all the skills and talent you need to do well. Why do you choke?

“Choking can occur when people think too much about activities that are usually automatic. This is called ‘paralysis by analysis’.”

Understand what causes choking, and you can avoid it and ensure higher levels of personal performance in high-stakes situations. Your “working-memory” allows you to hold information in your mind while doing other things, such as reasoning about that information to solve a problem. Stress and worry disrupt your working-memory, causing your intellectual performance to suffer. An experiment studying how physics experts solved problems compared to physics novices showed fundamental differences in their approaches. The newcomers plunged right in, trying to solve the problems; the experts took time to examine the problems and to decide which concepts to apply and how. The difficulty is that you need considerable working-memory to take this approach. If something disrupts that memory, your performance falls apart. If you “overthink” your performance, you can shift function out of tacit memory and into working-memory, and thus disrupt your own performance by

overloading yourself.

“Despite innate differences, our eventual level of success is markedly affected by training and practice.”

Expertise is part of it. When people become experts in a field, they’re particularly bad at predicting how others will do the things they know how to do well. You learn a skill by engaging your conscious mind. Once you get good at a skill, it moves into “procedural memory,” an area of the mind that “is implicit or unconscious.” This aspect of memory is distinct from “explicit memory,” which provides conscious recall of specific events. These two areas of the brain can operate independently. You can learn a skill and repeat it well without necessarily being able to remember how or where you learned it. In fact, the better you get at doing something, the less able you might be to communicate your understanding of it to others or to predict where new users might stumble. If you’re the expert in a certain area in your workplace, you might dodge this barrier by asking less-experienced people how they might attempt to do your job.

## Gender Differences

Throughout history, society has made negative assumptions about women’s intellectual capabilities. As recently as 2005, the president of Harvard gave a speech arguing that, intellectually, men vary more than women, and therefore the population of people with higher intelligence will include more men than women. If you studied students’ performance on the US Scholastic Aptitude (or Assessment) Test (SAT) in the 1980s, you’d conclude that this view was right, because boys scoring in the 95th percentile outnumbered girls 13 to 1. However, by 2005, the gap between boys and girls dropped to 2.8 to 1. What happened? American colleges implemented Title IX, the Equal Opportunity in Education Act, which gave women the same access to education as men.

“Experienced people benefit from hearing the thoughts of those who are less skilled.”

If intrinsic differences between the genders caused the gap in math performance, education would not have been so significant a factor, and certainly not so quickly. The performance gap derives from factors such as socialization. Much of the remaining gap comes from which toys kids receive or which activities they are exposed to in their homes. The complication is that people are vulnerable to the effects of negative thought. If you’re part of a group that suffers under a stereotype of poor performance in a certain area, just acknowledging this expectation is enough to drive your anxiety up and produce the bad results about which you’re worrying. You can see this “stereotype threat” clearly in those with the most to lose: women or minorities who are academically gifted and want to succeed. People are so affected by external expectations that even a traditionally feminine name can affect a woman’s academic career. “Merely being aware of a stereotype can bring down your performance.”

## Are High-Pressure Situations the Best Choice?

Some high-pressure settings are unavoidable: A doctor performing emergency surgery or a firefighter battling a blaze can’t choose not to engage. Some systems contain high-pressure situations by design and you might ask if these optional pressures produce the best results. An example of optional, systemic stress would be the ubiquitous standardized tests of American education. Your performance on these tests determines much of your academic future. You might earn or miss scholarships, or gain or lose access to superior schools. Intelligence tests can shape how you think of yourself. But these tests may not be the best judge of your ability to learn or think; they can be skewed because of social contexts and they may produce biased results simply from the way they are presented.

“If you are not in a position to practice making the catch when the pressure is on, it may be better to avoid the game to begin with.”

Methods of offering information affect how people process data. For example, equations written horizontally take more working-memory to solve than equations written vertically. So, the design of some tests amplifies the pressures involved. Coaching can improve some exam performances, and many test-prep courses are available. These classes can be expensive, and so provide an advantage to those who can afford them. This means that tests intended to reveal innate ability end up reinforcing existing social structures.

## How Can You Beat Choking?

Given all the factors that contribute to choking in high-pressure circumstances, what can you do to improve your performance? Steps you can take range from brief and immediately applicable solutions for any situation to more advanced techniques that require considerable practice. Going from the most broadly applicable methods to the more complicated, try these methods:

- **Step away from the situation** – If you’re too close to a situation, you may not see all your options. Step away, even for a minute, to allow your subconscious to process your circumstances. Approach the situation with a new perspective.
- **Speed up** – If you have a tendency to overanalyze a condition, the worst thing you can do is give yourself time. Act right away. Trust your instincts, and remember that you have the skills to perform the task. Leaping into the breach prevents your conscious mind from interfering.
- **Stop and write** – Stress negatively affects performance, so take a break and write out everything that worries you. This releases tension. Writing down your concerns parallels the “flooding therapy” that experts use to treat phobias by exposing people to the object of their fears. Putting emotions into words changes how your “brain deals with stressful information.”
- **Think differently** – Change how you consider yourself. Focus on the positive aspects of your life. Thinking about the details of a skill you know well, like making a putt or swinging a bat, get in the way. Think instead about strategic goals, or holistic objectives. Distracting yourself by singing, whistling, repeating a one-word mantra or visualizing an unrelated action also helps.
- **Focus on the goal, not the obstacle** – This is a specific version of thinking differently. In high-pressure situations, much can go wrong, and you can get stuck thinking about every negative possibility. Focus instead on what you want to do. Don’t think about potential errors; think about executing the play, the speech or the pitch.
- **Put on some music** – Overfocusing on one specific mental activity can make your mind work more clumsily. Try listening to music, making a game of your task or even taking your work to a place with a low level of background noise.
- **Educate your anxieties** – False beliefs about a situation can rule your performance. If you don’t know the setting – if it is unfamiliar or disorienting – you’re likely to spend too much mental energy figuring out what’s going on around you. The more you know about the context of your situation, the better you will

perform.

- **Practice (under pressure)** – You are more likely to perform well under pressure if you prepare in stressful situations. For example, police officers who practiced shooting while being shot at with paintball guns scored higher than cops who practiced with stationary targets. Up the stakes: Bet on the outcome of putts, speeches and the like so you have something on the line. To make your performance even stronger, rehearse areas you’re most likely to be required to do well in or skills that have the most consequences riding on them. For example, pilots might practice their planes suffering an engine malfunction.
- **Practice embarrassing yourself** – Speaking in public often causes people to choke. Being asked to think creatively on the spot also produces choking. Since both apply performance pressure, practice both together. Take an improv or acting class, try stand-up comedy or ballroom dancing, or any exercise that familiarizes you with similar pressures and skill sets.
- **Find a model** – People often perform according to self-limitations they perceive as pre-existing. If you haven’t seen someone you regard as similar to you achieve in a specific area, you’re more likely to regard success as unattainable. Find a model or a mentor, and focus on how they succeeded and how you can succeed.
- **Imitate your interviewer** – It is easy to choke in an interview situation where much is on the line and you don’t know the other person. Reshape the situation by mirroring your interviewer’s gestures and facial expressions. This puts him or her at ease, and your interview can become a conversation. “Subtle mimicry can help create positive affect and liking...by putting your and your interviewers’ brain on the same page.”
- **Change your relationship with the past** – Dwelling on past mistakes is an all-too-easy way to ensure choking. Think about the past and let yourself feel all the stress and disappointment you felt at that time. Consciously shift to drawing lessons from that experience and transform it into a stepping-stone to success.
- **Frame the future** – New situations can be difficult to make sense of or to comprehend. Feeling lost can spike your anxiety and make choking more likely. Ensure success by framing the future in specific, positive ways. In the business world, this may be as simple as making a strong first impression; in other circumstances, think through how you want to define a situation before it begins.
- **Make small changes in your process** – If the way you’ve been doing things no longer works and you feel tension building, make a small change in your process, as a golfer does when shifting his or her grip on the club. This “reprograms the circuits” in your brain and offers you a new course of action.
- **Practice broadly** – Studies have shown an odd thing about sports stars: They are more likely to come from small towns than from large cities. This is because in smaller locales, kids can try several different activities instead of specializing early in life. This reduces burnout and provides more diverse experiences. Playing music also facilitates “the two hemispheres of the brain” working together and operating more smoothly.
- **Develop organizational models** – The best waiters have their own patterns or tricks for remembering orders. They develop mnemonic devices like images or words. They reuse established tools of which they know they can trust so they can free up mental energy for other tasks. The simplest of these models is to group or cluster individual “pieces of information into bundles,” such as meaningful patterns, rather than remembering them individually. Develop your own tools and apply them in high-pressure situations.
- **Reduce the demands on your mind** – If a computer is running too many programs, it slows down and may even crash. Reduce the demands on your mind. Write your “chronic stressors” down, or repeat a key speech until you know it so well that you don’t have to think about what you’re saying.
- **Train your working-memory** – Overwhelming your working-memory contributes markedly to choking. But you can train it to be stronger. Practice memory drills; play video games such as *Medal of Honor*, *Space Fortress*, or *Halo* that require you to hold multiple complex tasks in your working-memory and act quickly under pressure. “So, parents, before you take your kid’s Nintendo DS away for good, you might want to think about the potential benefits of some video game play.”
- **Practice meditation** – When you choke, your mind gets stuck on the wrong thing. You repeat negative images or focus on mechanics when you should focus on strategy. Not thinking of something once you’ve started to focus on it is hard, but people who have studied meditation, for even a short time, are better at letting go.

## About the Author

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