

THE LEADERSHIP

# REVIEW



PAST  
LESSONS  
LEARNED

# HOW TO ACE PRESSURE

BY DR JILLIAN NEJAD

There's an Al Pacino line in the film *Devil's Advocate*: "Pressure changes everything. Some people, you squeeze them, they focus. Others fold."

I'm a psychologist, a tennis fan and a Melbournian, so my favourite time of year is the Australian Open. I have so much admiration for the dedication, passion, discipline, and mental and physical prowess it takes to succeed as a professional tennis player or an elite athlete of any sport. I've learned by watching these athletes live and up close for over 25 years.

Sport is the ultimate in reality television; unscripted, and often unpredictable. In an individual sport like tennis, mental skills and strength are as much a driver of success as physical ability. Every year, tennis fans gather to witness who will triumph and who will crumble under the pressure, or 'choke' as they often refer to it in sport.

Experiencing pressure is not necessarily harmful, in fact, we need some stress and pressure to perform at our best. But how as leaders do we perform at our best when the pressure is mounting? What lessons can we learn from the tennis court?

## TOP 10 TIPS TO ACE PRESSURE:

### 1. PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR THOUGHTS.

Whether you succeed or fail often comes down to how you talk to yourself. Self-defeating thoughts include beliefs about yourself, such as "I can't do this" along with negative and unrealistic perspectives on the situation, including striving for perfectionism. Pay attention to how you perceive others' expectations or views of you, such as "everybody is counting on me" or "everyone is laughing at me".

Monitor your own thoughts in high pressure situations. Are you motivating yourself or putting yourself down? If you tend towards the latter, work on changing and practicing more effective ways of thinking. Practice telling yourself statements like "I can do this" or "everything I have done has prepared me for this moment." Consciously use these statements in different pressure situations until they become a habit.

### 2. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.

Become accustomed to high-pressure situations. Avoidance breeds fear, whereas practice fosters confidence, so face pressure head-on. Expose yourself regularly to a variety of pressure situations at home, work, or sport.

### 3. TAKE A MOMENT.

Notice how tennis players take a few breaths before serving. Relaxation and breathing techniques can ease the tension in your body before, during and after exposure to high-pressure situations.

### 4. PREVENTION IS KEY.

Even if you have the talent, knowledge and ability to deal with the high demands of work, life, or sport, sometimes the pressure can still get to you. If you have a balanced lifestyle that includes social support, a healthy diet, physical activity, and time to relax, you will be putting yourself in the best position to have the mental, emotional, and physical strength and energy to cope with stressful situations.

### 5. STAY IN THE PRESENT.

Don't overthink the outcome. Stay focused on the task so you can respond effectively to whatever happens in the moment. Being mindful in the moment creates what athletes call, "flow" or "being in the zone", a state of being wholly absorbed in an activity that achieves optimal performance.

### 6. DEVELOP A RITUAL FOR FACING PRESSURE SITUATIONS.

Tennis players often have rituals before each service, such as wiping their face, bouncing the ball a certain number of times or doing a particular movement or gesture. Nadal is well known for his precise and long-winded pre-serve routine, but the recommendation for most is to keep your ritual simple and practical. Some ideas are to take a few breaths, read an inspirational quote, listen to a particular song, or do a short mindfulness exercise.

## 7. WATCH AND LEARN.

How do people around you deal with pressure, expectations, public scrutiny or professional pitfalls? You can learn a great deal from others' successes and mistakes.

## 8. REFLECT ON YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES.

Athletes are always reviewing their past performances to ascertain what will make them more effective in their next match. Study yourself. Ask yourself what were the conditions, both internally (in your mind and body) and externally (in the environment) when you were successful and when you were not. Then work out what you would do differently to improve the outcome next time.

## 9. IMAGINE COPING WITH THE SITUATION.

One of the best ways to prepare for high-pressure situations is to visualise success. Sit or lie down with your eyes closed and go through the whole scenario in detail with you completing the task. Visualising success by going through the motions in your mind is a powerful tool and is effectively used to prepare elite athletes for their matchups.

## 10. PASSION AND PURPOSE

Why are you in this situation? Is this the path you want to take? Is this an expression of your values? Are you passionate about what you do? The meaning you attach to what you do in your life has a significant impact on how you

approach it, and ultimately can be the difference between failure and success. In Andre Agassi's autobiography *Open*, he is unequivocal that tennis gave him no joy for the majority of his career. It wasn't until he was able to use his tennis skills to fund his foundation for education that he felt at peace with being a professional tennis player. It was "meaning" that led Agassi on the path of great success, both personally and professionally, in the latter part of his career.

Over his career, Nick Kyrgios openly commented about his struggles with motivation as a tennis player. The public has watched him struggle with his emotions and self-doubt on the court. Why is such a talented person struggling so much in his chosen field? It may have been because he wasn't convinced it was worth it. This year, Kyrgios started the campaign to raise money for bushfire recovery, pledging \$200 per ace served during his summer of competitive tennis in Australia. His pledge spearheaded a tennis-wide Rally for Relief campaign that raised \$5 million. Something else also happened. Tennis wasn't just tennis anymore, it was now

serving a greater purpose. This purpose gave tennis more meaning and this led to a more fulfilled and motivated player, and person in Kyrgios.

Purpose is what gets you out of bed, fosters passion, and it is what brings about joy and fulfilment. So, when you're under pressure, you know it's worth it.

You can't get rid of pressure, but you don't have to let it get to you. As leaders, it is up to you to identify what gives you a sense of purpose and to seek out opportunities to develop and practice the skills to respond to pressure situations confidently and effectively.

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