

Hi Guys,

What causes choking? Why do some athletes choke while other athletes rise to the occasion?

No athlete likes to hear the word “choking,” let alone admit it. Yet, some athletes believe they “always choke” when the pressure is on.

Choking is rooted in three sources:

1) Self-talk (the monkey-brain) – If you tell yourself, you will choke over and over or refer to yourself as a choker, guess what will happen when the pressure is on? You got it. You will probably choke. Self-talk is powerful. Think of self-talk as a directive. Your self-talk tells you what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.

For example, “In the last minutes of a close pool game (when to do it), I always choke (what to do) and over cut the ball (how to do it).”

Giving yourself a different message will give you a different result. “When I get down on the shot, stay down on the shot and follow-through.” In games, it’s ideal for shortening this message by using key words, stay down, follow-through. Use what works for you. But remember to use it.

2) Perspective – When you view pressure situations as an opportunity to fail or embarrass yourself, you will tense up and play it safe. When the pressure is on in a pool game, if you see yourself as a “choker,” you will try taking the easy shot instead of the right shot. Not a harder shot the “right” shot.

You are more successful when you see challenging situations as a chance to shine and help yourself.

3) Focus – Focusing on results, the outcome the game, missing a game winning shot, scratching on an important shot build anxiety. Anxiety negatively affects your physiology and mechanics, causing you to choke.

Staying immersed in what you are doing keeps your attention in the moment, freeing your mind and body just to perform.

Choking or performing under pressure directly results from your perspective, focus, and self-messaging, all of which are under your control.

Blowing a big lead is often due to choking or playing it too safe. The fear of unraveling and losing after having a commanding lead causes you to play cautious and back on your heels. Remember a “commanding lead” could be a big spot you were given or having the much better average.

The focus always needs to be on the present moment. When your mind drifts away from the “present time,” under performance or choking will be the result.

Preventing Choking when Under Pressure

One strategy to prevent choking is to reframe how you view pressure games. For top players, pressure elevates their game when they use the added intensity to go deeper into the zone. Look at pressure as a challenge to excel, not an opportunity to fail.

Under pressure, the game is still the game, no more no less. The only thing that changes is your perspective of the importance of the game!

More on self-talk and the “monkey brain” later. . .

The Commish