

## Pressure: Why people choke

Written by Julie Desmond

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Take every emotion you have ever had, put it in a blender and fire it up. This is what it might feel like for an Olympic athlete standing on the edge of a diving board or in the blocks on the track or facing a balance beam or pommel horse waiting for the signal to start. Got pressure? Every sweaty, chalky, bloody day, every goal set, every sacrifice offered up, every thought and every breath has been about getting to now. Blow it, and the dream is over. There is no second chance today, and the next tomorrow is four years away. So how can it happen that even Olympic athletes choke under pressure?

Sian Bielock wrote the book on choking, literally. In *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Success and Failure at Work and at Play*, Bielock explains that choking happens when people overthink. Scientifically, someone who has practiced extensively has developed the motor memory to deliver a positive performance without consciously thinking about every movement. As soon as a person under pressure starts to analyze their activity in the heat of the moment, he risks flubbing up.

When Olympic hurdler Lolo Jones talks in interviews about hitting a hurdle during the 2008 games, costing her a race, she knows exactly what was going through her mind when it happened. Her energy was invested in analyzing the race and tweaking her movements. On the other hand, when an athlete or performer delivers perfection, they will often remark afterward that they felt they were in the Zone, in a dream, separate from the performance.

Olympic athletes and movie stars make it look easy. In truth, we know they have invested whole lifetimes honing skills. During practice sessions overthinking, analyzing, falling and failing are encouraged. The reward for all this pain is the glory of an easy win, a perfect performance, when it counts.

Practice, think, prepare. And when it is your turn to take the stage, let your motor memory take over. You can deliver perfection. But if your result is disappointing in any way, remember, it happens. Even the best among us chokes once in a while. Get up, practice some more and make the next performance better than ever.

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