

Ever have that experience of your mind going blank in a test?

When we are under pressure our ability to perform can be affected. Psychologist Sian Beilock has studied the science around this phenomenon and written an easy to read informative book on the science behind performance in pressure situations. Interestingly, the ways to combat this problem are different, depending on whether you are facing a test compared to trying to perform in a sport under pressure. Sian has kindly given her permission for me to share with you her tips for ensuring success under stress (pages 174-176 of *Choke*). Why not choose a few and give it a try.

### **Tips to Ensure success Under Stress**

#### **Reaffirm your self-worth.**

Before a big test or presentation, spend a couple of minutes writing about your many interests and activities. This writing can promote feelings of self-worth. Re-affirming yourself, especially when you question your abilities, can boost your confidence and performance.

#### **Map out your complexities.**

Before taking an important test, spend five minutes drawing a diagram of everything that makes you a multifaceted individual. This exercise can help to highlight that this one test score doesn't define you, which can in turn take some of the pressure off.

#### **Write about your worries.**

Writing for ten minutes about your worries regarding a presentation or test you are about to take can thwart the anxieties and self-doubt that often emerge in high-pressure situations.

#### **Meditate.**

You can train your brain not to dwell on negative thoughts. Meditation training can help you harness all of your cognitive horsepower for the task at hand. *Studies have found even a small amount of meditation training can make a difference*

#### **Think Differently.**

Think about yourself in ways that highlight your propensity for success. Instead of thinking for example, that you belong to a sex or racial group that is unfairly stereotyped to be bad at math, remind yourself instead that you have the tools to do well – maybe you have done well in school in the past. Focus on the skills you have demonstrated and what you have achieved.

### **Reinterpret your reactions.**

If you get sweaty palms and your heart races under pressure, remember that these physiological reactions also occur under more pleasant circumstances, such as when you are excited about something. When under pressure if you can learn to interpret your bodily reactions in a positive way e.g. “I am psyched up for the test” you may be able to turn your body to your advantage.

### **Pause your choke.**

Walking away for a few minutes from a challenging problem can help you find the most appropriate solution. This “incubation period helps you let go of your focus on irrelevant problem details and instead think in a new way or from an alternative perspective - and can produce an “aha” moment that can lead to a breakthrough.

### **Educate the worries.**

Merely drawing attention to the stereotypes students may hold – for instance, “girls can’t do math” or “whites are not as good at math as Asians” – and reminding them that they are stereotypes and nothing more, can help to prevent people from worrying about their ability when the pressure is on. It might seem counterintuitive that teaching people about a stereotype regarding their ability would quell its effects rather than exacerbate them, but giving people an excuse for their worries allows them to see their performance as less diagnostic of their intellect.

### **The Obama effect.**

Seeing examples of people who defy common stereotypes about sex, race and ability can help to boost the performance of people in these social groups. Seeing and recalling such examples helps to remind you that the stereotypes just can’t be true.

### **Practise Under pressure.**

The old adage that practice makes perfect can do with a bit of adjustment. Studying under the same conditions you will be tested under – for instance, in a timed situation with no study aids – helps you get used to what you will experience on test day. There is also research suggesting that testing yourself on material (rather than simply studying it) helps you remember it better in the long term. After all, you are going to be tested during the test so you might as well practise being tested.

### **Outsource you cognitive load.**

Write down the intermediate steps of a problem rather than trying to hold everything in your head. This provides you with an external memory source, one that may be relatively free of worries compared to your own brain. As a result you may be less likely to mix up information or forget important details of what you are doing.

### **Organise what you know**

Coming up with meaningful ways to organize the information you need to remember for a test or a big presentation can help take the burden off your working memory and actually help you remember more.

We have Sian Beilock's book *Choke* in the school library if you would like to read more about this.

If you would like to get the book or more information: <http://sianbeilock.com/>

If you would prefer to hear Sian talk about this, you will find videos and podcasts online. Here is one

<http://brainsciencepodcast.com/bsp/how-to-avoid-choking-under-pressure-bsp-76.html>