

The Tip #10

We are not our feelings.

Change the self-talk of colleagues by using one word!

“I am anxious” / “I am feeling anxious”

“I am stressed” / “I am feeling stressed”

“I am depressed” / “I am feeling depressed”

This creates a vital space between them and the emotion.



Photo by Mathew Schwartz

The Tale #10

Why We ‘Choke’ Sometimes

Have you ever had that feeling that you are ‘choking’? Why do some people ‘choke’ (ie lose it, fail at it) – right at the critical point of execution? Why does a famous basketballer, who has completed the same free-throw thousands of times, lose it or choke when the final shot of the game has the eyes of the crowd bearing down on him? Why can we so often do a great reverse parallel park without thinking about it until we go to reverse parallel park and see a group of people watching us?

In talking to a colleague last week, she revealed that she had to partially redo her ‘test’ (a compliance test) as she did not fully answer everything correctly that needed to be answered the week before. When questioned further, stress – and caring too much - was the main reason why she had a second go at it.

Why do skills abandon some people right when it matters? It turns out that ‘choking’ can be a result of expertise and ‘caring too much’.

Sian Beilock's work specifically on this topic sheds some light on the paradox of working memory – it is really important to be able to focus, but you have to be focussing on the right things.

Before becoming Barnard College President, Sian spent 12 years at the University of Chicago as a professor of psychology, focusing on how children and adults learn and perform at their best, especially under stress. Her research focuses on how well women and girls perform in Maths and Science, and how performance anxiety can be affected by teachers, parents and peers.

Beilock's research focused on why people perform poorly in stressful, high stakes academic situations. *'Beilock found that worries during those situations rob individuals of the working memory or 'cognitive horsepower' they would normally have to focus. Because people with more working memory rely on their brainpower more, they can be affected to a greater extent in stressful academic situations. Beilock's work demonstrated that stressful situations during tests might diminish meaningful differences between students that, under less-stressful situations, might exhibit greater differences in performance.'* Wikipedia

Sometimes you can choke when the task is easy, but when the stakes are high, making the simplest task a monumental fail even when it so well learnt can occur. Beilock argues that in choke situations, we spend too much attention to what we are doing rather than allowing 'autopilot' to operate as it should.

A concert pianist is not thinking about what her fingers are doing and because of that she can interpret the melody and think about tone etc. Choking occurs because of malfunctions in the prefrontal cortex whereby in stressful situations it stops working the way it should. When performing skills to perfection it is better NOT to focus on all of the details. It is better to allow the automaticity to take over so one is in the flow.

When we walk down the stairs, we do so without giving it a second thought. However, if you have to pay attention to your knee as you are walking down the stairs there is a good chance of stumbling – you bring into conscious attention something that is done automatically. Watching yourself from 'outside of yourself' becomes paralysis by analysis.

The issue here is how this impacts on your performance even when you know your area of operations well. When the stakes are high, and when we start to think too much about what we are doing, we increase the chances of 'choking'.

And sometimes, this is exacerbated when the eyes of the crowd (parents at an important function?) are on you. This is not about doing the task or performance so often that one is expert at it. It is about overthinking it when you are 'expert' at it.

Are you 'choking' sometimes? Or perhaps you feel less confident in high stress moments? Coaching & Mentoring (Moaching) can help. Call +61 410 586 700 **Be and Become**.