

PREVENTING PANICKING

1. Develop a mental routine.
2. Have a mantra to repeat to yourself.
3. Develop a cue or trigger.
4. Get or simulate experience.
5. Learn relaxation strategies.

Optimal Performance Consulting

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Optimal Performance Newsletter

Panicking Under Pressure

What it is, Why it Happens, & How to Prevent It

Sam Maniar, Ph.D.

In an earlier newsletter, I discussed the phenomenon of choking in sports. I discussed how panicking and choking—although they look the same—are quite different. In this month's newsletter, I'll discuss panicking.

What is Panicking?

Panicking in sports is when an athlete freezes due to pressure. The panicking athlete simply stops thinking. This is quite different than choking. An athlete who chokes also fails at a routine task due to pressure. In this sense, the two look similar. However, when we choke, we pay too much attention to the situation. Choking, then, is the result of thinking too much. Thus, panicking (not thinking at all) and choking are opposites (thinking too much).

Perhaps you can think of times when you messed up on a routine play when the game was on the line because you did not stop and think. Maybe you failed to make an adjustment to your strategy after having a big lead. Or, perhaps you forgot everything

you knew about your sport and just stood there. Did you choke, or did you panic? If you panicked, then read on!

Why it Happens

Over the past decade, sport psychologists and physiologists have begun to understand the process of panicking and 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. Explicit learning takes place in the left hemisphere of our brain. With experience, we think about the steps less and less, and the task becomes quicker and easier.

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, speed, timing, and feel. As an example, think of the first time you or your child learned to tie a shoe. It may have looked or sounded something like this: "Grab both laces in separate hands, and pull them tight. Cross one over the other. Then tuck the top lace under the bottom, and pull through. Make a loop with one lace..." Now, these steps have become automatic - we don't even think about them. Now that it has become automatic, the process is

stored somewhere in the right brain

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,” “forcing,” or “choking” in sports.

Panicking, though, occurs when we are completely in our right brain. This works well until our environment changes. Perhaps, we need to make an adjustment for the weather, or the opponent is playing a different type of defense, or the team is up by a large margin, so a more conservative offense is called for. At this point, it is important to THINK, which requires some left brain activity. Those who panic, though, stay completely in the implicit mode. If you have ever been asked, “What were you thinking?!?” by your coach, and you responded with, “Nothing.” then you may have panicked.

How to Prevent It

Athletes who succeed under pressure know when they need to turn their brain off as well as when to turn it on and make adjustments. If you have difficulty with panicking, below are some suggestions that you might try. If you are having difficulty with any or all of these, let us know.

- Remember, the first objective is realizing *when to think more*. One way to learn this is to have a **mental routine** that you go through prior to every play. One that I prefer is to SCAN (What do I see?), PLAN (“What is my objective? What do I need to do based on what I just saw?”), SEE (Quickly visualize it.), and DO (Let go, and let ‘er rip.).
- In some sports, athletes do not have the luxury of having stoppages to run through a mental routine before each play. For these athletes, it is important to have some sort of **mantra** that you repeat to yourself. Think of one or two things that are important to remember for your next competition. It could be “stay low,” “weight forward,” “one shot at a time,” “follow through,” “nice and relaxed,” etc. Remember to rehearse two things to yourself over and over.
- In addition to a mental routine or a mantra, it sometimes helps to have a **cue**. Cues can take many forms, but the main

purpose of a cue is a reminder or a trigger. When using a cue with a mental routine, an athlete might pick-up some dirt, unstrap and re-strap gloves, kick the ground, etc. in order to remind themselves to start the routine. This also serves as a trigger for your body. You can also pair a cue with a mantra. Whenever you feel yourself starting to panic, just tug on your shorts, or kick your shin guards as a reminder to rehearse your mantra.

- Get **experience**. Actual, simulated, or visualized experience is usually the difference between those who do not panic and those who do. When we are under stress, our short-term memory is wiped clear. We forget what we were just told to do. If we have experience to rely upon, they we will usually not panic. If this is new to us, though, look out! If you are simulating or visualizing to gain experience, be sure to make it as real as possible. Also, be sure to set yourself up to succeed.
- Finally, it may help to learn some **relaxation strategies**. Some of these techniques include diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, body scan, imagery, and many others.

As always, if you would like assistance with this or any aspect of your performance, please let us know. We would love to help.φ ©OPC (2004)