

# Reducing the Pressure We Feel Every Day

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# Learning how to perform under pressure, and reducing the feelings of pressure we experience day in and day out, are not the same thing.

In the last few years, I've observed through my clinical practice and in the pressure management seminars that I conduct, that the senior executives and professionals I talk to most often want to know: "How can I stop feeling pressured 24/7?" "How can I 'de-pressurize?'" "How can I lessen the feelings of pressure I experience every day?"

Unfortunately, simply getting better at what they do is not likely going to help anymore. This is because the underlying pressure they feel every day has little to do with performance pressure—the pressure of performing in a courtroom, in the case of a trial lawyer, or hitting a presentation out of the park in a meeting with the executive board. The daily pressure they experience arises more from a sense of the workload they have to carry on their shoulders everyday, without relief.

In Greek mythology, Zeus punished Atlas for defying the gods by ordering him to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. That is the kind of weight we often feel in our everyday lives—particularly at work. And at times, it can be crushing. When Atlas, overwhelmed by the unrelenting pressure of carrying his load, asked Hercules to help him, Hercules (wisely) declined.

For twenty years, I have taught that learning to perform in the pressure of the moment in key situations is the pathway to success in a career. I still know that to be true. But learning how to reduce the daily pressure we experience is an equally important success skill.

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# The Case Against Pressure Feelings

Nobody comes home and says, “I had a great day today—I was under enormous pressure all day long.” Nor do we ever wish our kids were under more pressure at school. Experiencing pressure does not enhance our lives—it undermines them. At heart, the feelings of pressure are rooted in the primal, evolutionary concern that “I have to produce or I will be weeded out.” It is an early warning survival mechanism. For our early ancestors, a failure to perform under pressure often meant death. If he or she couldn’t sprint fast enough to escape a predator, or maintain focus while navigating a treacherous path, he or she might not have survived. There was no second chance; literally he was one and done. “I have to produce to survive,” was a daily and realistic concern based on the fact that our ancestors’ existence was dependent on being able to perform effectively in the do or die moments they encountered.

That fear kept Early Man almost continually on point and ready to act. Today, so many of us continue to experience pressure in the same way as our ancestors—our brains experience such situations as “do or die.” As a result, we remain on high alert, creating nonstop pressure—sometimes over even the smallest things.

# A Contemporary Plague

This kind of nonstop anxiety has become a plague in our work-life. It keeps millions of us up at night. Here is how the manager of a high-end Madison Avenue store put it: “Everyday, I wake up wondering if I can make our sales goals. The butterflies start right away.”

When you experience pressure anxiety—the feeling that you have to produce all the time—your emotional landscape changes for the worse. Small annoyances like picking up your dry-cleaning, for example, begin to interfere with your need to “produce.” Going to your daughter’s play becomes an intrusion. Going on vacation can increase your anxiety, because it takes you away from what you “should” be doing: achieving results. Important conversations with your spouse may go south because of the subtle pressure of always being “on.” Worse, your decisions may become distorted by your need to produce. And if your focus shifts solely to winning, at any cost, you may find yourself compromising your ethics.

Pressure anxiety may seem irrational. A mediocre presentation to a client is not akin to death, and probably, in and of itself, will not lead to the end of a professional relationship. Similarly, your daughter being turned down from her first choice college will not end her life, although she may feel that way at the time. We often tell ourselves and our kids not to overreact to these kinds of temporary set-backs—to be rational—but the anxiety makes it hard to hold that thought in mind.

Sometimes, of course, the pressure is real. A college graduate in his first sales job is given three months to meet his goals or he will be let go. While it is true that this is not physically a do or die situation, it is in effect a do-or die situation in terms of this job, and failure may make it more difficult for him to get another sales position. No wonder those first three months are filled with feelings of, “I have to produce” or else... ” There is some truth to that line of thinking.

Twenty years ago a student proclaiming, “I didn’t get into a top school, my life is over,” was a wild exaggeration. It is still an exaggeration, but there may be some truth to it if the person hopes to get into one of the top medical or law or business schools. It is not so surprising that in today’s hyper-competitive world, students walk around thinking “I have to get good grades, or else.”

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And that is the kind of pressure so many of us face in our lives. For example, the annual American Psychological Association report entitled “Stress in America” shows that 72 percent of adults admit to feeling stressed about money at least some of the time, and 22 percent say that they experience extreme stress about money.

I should point out that stress and pressure are not the same thing, but they are related. Stressful feelings result when demands placed upon us outweigh our resources to respond. People stressed about money feel the demands on their finances outweigh their financial resources—too many bills, not enough cash. This stress can quickly intensify into feelings of pressure: I have to earn more money, or I won’t be able to afford my kid’s college tuition, or make my mortgage payment. If the individual was confident he could make more money, the pressure he experiences would lessen. But for most people, the chances of earning dramatically more, quickly, are unlikely, so the pressure they experience day in and day out ratchets up.

This feeling of pressure can occur in all kinds of settings. Studies reported by The American Psychological Association indicate that students feel under more pressure than ever before. Some experience periods of depression, and may even need to take a leave of absence from school. By the time they get into the work world, their susceptibility to pressure anxiety is often in full bloom.

My point is that the pressure resulting from the conviction that you have to produce results day in and day out is not helpful. Yet, for a number of reasons, it is trending upward in the U.S

**Global competition.** One reason, of course, is increased global competition. Competition is a natural pressure inducer.

Look at the element of competition in terms of contemporary college admissions. Since the 1950's, the number of students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe attending American universities has soared. Ninth grade students who want to go to an elite school are already thinking, "I have to get top grades in every class to get into Stanford." And that's true. If he or she doesn't produce, she is out; it is not a figment of her imagination.

The same kind of competitive forces are seen in the workplace. Today's workforces are infinitely more diverse than they were even 30 years ago. Job applicants come from all over the world. Billy Beane, General Manager of the Oakland A's and creator of "money ball," told me that he had 1500 applicants for two front office analytical positions, many from China, Hong Kong, as well as Ivy League colleges such as Harvard, M.I.T. and Yale. Global competition adds more pressure to our lives, not just in getting a job, but in keeping it.

**Longevity.** In the 1970's, people turning 60 were looking towards retirement. A few decades later, 60 years olds are in the height of their career and are often thinking about second careers. Many 70' year olds are flourishing at work. More and more people are staying in the work force for a longer time, reducing the number of jobs available for younger workers.

You don't have to be a mathematician or an economist to realize that more people in the work force increases the competition for what is a limited number of jobs. Thirty years ago, 35 year olds were not competing with 65 year olds. Today they are. And that element of competition increases pressure and pressure anxiety.

**The 24/7 Pressure of Technology.** It used to be that our workday was 8 hours long and it was a rarity for people to work at home. Today, computers allow people to work at home, airports, and over coffee at Starbucks. While technology makes work easier, it also allows us to work more. Twenty years ago, managers were reading newspapers and magazines while waiting for their next flight. Today, they are hard at work on their computers.

Cell phones allow us to call or text others from anywhere. But they allow us to be reached anywhere, too. In effect, most of us are on call 24/7.

Such instant communication creates the expectation and demand that we respond faster. “Why didn’t you answer me? I texted you ten minutes ago,” is not an uncommon comment.

So while technology can make things easier, it can also increase the pressure we feel as it forces us to work harder and respond faster.

Global competition, increased longevity, and 24/7 technology are but a few of the factors that are driving an increase in our feelings of pressure. Some describe it as a contemporary plague.

And the question is not how we can perform better under pressure—we’re already maxed out on effort and time and performing at a very high level. It’s how we can lessen our anxiety and reduce the feeling of pressure so it doesn’t get in the way of our performance.

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# How to De-pressurize

If you were to come to my office, I would give you five actions you can take to reduce the feelings of pressure you experience that you could do in just a few minutes. Here are a few of the things I would prescribe to you:

- 1. Focus on how good you are at something, not your ranking.** You'll experience less pressure if you focus on your own skill and excellence rather than how you stack up against others. We all know that we live in a competitive world. But we can't control the efforts of the other guy. Competition encourages us to try to be better than others. The tradeoff is a constant feeling that "you have to be the best," which can create unrealistic expectations and a sense that you don't measure up. Focusing on your own excellence, rather than beating out the other person, puts you in control of your destiny. It promotes feelings of confidence, rather than pressure anxiety.
- 2. Adhere to your values and personal expectations.** You've probably seen plenty of films and television shows in which one of the characters feels extreme pressure to live up to the expectations of others. These shows are a good example of art imitating life, and we relate to them because it's such a common pressure.

Whether because of a fear of rejection or the need to be accepted, attempting to perform to meet the expectations of others helps to exacerbate pressure. It can force you to navigate a different course than you would otherwise.

Staying true to your values and honoring the goals and expectations you set for yourself are more likely to reduce the feelings of pressure you experience.

- 3. Focus on your interests, not the incentives.** Almost everyone thinks about incentives in the workplace, from salaries to bonuses to promotions. Paradoxically, those who focus excessively on attaining them or losing them are more likely to feel stress, anxiety, and fear—emotions that intensify feelings of pressure that, ironically, inhibit their capabilities to attain the very incentives they desire.

Those who pursue and develop their interests in their careers are much more likely to experience positive emotions at work than those who don't, as well as greater productivity. The same is true for people who focus on achieving a sense of purpose and meaning through their work. If you are starting out in the work world, follow your genuine interests—any pressure you experience will be buffered by the feelings of curiosity and fulfillment that come from following your passions. If you've been in the work world for a while, try to rekindle your purpose.

- 4. Appreciate what you “have,” not what you “have not.”** Experiencing joy is a great minimizer of pressure. Appreciate the people, events, opportunities, and achievements that enrich your life, but which so many of us often take for granted. Focusing on what you don’t have will likely increase your feelings of pressure. To de-pressurize, take a few minutes each day to appreciate what you have. You will feel calmer, happier, and more relaxed.
- 5. Use any feelings of pressure you experience to modify your thoughts.** If you are experiencing pressure anxiety before a key event or action, remember that how you speak to yourself can help you or hurt you. If you have butterflies in your stomach before a presentation you are probably not telling yourself, “I can handle this,” or that “Life is great.” But you should. Telling yourself you’re not ready, or imaging yourself failing is not productive. Give yourself practical advice, such as “stay focused,” or “just do your best.” Instead of allowing your thoughts to keep you stuck, repeating and intensifying your fear, train yourself to create feelings of confidence. Those feelings will stay with you as you walk out onto the dais.

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# How To De-Pressurize Your Organization

For those of you who are CEOs and recognize the importance of de-pressurizing your organization, here are some actions you can take that will help get you there:

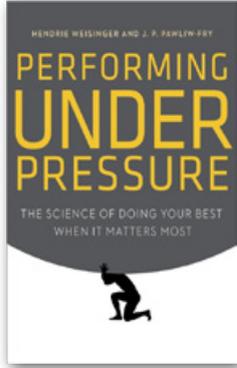
1. Since pressure adversely impacts almost all of us, help employees learn how to manage the pressure they experience, rather than increasing the pressure on them to do better.
2. Create forums where employees can share their feelings of anxiety and pressure. Talking through their feelings can reduce the pressure they experience.
3. Teach managers and supervisors to communicate in a style that reduces performance pressure. Telling them “This is our big chance, or telling them how important a project is, are all pressure inducing phrases. Instead, make it clear “There will be plenty of other opportunities.” Help them to focus on just doing their best.
4. Create an organizational mindset of striving to achieve excellence, rather than beating the competition.

We all know that it's to our best advantage to learn how to perform under pressure, to do our best, because we all feel pressure in our lives.

But much of that pressure is an added pressure we put on ourselves, and as real as it is, it is largely an evolutionary internal anxiety that actually hinders performance rather than helping elevate it.

**The good news is that learning how to live with it, deflate it, and overcome it to do our best is something each of us can master. 🧠**

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS** | **Hendrie Weisinger**, the bestselling author of *Nobody's Perfect*, is a world-renowned psychologist and pioneer in the field of pressure management. He has consulted with and developed programs for dozens of Fortune 500 companies and government agencies, and has taught in Executive Education and Executive MBA programs at Wharton, UCLA, NYU, and MIT.

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