

# PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

GAINING THE MENTAL EDGE  
IN BUSINESS AND SPORT



**DR. SAUL L. MILLER**

AUTHOR OF *WHY TEAMS WIN*



# MORE PRAISE FOR *PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE*

“A criminal trial lawyer has to perform under pressure everyday. A poor performance could mean a client being wrongfully convicted and sentenced to a very long time in custody. Dr. Miller’s book is loaded with useful, practical advice and interesting stories of his work with some of the world’s elite performers. I highly recommend this book to anyone who performs under pressure.”

- *Brian Coleman, criminal lawyer*

“In *Performing Under Pressure* Dr. Miller provides some very practical advice on how to excel in a highly charged professional environment. I highly recommend this book to colleagues and patients.”

- *Dr. Bruce Ward DDS, President,  
British Columbia Dental Association*

“Dr. Miller truly knows the intricacies and criteria required to enable peak performance. *Performing Under Pressure* is loaded with precise and practical advice on how to excel in the moment. I highly recommend it.”

- *Rodger Schmidt, competitor and three-time Olympic and World  
Championship Coach for USA, Italy, Austria and Germany*



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**DR. SAUL L. MILLER**

 **WILEY**

John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.

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*Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Miller, Saul, 1942-

Performing under pressure : gaining the mental edge in business and sport / Saul L. Miller.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-73764-4

1. Success—Psychological aspects. 2. Industrial management—Psychological aspects. 3. Sports—Psychological aspects. 4. Time pressure. 5. Competition (Psychology). I. Title.

**Production Credits**

Cover design: Mike Chan

Interior text design: Adrian So

Typesetter: Adrian So

Printer: Friesens Printing Ltd.

John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.

6045 Freemont Blvd.

Mississauga, Ontario

L5R 4J3

Printed in Canada

1 2 3 4 5 FP 14 13 12 11 10



*To Garfield and Laara  
and  
to all who strive and press to excel, win, and be loved.*



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## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I wish to acknowledge Karen Milner, Jennifer Smith, and the very capable team at John Wiley & Sons for their enthusiasm and support for this book. And many thanks to Garfield L. Miller and Laara K. Maxwell, my home team, for raising the bar with insightful feedback and editorial expertise.

I also wish to thank all of those who through our consultation, counseling, and personal interaction, or through their writings and ideas, have contributed to making the book a success: Anne-Marie, Alan, Art, Barry, Bobby, Brian, Bruce, Cam, Cathy, Carole, Charmaine, Chris, Chuck, Cindy, Clark, Cliff, Craig, Curt, Dan, Davey, David, Dawn, Deborah, Dick, Don, Donna, Doug, Fred, Gale, Gary, George, Glen, Greg, Harreson, Jack, Jenny, Jim, Joe, John, Julie, Kathleen, Kelly, Ken, Kevin, Larry, Leroy, Luke, Mark, Matt, Michael, Mitchell, Morris, Nancy, Paige, Paul, Pete, Peter, Randy, Ray, Rick, Ron, Roy, Ryan, Sam, Sean, Shaun, Sharon, Sid, Stanley, Tanya, Thelma, Tiger, Tom, Vince, Will, and Yvon. Thank you all.



## I N T R O D U C T I O N

# WE ARE ALL PERFORMERS

For over a quarter of a century, I have been fortunate to work with elite performers—people with the talent, motivation, and desire to be the best they can be. In principle, excelling is really quite simple. It is about having a clear idea of what you want to do, acting on that idea, staying focused, and persevering until you make it happen. However, sometimes, something comes between the desire and the doing. That something is often *pressure*.

It's the sixth game of the World Series and the team at bat is trailing in the Series three games to two. It's the tenth inning and they are losing the game 5 to 3. There are two out and two runners on base. One more out and they will lose the World Series. The batter stepping up to the plate is a seasoned veteran, yet like many competitors, in his desire to excel he sometimes tries too hard, tenses up, and interferes with his performance. As he stands at the plate facing the pitcher at that critical moment in the game and the Series, he desperately wants to get a hit, to express his ability. There are 60,000 frantic fans in the stadium, 60 million more watching on television. The atmosphere is electric. The pressure is enormous.

With just one second left in the game and his team losing 29 to 27, the kicker stands poised to kick a 33-yard field goal. The

field goal will mean victory. Missing the kick will mean losing the game and probably his job. It is a seemingly routine kick, the kind he made at practice over 100 times during the week. However, the previous Sunday, he missed two short field goals and was blamed in the press for his team's loss. Now he stands in front of 55,000 people, with millions more watching on national television. The game and his job hang in the balance. The pressure is enormous.

The scene is the cycling velodrome at the summer Olympics. It's the one-kilometer race, the fastest cycling speed race of them all. Three laps around the track, full speed against the clock. One chance, no repeats. The fastest time wins. The rider is only nineteen years old, the youngest in the race. Still, he has been training for years for this moment. It's what he dreams about. The whole race will take less than 65 seconds. The question is will he be able to bring it all together—his desire, talent, training, and technique? As his turn approaches, he can feel the tension building and his heart pounding. The pressure is enormous.

It's 8:48 a.m. as the young executive steps into the corporate boardroom. After several years with a large multinational company, he is about to give a presentation on the status of an account he has been managing. It's his first opportunity to impress the senior executives and CEO, and he is extremely motivated to make a favorable impression. He believes his future with the company is dependant on how he comes across in this meeting. He knows it's vital the presentation gets off to a good start. As the moment approaches he can feel anxiety and tension building. The question



racing through his mind is, “Can I pull it together and really show them who I am and what I can do?”

The batter, the kicker, the Olympian, and the executive are my clients, along with many other outstanding performers. The list includes major league All-Stars, NFL quarterbacks, NHL goalies, tour golfers, and Olympians in a dozen different sports, as well as stock brokers, surgeons, writers, actors, musicians, managers, dentists, lawyers, and people in marketing, sales, movie-making, rehabilitation, and law enforcement. They all want to succeed, to win, and to realize their goals and dreams. In so doing they repeatedly face the challenge of having to perform and excel in intense, high-pressure situations. At one time or another all of them have experienced how tension, pressure, anxiety, and stress can alter their perception, undermine their confidence, affect their judgment, and limit their performance.

My job is to facilitate success, to help my clients excel. To do that, I work with both mind and body. I coach my clients to exercise more psycho-physical control, and to release tension, fear, worry, and limiting thoughts. I coach them to “use” the situation, and to tune into and focus on thoughts, images, and feelings that give them power.

In the case of the batter, the kicker, the Olympian, and the executive, I spent hours working with them, helping them to excel in just the kind of intense situations described. Our goal was that, even under extreme pressure, they could regulate their emotion, shift focus, and experience more ease, power, and impact. And they did.

The World Series batter got the game-saving hit. The next night he did it again. His home run in the seventh and final game was the decisive blow and he was voted the Series' most valuable player. The kicker made the field goal. His team won the game. In the two weeks that followed, he set a league record for the longest field goal. The Olympian rode a great race, a personal best. He recorded the fastest time of the day until the last rider surpassed it. He won an Olympic silver medal. The young executive gave a compelling and impressive presentation. He spoke with clarity and poise, and the feedback he received from the senior executives was strongly positive. Shortly thereafter, he was approached to lead a larger, more high-profile account.

The most responsive and successful of my clients share several things in common. They are motivated. They have a clear, positive idea of what they want to accomplish. They have developed the technical skills required by their sport, business, or art form. And they possess the emotional and mind-body control to integrate and implement all of the above.

Facilitating elite performers in sport and business has been a major focus of my work for over a quarter century. I see sport as a fascinating forum of human potential, a model of performance under pressure, and a metaphor for life. It's an exaggeration, a drama, and a game. Yet, in many ways, it's similar to what we all experience in our daily lives. Business is another performance area where the status quo is never good enough and there is continuous pressure to improve.

*We are all performers.* In the “games” we play in life, in our careers and relationships, in our challenges to excel, the pressure we experience can be very real and very intense. Like the professional athlete, our performance can be significantly limited by tension, anxiety, over-effort, negativity, and stress. A key to our productivity and pleasure is our ability to maintain a clear, winning focus and to bring more confidence, power, and ease to the moment. That’s what this book is about.

Chapter 1 looks at pressure and stress. What is pressure? What causes it and how do we experience it? Two basic therapeutic approaches to dealing with pressure are outlined. In Chapter 2, we begin our discussion of high-performance programming by describing personal and professional power thoughts. In Chapter 3, we explore three different kinds of imagery (goal images, mental rehearsal, and identity images) that can enhance performance. Chapter 4 discusses the relationship of thought and feeling, and offers a prescription for achieving more psycho-physical control. In Chapter 5, we discuss the release reflex and provide a tension-release process for the entire body. Chapters 6 through 8 describe the use of conscious breathing and three breathing elements (rhythm, inspiration, and continuity) that increase feelings of power, integration, and ease. Chapter 9 introduces streaming, a way to channel energy, to relax, to enhance performance, and to promote healing. Chapter 10 describes an unusual power-balancing technique for energizing and creating equilibrium by blowing off tension. Chapter 11 explores elements of a winning high-performance

attitude, including confidence, mental toughness, and a positive self-image. Chapter 12 discusses individual differences—how variations in personality and focusing style affect the ways people experience and deal with pressure. Chapter 13 discusses five elements of personal lifestyle that support both consistent high-level performance and the ability to perform under pressure.

## CHAPTER ONE

# PRESSURE

The mind operates at both an instinctive and a highly conscious level. The instinctive brain is an action brain. It doesn't think; it simply reacts. It serves as an energizer, transforming impulse into action, receiving incoming (sensory) messages, relaying them, and firing outgoing (motor) responses. With the conscious mind we set goals, analyze, interpret, image, affirm, reason, adjust, and respond.

When we're performing well, there's an effective and remarkably complex interplay between these two levels of mental function. However, there are times when we get frightened, nervous, and tense up, when the conscious mind overanalyzes and over-responds to incoming messages. We think too much, say negative things to ourselves, and interrupt the smooth flow of input to output. There are times when we try too hard, ignore our intuition, and worry about things going wrong, instead of focusing on being smooth and effective and fully embracing the moment. This kind of performance "dis-ease" is frequently called *pressure*.

**“What is pressure? Where does it come from? Is it inside or outside you? Who creates it?”**

I was seated in the office of the vice president of sales of a company I'd been consulting with for several years. The VP was

interviewing for the position of regional sales director and asked me to listen in. The man being interviewed was an experienced, successful salesman. Still, it was an important career meeting for him, and he was nervous. His response to the pressure of the interview was to talk too much. He felt uncomfortable and was attempting to fill the uncertainty of the moment with sound. While trying to make a good impression, he presented himself poorly. A little conscious breathing would have enabled him to feel better about himself and allowed him to be more calm and clear. When the salesman left the office, the vice president asked me, “What do you think?”

I replied, “I think he talked too much.”

“Way too much,” said the vice president, “If he gets the job you’ll have to do some training with him.” The man never did get the job.

There are many people whose response to pressure is either to push too hard and talk too much, or to contract and withdraw from expressing their full response-ability. Either way, they are operating from the fear and pressure in their lives. Either way, the result is that they reduce their effectiveness and pleasure.

*Pressure is a feeling of dis-ease that is inextricably linked with motivation and the desire to be or do something more.* Pressure is about being attached to outcome, about really wanting to make something happen and feeling maybe it won’t. It’s about pressing to meet your goals and the expectations of others. It’s also about struggling to avoid the fear, pain, disappointment, and embarrassment you associate with failure.

It's pressure that visits the golfer close to the lead when he suddenly loses his touch on the last few holes. It's pressure that gives the young pitcher the uncomfortable sensation that the plate is moving. It's pressure that robs the speaker of her confidence and ease as she stands before the audience she's about to address. And it's pressure that causes the actor to blow his or her lines in audition, the salesperson to press too hard, and the student to "go blank" in an exam.

Pressure can be intense (one young athlete competing for a place on the Olympic team confided, "If I don't make the Olympic team, I'll die.") but it is not confined to the obvious "test situation." Pressure can follow you anywhere: into career, relationships, and quiet moments by yourself. It's there when you are struggling to get ahead, and to make ends meet. It's there when you are concerned about saying and doing the right thing, and about being accepted. And it may be there at times when you reflect on the meaningfulness of your life.

## The Seminar

I am standing in front of a business audience of about 200 people giving a seminar on *Performing Under Pressure*. I begin by asking the group to imagine a scene. It's the same scene I presented at the start of the book.

"It's the sixth game of the World Series. The batter stepping up to the plate is acutely aware his team is losing the game and the Series. It's the tenth inning and they're trailing 5 to 3. There are two out. It's their last chance. If he makes an out, the Series is over

and his team loses.” I pause for a moment. “I want you to imagine that you are the batter stepping up to the plate at that critical moment in the drama.” (There’s some laughter.) “There are 60,000 people in the stands, 60 million more watching you on television. You desperately want to get a hit, to come through. Imagine that you have the talent and the ability. The question is, what could you do in that high-pressure moment to help you be at your best? Even if you’re not a baseball fan, please consider what you might feel like in that situation, and what you could do to perform under pressure.” After a moment, I continue, “The image may seem more dramatic and high-profile than what most of us experience in our daily lives, yet in many ways it’s about the very same fear and pressure. Each of us is an expert regarding pressure in our lives. Please relate some of the things that cause you to feel pressured.”

My seminar audiences have some responses in common. “Deadlines”: a favorite pressure stimulus.

“Just the word *dead-line* is pressure,” I interject. “What does it mean? If you don’t deliver the goods on time, you die? The project dies? The boss dies? Deadline is a frightening word. What else causes you pressure?” I ask.

“Being successful in my career,” says a young woman.

“Quotas,” volunteers another.

“What kind of quotas?” I ask.

“Having to maintain a certain sales volume,” is the reply.

“Working on commission.”

“Having to ship so much a day,” adds someone else.



“Pressure is meeting the goals I set for myself.”

“It’s speaking to large groups.”

“It’s accountability.”

“Pressure is picking up the kids on time.”

“It’s having call waiting.”

“It’s paying the mortgage.”

“Making money.”

Now the audience is engaged. This is about every aspect of life.

“There’s pressure to be in shape.”

“Being on time.”

“Getting around the city in traffic is pressure.”

“Being supervised can be real pressure.”

“Especially if you work for more than one supervisor,” adds someone else.

“It’s rising production costs and trying to compete with the tide of cheap foreign imports flooding the market.”

“Pressure is about trying to produce a better-quality product, for less money, in less time.”

“It’s trying to be a good parent.”

“Staying on my diet, losing weight.”

“Working for someone who’s demanding and insensitive.”

“Making a partnership work is pressure.”

“It’s trying to satisfy others.”

“Pressure is playing to a four handicap.”

“It’s keeping up,” says an older gentleman.

“Keeping up what... or with what?” I ask.

“Everything,” he replies.

Laughter. The group is engaged and communicating. They are all experts. They know the subject.

“Pressure is having to make right decisions.”

“It’s keeping the home office satisfied, and off my back.”

“It’s getting the job I want.”

“Getting along with the rest of the family when we’re all operating on separate agendas.”

“Pressure is exercising patience dressing my three-year-old daughter when I’m already half an hour late for work.”

“Two jobs usually mean pressure,” I remark.

“Pressure is keeping my job.”

“It’s getting everything done on time.”

“Pressure is making the most of my life.”

“It’s satisfying others.”

“Pressure is making enough money so I don’t have to worry about money all the time.”

The seminar continues. I explain, “The term pressure means to press. As you can see, all kinds of thoughts, situations, and demands press on us every day. For most people the “biggies” behind an intense desire to do well are the need to feel good about ourselves; striving to meet the expectations of others; and operating with what we believe is a limited supply of time, talent, or money.

“To summarize, pressure is a force we experience as a feeling of dis-ease, growing out of an intense desire to be or do something more, accompanied by the uncertainty and fear that we may not succeed.”