

Delivering Under Pressure

Helping athletes to deliver when it matters most

One of the most important things an athlete will need to develop is the ability to remain calm and perform well under pressure. A key feature of a champion is that they remain calm under pressure, they retain the ability to make good decisions, think clearly and attack the task in front of them with confidence, enthusiasm and tenacity. They have developed strategies so that they can control the symptoms of pressure and remain process-focused, they maintain situational awareness so that they can make good decisions in the heat of the moment.

We all face pressure in our daily lives but it's in competition that athletes can experience incredibly high amounts of pressure. When performing under pressure some athletes buckle, whilst others remain firm, why is that?

"There was a pivotal point when I had an outside chance to get to the games in 2004 and there was a semi-final race where I made a minor mistake early on. Instead of dealing with it well, I went to pieces. This was a bit of a turning point for me. I worked with a sports psychologist who my coached suggested. He was able to put things in a really useful way for me, I engaged with him really positively and I was able to look into this aspect of performance."

Every athlete feels some pressure when performing, the less prepared you are, the more pressure you're going to feel. No athlete is immune to pressure, their heart rate rises, they breathe quicker and, depending on how well prepared and confident they are, pressure can make them perform better or worse.



All quotes in this article are from David Florence. David is one of the World's top men's slalom canoeists. He is a three time Olympic silver medallist, a three time World Champion and has won more than 25 World Cup medals including 9 gold. He has been a member of the senior team since 2000, representing Great Britain for an incredible 19 years. He shares with us examples from his own practice which have been used to bring the theory to life.

Developing Self Efficacy

What is self-efficacy?

Self-efficacy is your belief in your ability to accomplish a task. It influences perception, motivation and the performance of a task. It is related to, but more than self-confidence.

So how does it impact on the people that I coach?

We are all aware of the importance of 'the head game'. Being in the right mental space, etc. A high level of 'self-efficacy' is the psychological term for this. Having the self-belief that you can deliver a performance when it matters.

So how can we, as coaches, help other people develop this?

Research suggests that there are 4 key ways that we can help develop self-efficacy. They are written in order of impact on self-efficacy, i.e. they get less impactful as we move down the list.

Number 1: Past Performance

Bandura, a researcher in the area of human psychology, found that the most effective way of developing a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences, i.e. if you've been there before and have had success previously.

"To me, winning an Olympic medal was everything and, having achieved that, there is an element in me that says I've nothing to lose. So I can approach every competition after that with a positive outlook."

Well that might seem pretty obvious but what can we do to help build success? We can help structure development so that each individual step doesn't appear too significant from the last. Some people will feel more confident with bigger steps than others. So judging your athlete is key. Helping people to recall their past successes to build from and extend. The mindset that frames what they are about to do as just the next step in the process. Remember 'mastery motivation' is when we self-reference performances rather than against others (see Motivation theory information sheet). So helping people structure development in a mastery way will also help develop self-efficacy.



Psychological coaching

All competitive sports have a strong psychological component. Whilst we may spend a significant amount of our time helping athletes to develop essential Technical and Tactical skills, as well as the Physiology to be able to do this consistently. We also need to help them develop the necessary mental aspects required to perform effectively. Very few athletes think about how they're going to handle high pressure situations until it's too late and they're in the thick of it. Most will simply model what they've noticed others doing and hope it works, sometimes it does, most often it doesn't.

"Whilst I have had success at many of the sites we race on, this isn't the only source of confidence and you can't always have been there before. Confidence can come from a range of other sources too. How well your training's been going, where you've paddled that's similar, building up incremental steps but which are all, to some extent, evidence based. This is just the next step."

Number 2: Modelled Behaviour

When a performer observes a person they regard as a peer successfully complete a task, they will feel more confident they can also successfully complete a similar task.

"I get to the position being clear on what I want to do, my intended lines and how I want to go about them. I usually then watch a few people to see how they are doing it, or if they go about it the way I am planning to do it to see if that's going well or not. A chance to get extra information. I'm not focussing on whether the other athlete has had a good run or not, I'm looking for the extra information. I almost forget that they are actually a competitor. With some of the early runners who might not be as strong as I am, I might see their run and think it didn't work for them but I think I could pull that off, or confirm that it is doable like that."

"EACH ATHLETE ONLY AFFECTS YOUR POSITION BY ONE PLACE. SO IF SOMEONE'S HAD A GOOD RUN, IT ISN'T ALWAYS OF GREAT CONCERN. IF I SEE A GOOD RUN, I'M PRETTY CONFIDENT THAT I'M CAPABLE OF A SIMILAR PERFORMANCE."

Now, this is a tricky one. If we want to encourage 'self-referenced' performance, how can we manage to get them to watch each other? It's about the 'peer' aspect here. Someone that they relate to as of very similar ability. They may not see a 'peer' within their group, i.e. they see themselves as the least able. So once again we have a fine line to tread. We all compare ourselves to others. As a coach, we need to help manage this aspect to ensure we remain 'mastery focussed' but utilise 'peer identity' where appropriate. If we have created the right supportive environment, seeing others that you identify as of a similar ability to you complete a task can increase self-efficacy.

Number 3: Social Persuasion or Feedback from Others

Performers can be persuaded to believe that they have the skills necessary to successfully complete a task. Both positive encouragements, as well as convincing others that they can succeed at the particular task, can facilitate self-efficacy. Positive self-talk and creating a supportive motivational climate can facilitate this. But be realistic and bear in mind strategy number one. Incremental steps are the best way to develop self-efficacy. Failure at a task will undermine belief in future tasks. So, encourage but don't push too hard. Failure after encouragement could undermine their belief in your judgement.

"I walk the course, run it through in detail with my coach, make sure I'm clear of exactly where the gate is and key stroke patterns and key things I'm looking for. I'll stop and rehearse key gates or a short sequence of gates before I get to the bottom and then rehearse the whole run again in my mind. My choice is to visualise it from what it will look like when I'm doing it, from in the boat."

Number 4: Physiological Responses

The emotional, physiological and psychological responses of an individual can influence their level of perceived self-efficacy. A person who expects to fail at a task, or finds the task too demanding will experience a set of emotional cues: racing heart, blushing, sweating, headaches, etc. If these physiological cues are persistent and severe enough, they contribute to a sense of weak self-efficacy in a performer. (Link to arousal management). So, if any of these are present, the perception is that the task is too hard (see above point on incremental steps). If they are already within the task, i.e. at a competition and between heats, we will need to help support them through this process.

"I do find it stressful or an element of pressure, but this I find helpful. I don't notice physical fatigue in a competition run which I would do in training."



Ways that an athlete can reduce, and better handle, the pressure when competing or performing

The more important the outcome is to an athlete, or the more uncertain of the outcome they are, the more pressure they will feel. The pressure they feel is somewhat equal to their chances of winning, so the more thoroughly we help them prepare, the less anxious they should feel about competing. Sporting events fill athletes with anxiety. Winning is important to them, they want to avoid failure, and before they compete they can never truly know who is going to win. Athletes also feel pressured if they believe they're being judged on the outcome, they don't want to look bad in front of other people or be embarrassed by losing. Pressure can be a positive force, or an evil villain, depending on whether they view pressure as a challenge (growth mindset) or a threat (fixed mindset).

1. EMBRACE THE MOMENT

Acknowledge where they are and embrace the moment. Encourage your athletes to think of high-pressure situations as challenges, opportunities to test themselves and have fun. They have earned the right to be there and compete in that place on that day. Too many athletes view high-pressure moments as do or die threats, but doing so fills them with anxiety, fear of failure, compromises their cognitive ability and judgement, as well as draining their energy, making them fatigue more easily.

"I really enjoy being really good at paddling, not just being able to say I'm really good at that but actually the feeling of doing something really well as if nobody is watching. The feeling of mastery of a skill really does feel pleasant."

If you see a situation as a challenge to be met rather than a threat, you are much more likely to perform at your fullest capabilities and more likely to succeed. Adrenaline can make us feel uncomfortable, but when you see competition as fun, the energy and arousal you feel from the pressure becomes enjoyable. It fills you with enthusiasm, one of the best weapons for fighting anxiety and fear. When going into a performance, remind them that it is an opportunity to have fun, a challenge to be embraced rather than dreaded, having such a positive mindset can help you to remain calm and perform well. But you are going to have to nurture this mindset through your approach to training too. Telling themselves things like 'this is a challenge to have my best performance ever,' or 'this is an opportunity to have fun and show how good I am.' Focus on the fun aspects of performing, embrace the parts of competing that you find most enjoyable and have a good time doing your best.

2. LET GO OF WINNING AND DON'T OVERTRY

A useful tool in sport psychology is to let go of the need to achieve the outcome. Feel the pressure warmly, accept it and let it wash over you. Realise that all of the hard work is already done, all of the training will pay off and it is time to enjoy performing in competition. This works very well for some athletes when practised mindfully, not so much for others, the tools you use will depend on them as an individual.

Many of the best athletes in the World perform best when they compete like they have nothing to lose. This allows them to focus on the process and not getting hung up on the outcome.

"Ultimately, it is a competitive sport and I'm there to beat other people. But, contradictory, the best way to do this is to not try and beat other people but to focus on my own run. It's not really relevant how well other people have done, it's my focus to do the best performance I can do."

If they are nervous about an upcoming competition or event, learn to let go of the pressure of winning. Know that they've worked as hard as they could and gave their best, as long as they have improved and become better, that is enough.

3. OWN THE PERFORMANCE AND LEARN FROM IT

The fact is that a champion must be willing to lose. They do everything they can do to win, they prepare diligently, they work hard and then, when it comes time to perform, they have to be willing to roll the dice. Do your best, if it doesn't work out accept it, learn from it and move on. A champion admits when they've made a mistake and they don't make excuses, instead they try their best to use it as feedback that they can learn from. They don't try to pass off the blame to somebody else. They don't dwell on it, they take responsibility, own their failures and move on. The ability to take ownership of our shortcomings and admit that we made a mistake, is one of the simplest ways to take the pressure off of ourselves. If we are too concerned about looking perfect and never making mistakes in front of others, then we'll put too much pressure on ourselves and we'll never take any risks.

"I tend to get over disappointments fairly quickly and focus on the positives, and invariably there are positives in almost any performance."



Learning from mistakes and bring these into the training programme so that they can be addressed is a great way for an athlete to 'own' the content of their training plan. They will know why this area needs to be addressed. A helping aspect for effective athlete engagement.

4. STAY FOCUSED ON THE PROCESS

"In practice, this is following a normal process; a health breakfast that fuels me well and hydrates me. There is an element of nutrition here but also a psychological element to knowing that you're doing everything as right as you can. Creating a positive mindset. I allow plenty of time to walk the course. I already know the course from the night before but I won't put too much thought into the course until the morning. This is so I don't get too bogged down too early. Generally speaking, as I'm ranked pretty high in the World and as it is always in reverse order, there's lots of other people to watch. I always take advantage of this."

Most athletes who perform well aren't thinking about the outcome, they're immersed in the process, focusing on their activity in the moment.

"I have a general routine which I follow which helps get me in the right frame of mind and feeling well prepared, but is also a distraction, otherwise it allows the pressure to be there."

Maintaining focus on the process helps to depressurise things by preventing distracting thoughts from diluting your concentration and it cues you to do the things that you have to do to perform well. By simply doing your best on each task in each moment, you keep your mind focused on what you need to do and not on negative thoughts that can distract you and derail your performance.

The ability to stay in the moment, focus on what is happening now, rather than what has, will, might, or should be is a skill. A skill that needs developing through training. To focus on what you are responding to now, you need to let go of the past and ignore the future. Focusing on your senses is a useful way of tuning into the present moment and alleviating pressure during, and before, a competition.

"Once I'm clear on my run I'll go about a warm up. I have a very structured warm up, which allows me to focus on the process of the warm up, which occupies my mind. This is a very similar warm up to what I would do for full runs in training. This all helps me focus on the process which, for me, is the key thing. My performance and not the performance of others."

When you're focused on form and technique in the present moment and mindful of the process, you aren't focused on the outcome or your anxiety. Keep your eyes focused on your target; if your eyes begin to wander, so will your focus.

5. STAY MINDFUL AND FOCUSED ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

We often feel pressure because we focus on things that we can't control, focusing on the uncontrollable fills us with anxiety and increases the pressure that we feel. Champions have an intense focus on what they can control, the things that matter most to ensure they perform at their very best. Their breath, their thoughts, their visualisation and self-talk, their strategy, their game plan and their effort.

Sports in 'flow' are about finding that calm place within us and staying there throughout our performance, focusing on the process no matter what is thrown your way. Again, this will need to be developed during training. We can't just expect these skills to appear at a competition.

"When it comes to sitting in the start pool, there are a few elements that I always do. Check my helmet's done up, check my spray deck is on properly, my buoyancy aid is tightened; as much as anything they're probably time killers but, yet again, routine familiarity. After this, I focus on the first 3 gates and, knowing that I know all the course after this, I'll just take one gate at a time."

If available, utilise the psychological support services available to your athletes so that they can develop these skills for when they are needed.

6. REMEMBER THAT THEY BELONG HERE

Your athletes have got to trust in their ability. Even very talented athletes can become hesitant and indecisive when under pressure, they stop trusting their ability. The habit of confidence is learned in training, through preparation and self-improvement. Helping them to turn off their analytical mind, stop thinking so much and start trusting in their ability. When the spotlights come on and it's time to perform, go out and enjoy. Let their training and preparation carry them through, the hard work is already done.

"I'm ranked high in the World and my experience suggested that I'm capable of very good runs. If I see other athletes pulling off moves or runs, I'm confident I could do similar."

Remind them that they deserve to succeed, they deserve to be there, regardless of what has happened in the past, or the calibre of athletes competing against them. Everyone has earned the right to be on the start line. It's important that, during high-pressure situations, that they believe they are worthy of winning.

7. USE POSITIVE SELF TALK AND VISUALISATION

It is natural to feel anxiety under pressure. Many athletes try to pretend that the pressure isn't there and doesn't exist in an effort to simply ignore the anxiety completely. For most, however, this isn't an effective tactic, the pressure is real and will not disappear, and to control it they must address it. This is where forms of positive self-talk and positive affirmations come in. They interrupt and block out negative thoughts that accompany anxiety. Common affirmations are things like 'I can do this, I've worked hard and I'm ready, I'm stronger, I'm faster, training's been going great. I know I can win, I am going to win. I'm ready.'

"Ultimately, having a good process to go through on the day, a routine in part and also the way I go about that routine, mental rehearsal and things. There's an element of thinking about how your preparation has gone. Deliberately focussing on the positive aspects and not so much the critical stuff that you might do in a training block."

Visualise what they saw, felt, heard, smelt and thought the last time they performed at their best. Get your athletes to create a few positive affirmations and write them down in a place they will see them often. What they write specifically doesn't matter, as long as they are relevant to them and reaffirm their confidence. By writing them down somewhere they will see them daily and they will make these affirmations much more powerful when talking through high-pressure situations. Accompany them with mindful breathing and positive visualisation.

Useful additional reading

Bandura, A. (1997) Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Males, J (2014) - In the Flow – Performance Psychology for winning in canoeing and kayaking. UK Book Publishing

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Muretta, R. J., Jr. (2005). Exploring the four sources of self-efficacy. Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering, 65(10-B), 5447.

