



Pressure: Real or Perceived?

“Pressure is a perception of a situation, not a situation itself...if we change the way we think about demanding situations, we can alter our experience of pressure.” – Dr.

Stewart Cotterill

THREAT OR CHALLENGE...YOUR CHOICE: Why is it that two athletes can view the same situation and have opposite (negative vs. positive) responses? Why can one feel nervousness and interpret it as *failure in the making* while the other may have the same bodily feeling and interpret it as a sign of readiness?

Your perception (your own interpretation) of a situation is not necessarily the real thing...but your imagination's rendering of it. This interpretation takes into account your physical and mental preparation, your skill level, and how you've fared in the past in similar situations.

The realness of pressure comes from how your body reacts to it when it *sees* it, thus, making your perception of it your reality. In changing the way you see pressure (your perspective) you can change your response to it from a *threat* to a *challenge*. Any competitive athlete should want to rise up to challenging situations but few athletes run towards threatening ones. To the extent that you discipline your thought life to keep pressure in proper perspective will be the difference in whether you handle those situations properly or not.

EFFECTS OF PRESSURE: Pressure can come from self, coaches, parents, fans, and organizations among others. What happens to the **mind**: starts racing, thinks more about mechanics (internal) rather than the external focal point, uncomfortableness sets in and you want an escape by any means possible, negative thoughts start flooding the mind of doubt, worry, and fear of *what might happen* (results). The **body** usually develops tension, sweats, blurry vision due to eye muscle fatigue, and the body goes into fight/flight/freeze response resulting in rigid movements.

PROPER PERSPECTIVE: By understanding and maintaining proper perspective, you learn to get to the pressure before it gets to you. Not only so, but you can then learn how to impose pressure on the opposition – who likely hasn't learned to deal with pressure properly. Take some time to figure out what situations make you uncomfortable, how you tend to respond (physically and mentally) and ask, are these *really* pressure situations or imagined? How can I change them into challenges I'll thrive in.

MAKE THE BIG MOMENTS SMALL OR THE SMALL MOMENTS BIG: Some athletes thrive best when they choose to see each performance as just another game while others perform best when they view every performance as the most important thing in life at that moment.

Either way, if you view every moment as a big moment wouldn't they all begin to carry the same amount of importance, and thus become the norm? Likewise, if you train yourself to view every situation as a small moment, can't they all remain small?

STRATEGIES FOR ALLEVIATING PRESSURE:

Lowest Common Denominator (LCD): Which is scarier? 1,000,000/2,000,000 or 1/2? When you get rid of all the fluff, it's the same thing...just simplified. When you are in the World Series and bases are loaded with millions of dollars on the line and people watching what does it all boil down to? One batter, one pitcher, one ball. You've been successful at it over and over. Do it one more time.

Flip the Script: Rather than constantly suppressing the negative thoughts and feelings that infiltrate your thinking, take the lead in setting aside an appropriate time outside the performance arena to *allow* your mind to flood with the fears, worries, anxieties, and doubts in a controlled manner (like a controlled fire). In doing so, you may come to realize that the negative thoughts are not true and rarely end up the way you imagine them. Also, in making time to think about those scary things, they become less scary or not threatening at all...and thus – lose their strength. (Cotterill & Barker, 2013)

Accept the Possibility of Failure: In accepting the very real possibility that you may fail can actually free your mind up to focus on what you need to do to right now to succeed.

Change the way you talk: Rid yourself of sayings like “big moment, must-win, have to, need to, and pressure situation.” When you view every play as the most important play, nothing less and nothing more, your body will respond just as you've trained it.

Empty Your Head: Before competitions or practices write out how you are feeling...read it once. Then rip it up and throw it away. Acknowledge how you feel, ask if it will help you compete well, then move on.

Focus on the Right Things: Focus on the process of what you need to do to be successful rather than the results of what might happen.

Create Pressure: Use imagery to put yourself in every imaginable pressure situation you can think of and become aware of what your body is doing (mind speed, perspiration, heart rate levels). Then see yourself using coping strategies and routines to recognize what's happening, release the negatives, and refocus on what is important right now in performing the way you'd like to perform “under pressure.” In doing so, when it comes to the actual game, if you've trained your body to respond properly, it will do what you've trained it to do.

YOUR TURN - TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR CAREER:

What is your definition of pressure?

In the past or currently, what situations in your sport do you perceive to be pressure situations?

How has this affected the way you think and play?

When you simplify those pressure situations to their LCD (least common denominator), does your perception of the situation change? If yes, how so?

What would it look like if you played from a “Challenge Mindset” rather than a “Threat Mindset”?

What are some key strategies you can use to minimize your threat perception and raise your challenge perception?

Other notes: