

## PREVENTING CHOKING

1. Think **LESS** and try **LESS**.
2. Have selective memory.
3. Give yourself clear directions.
4. Practice meditation.
5. Have a pre-performance and/or pre-shot routine.

### Optimal Performance Consulting

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Please see [www.optimalperformanceconsulting.com](http://www.optimalperformanceconsulting.com) for additional information.

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# Optimal Performance Newsletter

## Choking Under Pressure

### *Why it Happens & How to Prevent It*

*Sam Maniar, Ph.D.*

We have all either seen or experienced choking in sport. "Choking under pressure" may bring up images of Bill Buckner, Tony Fernandez, Dan O'Brien, Greg Norman, Jean Van de Velde, Michelle Kwan, and others. Unfortunately, choking can happen to anyone at any level, and it usually results in feelings of fear and panic in many athletes. In fact, many athletes and coaches don't allow the word "choke" to be mentioned.

### What is Choking?

To make sure we are all on the same page, let's look at how choking is defined. According to dictionary.com, choking is defined as "fail[ing] to perform effectively because of nervous agitation or tension, especially in an athletic contest: *choked by missing an easy putt on the final hole.*" It is important to remember, however, that all failures are not choking. Choking happens when someone fails at a routine task due to pressure.

When we choke, we pay too much attention to the situation. Choking, then, is the result of thinking too much. This is quite different from the athlete who "freezes," or panics. (I will discuss panicking in a future newsletter.) An athlete who panics, doesn't think at all.

Perhaps you can think of times when you messed up on a routine play when the game was on the line. Maybe you three-putted the last hole of a tournament to lose it. Or, perhaps you missed the empty net shot that would have won the game.

### Why it Happens

Over the past decade, sport psychologists and physiologists have begun to understand the process of choking. When we first learn to perform a skill, we usually use what is called explicit learning. Explicit learning is when we consciously rehearse a task by breaking it down step-by-step. With experience, we think about the steps less and less, and the task becomes quicker and easier. This type of activity takes place in the left hemisphere of our brain.

When a task becomes automatic, the right hemisphere of the brain takes over. One part of the brain, the basal ganglia, is involved with force and timing. As an example, think of the first time

you learned how to drive a car. It may have looked or sounded something like this: "Put my seat belt on. Then, put the key in the ignition. Next, look in the mirrors and check over shoulder. Then place pressure with foot on the brake. Next, put the car into gear, and then slowly release the brake. Now move foot onto accelerator..." Now, these things have become automatic - we don't even think about them.

New research is showing that athletes who succeed under pressure experience a great deal of left hemisphere activity prior to performing a skill, and then a shift to right hemisphere activity when the skill begins. This shift is perceived as "nothingness" or a "quiet mind" by athletes. However, when some athletes are in pressure-situations, they begin to "think more", causing the explicit learning system to be activated. As a result, left hemisphere activity is increased and, and the shift to right hemisphere activity does not occur. This lack of shifting is sometimes referred to as "pressing" or "forcing" in sports.

"Mastery's true face is relaxed and serene, sometimes faintly smiling. The eyes are soft, reflecting an inner state that is both intensely focused and exceptionally calm. Those we most admire in sports seem at times to enter another dimension. Besieged by opposing players, battered by the screams of the crowd, they make the difficult, even the supernatural, seem easy and create harmony where chaos might otherwise prevail." -Anonymous

## How to Prevent It

Athletes who succeed under pressure are sometimes described as having "ice in their veins." But how do we go about getting "ice in your veins"? Below are some suggestions that you might try. If you are having difficulty with any or all of these, let us know.

- When we fail, we are often told to "try harder" or "concentrate more." However, all this will do is **further** increase the left hemisphere activity in our brains. *Instead, we should try less and concentrate less.* It is important to trust yourself and your ability to perform the skill. If you are having difficulty with this, try to use imagery to rehearse the skill prior to competition. It also may be helpful to watch yourself executing the skill over and over on film. Finally, if you cannot completely clear your mind, **have no more than one or two thoughts in your mind** while executing a skill. More than two thoughts may lead to inefficient, chunky technique, and possibly, choking.
- *Have selective memory.* Jack Nicklaus is an expert at forgetting the missed shots and consciously choosing to remember all of the shots he successfully made.
- *Give yourself clear directions.* Unclear language leads to confusion which in turn can lead to fear and worry. Directions should be phrased

clearly, simply, and in positive terms. The reason "don't" directions are not effective is because in order to process something like "don't raise your head," our brain must first process what it is we don't want to do and then process the opposite. On the other hand, "keep your head down" may lead to increased strain in the neck and shoulders. Therefore, directions should be specific to what it is we are trying to achieve. "Keep your eye on the ball." When you tell yourself, "Don't hit it to the right," the target becomes "right." Instead, tell yourself exactly what your target/objective is: "Hit it on the green."

- *Try meditation.* In fact, the objective of some types of meditation is to empty the mind.
- *Use routines.* (Routines will be covered in more depth in a future newsletter.) Having a regular routine before competition and/or before a shot can help athletes shift from left to right hemisphere activity, thereby "quieting their mind." Athletes who are able to make this shift report achieving "flow" or being "in the zone."

*Remember, the time to think is in practice, NOT in competition.*

If you would like assistance with this or any aspect of your performance, please let us know. We would love to help.☺