When the going gets tough - the tough get ....worse!

THE PERFORMANCE MYTH

We’ve all been told that “when the going gets tough, the tough get going”, implying that high performers perform best when placed under pressure. But worryingly, research evidence is clear - *performance deteriorates under increasing pressure* - whether in sport, business or relationships!

Although pressure and stress can be defined differently, increased pressure often results in stress. And stress has a significant impact on our brain and the way we perform. Stress leads to:

- a narrowed focus where we become obsessed with the problem - rather than seeking creative solutions
- an emphasis on reflexive decision making - driven by habit, emotion and usually defensive in nature
- impaired behavioural skills - even for those management tasks in which we are normally highly skilled.

In stressful situations, there are three key approaches to minimise the effect of stress on our performance. These are based on a deep understanding of how our brain and bodies respond to stress.
CALM YOUR BRAIN

Our brains are severely compromised under stress and we lose most of our rational, higher-order functioning. Our pre-frontal cortex shuts down and the limbic system takes over - encouraging a heightened fear and emotional response. To “trick” our brain into remaining calm we can:

- think of high-pressure moments as a (fun) challenge - not a life or death threat
- focus on the immediate task rather than the outcome
- chunk the challenge into smaller ‘bites’ - reduce the level of overwhelm
- concentrate on the things you can control, rather than those you can’t
- flash back to your previous successes for insight - and try to remain positive
- categorise and ‘name’ the challenge you face - this will ‘normalise’ it and reduce its impact.

ATTEND TO THE PRESENT

Sounds easy - just pay attention to what’s happening now! But it’s not that easy to do without regular practice. The goal is to stay focused on the facts in a non-judgemental and calm way without jumping to conclusions. This is generally called mindfulness, and there is much evidence to show it improves cognitive abilities and has benefits for behavioural skills and self regulation. Some ways to improve mindfulness include:

- recognise and ‘accept’ your emotions and feelings as they arise during an event - but try not to react to them
- observe what happens - but remain disengaged as if it were happening ‘outside’ of you
- create purposeful pauses during your day - take short breaks between meetings and go for a walk (just a minute or two) without engaging anyone
- use the gaps between tasks wisely - treat these as opportunities to briefly revisit priorities and purposefully decide on what to do next.

BE SENSITIVE TO YOUR BODY

Your brain and body are closely linked, and your body registers many of the non-conscious signals detected by your brain. These body sensations give you important feedback that improve your ability to perform under pressure. Pay particular attention to:

- Intuition: A non-conscious recognition of patterns that match past events in which you took successful action. Your body will produce a slight surge of positive excitement (a somatic marker) that suggests a particular action is likely to be successful.

You can trust this intuition if situations like this display regular patterns and if you’ve had successful experience in this field.
- **Gut feeling**: Sensations such as a feeling in the pit of your stomach or an increased heart beat. They generally signal that the brain has non-consciously detected something ‘wrong’ or ‘extraordinary’ in the situation.

In general, this suggests that you should not simply follow your habitual course of action (reflexive decision or action). If possible, rethink the situation and try to figure out what’s really going on.

- **Low mood and a general level of anxiety**: When you experience a more general level of negativity, disengagement and low motivation outside of the situation, your brain and physical capabilities will likely be impaired. This will cause a risk-averse and defensive outlook. Under these conditions, the feedback from your body is likely to be less reliable.

In these conditions, pressure and stressful situations should be approached with caution. Check your judgement and seek the opinion of others before acting wherever possible. Being aware of your low feelings or outlook is the best way of dealing with the situation in the short term.

This is a brief summary of key strategies to improve your performance under pressure and stress. Further detail and more comprehensive strategies can be found in the full article, or by contacting us directly.

**Download the full article “How to Improve Performance under Pressure” here.**

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