



# Working Under **PRESSURE**

Be At Your Best  
When It Matters

**Working Under Pressure:**  
Be At Your Best When it Matters

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*“When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that  
oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are  
made under pressure.”*

- Peter Marshall

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# INTRODUCTION

Everyone feels pressure at certain times, but some people feel it more than others. And some people handle it differently. There are people that fold under even the slightest pressure, while others thrive under a moderate amount of pressure, but succumb to the power of pressure as the magnitude increases.

There is also a small group of people that seem to be addicted to pressure. They often work on Wall Street, in emergency rooms, or as risk-taking entrepreneurs. Given the wide range of responses, pressure and stress are interesting topics.

One prominent psychologist has proven his skill to predict which couples will divorce with an accuracy rate of 94%. **The best criterion he has found to predict which marriages will last and which will not is the ability to deal with pressure.** How couples deal with high-pressure

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conversations in their relationship is the best predictor of marriage success or failure.

The ability to manage pressure can influence every part of your life:

- Physical health
- Mental and emotional health
- Relationships
- The ability to parent
- Career
- Finances

Your skill in handling stress and pressure can affect these different aspects of your life. Since pressure is a common part of life, learning to handle it appropriately makes a lot of sense.

**One of the great myths perpetuated regarding high-performers and pressure is that they “rise to the occasion.”** The idea that some people perform at average levels under normal amounts of pressure and perform better

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under high pressure has been proven to be false. However, they can perform at a comparable level under high pressure while others suffer from poorer performances.

Numerous studies of baseball players, golfers, and basketball players show that no one has consistently performed better under clutch conditions than they do under normal conditions.

Michael Jordan hit 49.7% of his shots over his career. His percentage when taking game-winning shots? 48.0%.

No player has ever been considered more reliable under pressure, and he was just slightly worse under pressure than he was under normal game conditions. Far more impressive than most, but still not proof that anyone performs better under high pressure.

Pressure affects everyone. It influences some more than others.

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Regardless of your present ability to deal with pressure, you can do better. **There are numerous tools and strategies available for those that want to deal successfully with pressure.** The responsibility to use them is yours.

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*“There's a lot of stress out there, and to handle it, you just need to believe in yourself; always go back to the person that you know you are, and don't let anybody tell you any different, because everyone's special and everyone's awesome.”*

- McKayla Maroney

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# WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR MIND AND BODY UNDER PRESSURE?

Some people like to think they do their best work under pressure. We do our best when the stakes are highest. Right? Wrong!

Several studies have shown just the opposite. **Under pressure, we naturally play “not to lose” rather than to win.** There is more emphasis placed on avoiding risk than doing excellent work. It's natural to take an approach that will reduce the likelihood of failure and criticism. This isn't the time that people pursue an outstanding result.

Safety becomes the target. Mediocrity is the result.

## The Biology of Pressure

When your brain is faced with danger, even an imaginary danger, it begins a cascade of physiological responses to prepare for that danger.

**Unfortunately, these responses are geared toward enhancing your ability to respond physically.** You're in a better physiological state to run or fight.

However, your ability to make wise decisions is greatly compromised. How many times have you made a decision that you regret under stress? In those moments, the instinct is to make a decision that will relieve the pressure as soon as possible. The long-term consequences are ignored.

It all starts in the hypothalamus, which is a structure located in the brain.

**Two pathways are stimulated when you feel stressed:**

1. **One leads to the production and release of corticoids.** These chemicals allow the body to tap into the energy stored in the body.
  
2. **The other pathway involves adrenaline.** This results in the shaky, jittery feeling you get before give a speech. There are other signs of high adrenaline levels:
  - Increased heart rate
  - Increased blood pressure
  - Slowed digestion
  - Dry mouth
  - Increased sweating
  - Enhanced blood clotting
  - Increased muscle tension
  - Increased breathing rate

These are excellent responses to stress if you need to avoid being eaten by a sabre tooth tiger or you're attacked in an alley. However, they aren't good responses if you're not in physical danger.

**Long-term stress is highly damaging to the body and to brain tissue.**

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*“A lot of directors don't want the pressure of a movie the size of Pearl Harbor. But I love it. I thrive on it.”*

- Michael Bay

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## The Mind Under Pressure

The hormones and chemicals released into your bloodstream don't just affect your body, they affect your mind, too.

**The mind undergoes changes when dealing with pressure:**

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1. **The instinct of self-preservation is also stronger when under stress.** People are far more likely to engage in selfish behaviors while under pressure.
2. **Thinking becomes more short-term.** Your brain wants relief now. You're more likely to take the easy way out and feel better right now than to consider the long-term consequences.
3. **The upside gets more attention than the downside when making decisions.** For example, after a bad stretch at work, quitting becomes more attractive. More attention is paid to the upside of quitting than to the pitfalls of quitting and being without a job. When you're happier at work, you'll pay more attention to the negatives of quitting.
4. **Stress reduces the brain's ability to ignore distractions.** This is part of the reason workers are more likely to make

mistakes when under stress. It's more challenging to stay focused on the work at hand.

5. **Short-term memory, attention, and judgement are impaired.** The likelihood of impulsive behavior is increased.

**While it was believed that stress over-engages and stimulates the brain, the truth lies in the other direction.** Stress disengages a small bundle of neurons in the frontal cortex. This area is involved in decision making. In a sense, pressure makes you “dumber.”

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*“I gave up my struggle with perfection a long time ago. That is a concept I don't find very interesting anymore. Everyone just wants to look good in the photographs. I think that is where some of the pressure comes from. Be happy. Be yourself, the day is about a lot more.”*

- Anne Hathaway

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# MAKING BETTER DECISIONS UNDER PRESSURE

Pressure and poor decisions often go together. **There are several obstacles to making smart decisions when your stress levels are high.** Having awareness of this fact is an important first step.

When you're under pressure, remind yourself that you need to be cautious before making any decisions.

**Attack your stress from a physiological perspective:**

1. **Make your brain more resilient to the effects of pressure. Mindfulness is the best preventative medicine for your prefrontal cortex.** This is the part of your brain that is numbed by pressure. When the prefrontal cortex isn't at full

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capacity, emotions have too much influence in decisions.

- When you're mindful, the brain retains the ability to filter out distractions, focus, and make wiser choices.

2. **Slow down. The effects of stress speed up your actions and thoughts.** This creates even more stress. It's not easy to slow down when you feel pressured to rush, but slowing down is an effective way to get out of your head and be more mindful. Slowing down also provides more time to think.

- Your responses to stress don't have to be automatic. You can create a little breathing space and take back control.

3. **Breathe.** Your breathing is one of the few physiological processes under your direct control. You can breathe faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, or hold your breath at will.



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- Take control of your breathing when you feel stressed. Try breathing in slowly for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 2 seconds, then exhale for 4 seconds. There's no reason to breathe deeply.
  - Take breaths of normal depth, understanding that the natural response during times of pressure is to breathe shallowly. Take the depth of breath you would take if you were relaxed. **Over filling your lungs creates discomfort and more stress.**
4. **Relax your muscles.** Relaxing your body will lower the stress you feel. It's natural for your muscles to tighten and hold stress. A massage or progressive relaxation recording can release a lot of stress from your body.

The impact on your mind and body from pressure-filled situations is real. **Use your body**

**to combat stress and anxiety.** These tools can take time to perfect, so begin using them immediately.

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*“Being in control of your life and having realistic expectations about your day-to-day challenges are the keys to stress management, which is perhaps the most important ingredient to living a happy, healthy and rewarding life.”*

- Marilu Henner

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# PSYCHOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS TO PRESSURE

There are also psychological ways to address your stress. Use every tool available for you. **The physiological tools are helpful, but are even more potent when coupled with psychological tools.** Attack your natural response to pressure from every angle.

1. **Pressure doesn't require that you behave a certain way.** A particular thought, belief, or emotion doesn't have to lead to a particular action. You have the option to resist your instincts and be more deliberate in your decisions.
  - Just because you're feeling frantic or feel that you must decide quickly doesn't mean that you must choose a course of action impulsively. You can consciously choose to take your time

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and consider your options.

2. **Look ahead, far ahead.** When you're 80, will you care about that huge report your boss wanted on your desk by Monday? Will the stress of paying your bills 30 years earlier matter?
  - Think about the things you were stressed about 20 years ago. What do you think about them now? You'll feel the same way in 20 years from now.
3. **Consider that you may have more than one good choice.** There's a tendency to believe that you only have one good option, especially when stressed. Just because you have multiple options doesn't mean that one of them is bad.
4. **Focus on what you want.** Under pressure, we tend to make decisions to avoid negative outcomes, rather than chase positive outcomes. **Decide what**

**you want, then make a decision that supports that.** Anxiety amplifies the negative. Turn your attention back to the positive.

5. **View pressure as an opportunity to have fun or to challenge yourself.** You can choose to embrace these moments, rather than dread them.
  - When these situations are viewed as do-or-die, your self-confidence falters, and your fear of failure grows.
  - **We respond positively to a non-threatening challenge.** The physiological response to a healthy challenge strengthens your ability to perform. Your body is more capable and you think more clearly.
  - We wilt under pressure and thrive on challenges, so turn everything into a personal challenge. Challenge yourself

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to see if you can find the best solution while remaining happy and relaxed.

6. **Lower the stakes.** Standing over a putt to win the Masters, the golfer would be wise to tell himself, *“It’s just another putt.”* The more important you make the event in your mind, the more pressure you’ll feel.
  - **Tell yourself that it doesn’t matter.** It might seem farfetched, but it’s no more ridiculous than convincing yourself that the situation is more important than it is.
  
7. **Put your focus on the task, not the results.** That’s another way of saying to keep your attention on solutions and executing those solutions rather than on the challenge.
  - By focusing on the task, your brain will be cued to do the right things. If you need to complete a report, you’ll know

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that you need to find the financials from last quarter. You might never look at the financials if you're too busy worrying about what will happen if you don't get it done.

- For longer tasks, keep reminding yourself of your mission. Remind yourself each day.
- You'll learn that focusing on each step of the solution is the best way to increase the odds of success.

8. **Remember times you were at your best.** Remembering your past successes increases your confidence and reduces doubt. Think back to your greatest hits, especially if you have positive memories from your past of similar situations to your current challenge. If you were successful once, you can be successful again.

9. **Rely on your senses to keep you grounded.** Your mind runs wild when you're stressed. Your thoughts are everywhere but on the present moment. **A quick way to bring your mind back to the present is to focus on your senses.**
- What do you see right now? Describe five things that you can see. Describe them in detail. Talk aloud if you can.
  - What do you hear right now? Close your eyes and describe what you hear.
  - What do you feel? Are you cold? Do you feel pressure in your back? Do you feel the ground beneath your feet?
  - Ask yourself these questions several times each day and whenever your focus is wandering.
10. **Practice.** We're under varying amounts of pressure each day. **Practice with**



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**situations that involve lower stress.** If you can handle situations that are mildly stressful more effectively, you'll become better at handling higher stress situations. Some lower stress situations might include:

- Being stuck in traffic
- Sitting through a horrible meeting
- Having a conversation with someone you don't like
- Giving a small presentation
- Hosting a party
- **Use your tools on lower stress situations, even if you don't need them.** If you don't use them during lower-stress times, they won't be available when you need them the most. Practice is important.

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There are many mental tools available to either lower the pressure you feel or increase your ability to focus and make good decisions despite it. Again, practice is important.

Begin using these tools in your daily life. **Your ability to focus, enjoy life, and make wise decisions will flourish.** Use your mind to your advantage.

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*“If you don't think your anxiety, depression, sadness and stress impact your physical health, think again. All of these emotions trigger chemical reactions in your body, which can lead to inflammation and a weakened immune system. Learn how to cope, sweet friend. There will always be dark days.”*

- Kris Carr

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## TIPS FOR BEING MINDFUL IN STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

You already know how to use your senses to be more mindful, but there are many more strategies you can use. Increased mindfulness will help in other areas of your life. **Those that are more mindful report better relationships, sleep, and more happiness.** Mindfulness is like the vitamin pill of mental health.

What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way. You choose the thing you're going to pay attention to and you pay attention in a non-judgmental way. Suppose you come across a homeless man on your walk to work. You notice his shoes.

So far, so good.

**But once you make a judgement about his shoes, you're no longer being mindful.** You

might say to yourself that his shoes are cheap, or dirty, or even blue. You might say to yourself that he has nice shoes. **It doesn't matter whether your judgment is negative, neutral, or positive.** One you apply a label to the shoes in your mind, you're no longer being mindful.

If you can walk through your day this way, you won't believe how relaxed and happy you feel.

You'll be amazed!

**Learn to be mindful during the most challenging of times:**

1. **Focus on your breathing.** Just observe your breathing. Notice how the air feels when it moves through your nose. Notice how your chest and belly move.
  - The key is to observe, not make judgements. If you say to yourself, "*I never noticed how big my stomach is from this angle,*" you're not mindfully paying

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attention to your breath. Avoid labeling your breath as good, bad, big, small, or anything else. You're just observing it.

2. **Use simple tasks as practice.** While you're getting dressed, don't think about anything other than getting dressed. The same goes for taking a shower, driving to work, or eating your lunch. Be mindful of your activities.
  
3. **Observe nature.** Be mindful of a natural object, such as a tree or a bird, in your environment. Just focus on it and keep your thoughts quiet. Observe anything about it without talking to yourself about it. There's no reason to say to yourself, "That bird sure is blue." You're looking at it, so there's no reason to tell yourself something you already know.
  - If you're stuck indoors, look out a window or find a photograph online.

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4. **Use a reminder.** Use a timer to remind yourself to be mindful several times during the day. **At least once each hour, spend one minute or more being as mindful as you can be.** It will soon become a habit.
  
5. **Meditate.** Those that meditate regularly can't say enough about the benefits. There are many ways to meditate, but the simplest is to sit comfortably and focus on your breath for at least 10 minutes. When your mind wanders, and it will, bring your attention back to your breath.
  - It's hard to believe that something so simple can provide such powerful benefits. Keep at it. Try to work up to 30 minutes at least once each day.

Everyone can gain from being more mindful.  
**It's not just for monks meditating in a cave.**

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Mindfulness has become a popular tool in the field of medicine and psychology. You have everything to gain from increasing your ability to see the world from a mindful perspective.

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*“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”*

- William James

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## CONCLUSION

Stress and pressure are a part of the human condition. **Consider that if your ancestors never felt nor responded to pressure, you wouldn't be here.** Your genes would have been extinguished from the Earth long ago.

But times have changed. Those living in first world countries don't face the types of threats that plagued our ancestors. We have plenty to eat, no one is trying to kill us in a war, and we're not being chased by wild animals. The need for a strong physiological response to stress rarely exists anymore.

You have challenges, but the fight or flight response does more harm than good in the modern day. It's questionable if you could ever eliminate these instinctive responses, but you can minimize them and enhance your ability to work through them without being negatively impacted by their effects.



**Pressure results in physiological changes that alter the way your brain works.** The ability to make good decisions and ignore distractions is compromised. Your brain attempts to eliminate the discomfort caused by adrenaline, even at the cost of your long-term success. All it wants is relief.

Tools exist to lessen the impact of these negative body sensations. You can also learn to become comfortable with them.

As with anything else, the key to success in dealing with pressure is knowledge and practice. **Practice making good decisions and staying focused during mildly stressful situations.** The practice will prove to be invaluable when the pressure is on and you must be at your best.

Remember that no one is truly at their best when under a high level of pressure. Enhancing your skills at managing pressure-filled situations will ensure that you can do your best under the circumstances.