



Staying Relaxed Under Pressure

Do you crumble under the pressure of big games, interviews, or important meetings? Does your performance suffer because you lack the composure necessary to effectively execute your talents and abilities? Learning how to stay composed under pressure is a key skill for performing your best in any situation. Whether it's an important match or a business meeting, how you cope with pressure is one way you separate yourself from the pack. Some people thrive under pressure situations because they go deeper in "the zone" while others get distracted and their performance suffers.

Why is it that some people fold under pressure whereas others thrive on it? It depends on how you interpret the pressure—if you feel challenged or threatened. You must understand that pressure comes from external sources—the big game, other's expectations, or your own expectations to perform well. You can view sources of pressure situations in two ways: as a motivator that instills feelings of excitement or as a threat that instills feelings of anxiety. In this article, I present a few techniques for staying composed when you feel the heat.

1. **Slow Down** Anxiety causes you to speed up your behavior on the court, field, or diamond. You may walk faster, rush to get a play off, or speed up the pace of your routines. When you feel tense, make an effort to slow down. Take your time in warm-ups. Relax between each play, pitch, or shot. Be more deliberate without over-analyzing the situation.
2. **Breathe Deeply** Deep breathing is an excellent technique to reduce muscular tension and focus on something positive. Use abdominal breathing (breathe deeply through your abdominal cavity or stomach) to reduce physical tension and help you clear the mind. After practicing this skill for a couple of weeks, you should be able to relax with just a couple deep breaths. You can practice this at any time—in the car, in competition, at work or at home.
3. **Release The Tension** Contracting a tense muscle and releasing the contraction has a relaxing effect. It is often easier to relax a tight muscle when you fully contract it and then release the tension. For example, if you feel tense in the shoulders, shrug your shoulders towards your ears for eight seconds and then release the tension.
4. **Talk To Yourself** Anxiety increases when your self-talk is negative and self-defeating. An example of negative self-talk is "I'm a choker. I can never perform well when I need to", which increases anxiety and decreases self-confidence. Notice when your self-talk becomes negative and learn to switch your inner voice to positive self-coaching. Your inner self is your best coach, so give yourself some words of encouragement.
5. **Use it to Your Advantage** The excitement (or fear) you experience when under pressure can help you if you interpret it as a friend instead of a foe. An increase in adrenaline that accompanies excitement (or fear) can give you an extra boost of energy to concentrate better and perform well. But be warned, too much excitement may cause you to make mental errors. Focusing on how uncomfortable you feel only accelerates your anxiety. Learn to "feel the fear and do it any way" by viewing your tension as a sign that you are focused and ready to play your best!

