

The Relationship Between Anxiety and Performance

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I choked.

It was just a middle-school tennis match against a manifestly worse player, but I became overwhelmed with anxiety. Before we'd started, the most important thing was to win. But during the match, I just wanted to get off the court *fast*. Burping uncontrollably, afraid of throwing up, I hit balls out. I hit them into the net. I double-faulted. And I lost 6-1, 6-0. After shaking hands and running off the court, I felt immediate relief. My distended stomach settled. My anxiety relented. And then self-loathing took over. This was a challenge match for a lower-ladder JV position. The stakes were low, but to me they felt existentially high. I'd lost to the overweight and oleaginous Paul (not his real name), and the result was there on the score sheet, and on the ladder hanging on the locker room wall, for all to see.

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A technical definition, as laid out by Sian Beilock, a University of Chicago cognitive psychologist who specializes in the topic, is "worse performance than expected given what a performer is capable of doing and what this performer has done in the past."

In any performance arena, from sports to the military to the workplace, choking is produced by anxiety and, ipso facto, viewed as an absence of fortitude, a sign of weakness.

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"Without anxiety, little would be accomplished," David Barlow, founder of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University, has written. "The performance of athletes, entertainers, executives, artisans, and students would suffer; creativity would diminish; crops might not be planted. And we would all achieve that idyllic state long sought after in our fast-paced society of whiling away our lives under a shade tree. This would be as deadly for the species as nuclear war."

Read the whole story: [Harvard Business Review](#)