

# mand Carry On

How do you stop yourself from “choking” when it really matters? The experts say star performance isn’t always an inherent skill, it can be a learnt one. BY ANTHEA ROWAN



**In the months following the live announcement of the 2011 Springbok World Cup squad, Ard Matthews, lead singer of Just Jinjer, was seen eating humble pie. A lot.**

He'd choked you see. Not on the pie (which he ate in earnest and with grace) but on stage giving a rendition of the national anthem. He's said sorry – and delivered a perfect performance of the anthem since then.

Ard's booking manager Craig Reid told me, “Ard is used to performing in front of big crowds; he has been for the past 17 years”. So what happened?

## WHAT IS CHOKING?

According to Sian Beilock, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Chicago – he choked. Beilock explores the mind-mechanisms that drive performance (and why even the best sometimes fail). She says, “Choking is sub-optimal performance, not just poor performance. It's [one] that is inferior to what you can do and have done in the past and occurs when you feel pressure to get everything right.”

While we're not all in the habit of belting out anthems in front of millions, none of us are immune to choking. It can happen during a job interview, delivering a speech to friends at a wedding or on the sports field – any situation where we're obliged to perform under pressure.

So why, when we've read that dratted speech over and over in front of a mirror, fine-tooth combed a presentation a hundred times or practised that penalty shot on the hockey field – do we bomb?

## THE BIG FREEZE

Paul Sullivan, a *New York Times* columnist and author of *Clutch: Why Some People Excel Under Pressure and Other's Don't* (Portfolio), believes people who choke share three traits: they fail to take personal responsibility for every action and that means quality slips; they over-think. Rather than focusing on the outcome, they concentrate on the mechanics of a task. Analysing the minutiae unpicks a performance; and they fool themselves with overconfidence by, for example, not preparing sufficiently well.

But, while researching her own book, *Choke: What the Secrets of The Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To* (Free Press), Beilock found that choking isn't only psychological, it's physiological too. Under pressure the prefrontal cortex of our brains is at risk of not working as it should. This results in a loss of cerebral power necessary for successfully executing tasks under stress. Simply put, anxiety messes with our wiring. So, how can we limit the chances of a misfire when it matters most?

## CLUTCH CONTROL

Sullivan says there are five principles of what he calls “clutch performers” – people who understand how to perform under high-stress conditions: “Focus; discipline; adaptability; being present; and the push and pull of fear and desire.”

They need, says Sullivan, to be applied in that order: focus allows you to block out everything that distracts from your goal, not to be confused with concentration. “Focus is a laser beam; concentration is merely a flashlight.” Discipline allows us

• To perform under pressure, follow Paul Sullivan's principles: Focus; Discipline; Adaptability; Being Present; and Fear and Desire.

## Shape Your Life Under Pressure

### 3 Women on Success Under Pressure

#### "I DO YOGA AND SWIM"

**Meryl van Noie, singer/pianist**

● "I used to be nervous as a performer and stage fright was an issue. I used to prepare for this by practising for hours. If you know the music backwards, it's more likely the brain will kick into its sense of muscle memory... your body will physically be able to cope or mistakes can be easily recovered.

In stressful situations, I take a few deep breaths and make sure I'm hydrated. I do yoga and I also swim, as I've learnt this is one of the most relaxing forms of exercise. I've found this helps immensely and I haven't been really stressed before a performance in a long time."

#### "I TRAIN HARD"

**Vivienne du Preez, amateur belly-dancer**

● "I started [dancing] after my mom had lessons. I'd never danced, having always been a scuba instructor, mountain biker and surfer. I am very confident. I own my own business and taught diving for many years overseas and in SA, but nothing prepared me for this! I just tell myself I know what I'm doing and people will forgive me if I mess up.

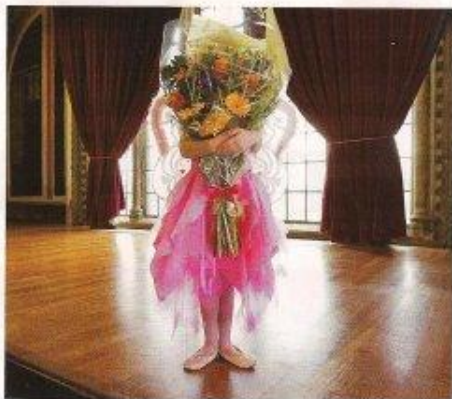
The key to a successful performance is to practise, practise, practise. Then practise some more but not to the point where you start doubting yourself. These days to go to sleep, I do dance moves!

#### "I FORGET EVERYTHING ELSE"

**Anna Buchanan, competitive dressage rider**

● The rider has to master not only his or her emotive state but also the horse's as they also suffer from performance anxiety. I try to maintain a steady pace in my preparations, doing everything calmly and quietly.

Many competitors have grooms but I prefer to be involved so that I'm forced to remain concentrated on my horse. Having to keep something else calm forces one to stay calm oneself. I prefer not to talk to people, to facilitate getting into the right frame of mind, so that by the time I am in the competitive arena I have a good dose of tunnel vision!



The same approach would work with a presentation, a conversation with your boss where you need to be articulate and even in what might otherwise be a challenging social scenario.

#### PEAK PRACTICE

◆ Penny Holburn, a Joburg-based life coach, believes preparation under the environmental conditions in which you'll be performing may also help to avert disaster. "European soccer teams practised

to stay the course under pressure. Adaptability allows us to change course if we have to – don't let the plan or your ego stop you from abandoning what might be the wrong course of action.

Being present is imperative if we are to enhance focus, it helps us to respond so we can better adapt and stops us thinking about past failure or anticipated glory. Finally, the push and pull is what drives us. The desire for success mixed with the fear of failure is a potent cocktail that will keep you on track under pressure.

#### HOW TO ADAPT

Clutch performers aren't always born, they can, and often are, made. Adaptability is key. Failing to adapt is what causes people to come unstuck most often, says Sullivan. Take a job interview. Caroline Goyder, a public speaking coach and author of *The Star Qualities* (Sidgwick & Jackson) describes interviews as "pure performance". Like theatre: "You have an allotted time in which to shine."

There's a rule for adapting she says. "A good interview is like dancing; you find the same rhythm, showing you can work with potential employers." Attune yourself to what's going on in the foyer and when you enter the room. Be an OAF: consider the Outcome, remain Aware and be Flexible – if they look positive, keep going; if not, change gear. "Noticing your interviewers' posture, pace, rhythm, tone, energy level and choice of words is important. You can echo elements in your own answers, while also staying true to who you are. It's a fine balance, but get it right and you get the job!"

with vuvuzelas blowing before they set foot on the pitch at the Soccer World Cup", she says as an example.

You need to know – and feel confident in – the message you'll deliver, the tone you're going to use and the direction you'll take. Beilock suggests taping yourself and watching it, or delivering the speech to an audience of your nearest and dearest (usually the harshest critics). Practise doesn't make perfect, she says. "Practising under pressure does".

She also advocates writing down your worries before you go into a stressful situation. "It helps to download the worries from your mind, making them less likely to pop up and distract you."

But is there such a thing as "over preparation"? Yes, says Holburn. You can exhaust yourself preparing and tiredness will compromise performance; you can bore yourself so that the zeal and energy has dried up at the point of delivery (which will compromise your audience's enjoyment of your performance); or you could have prepared so much you feel overconfident. "It's good to have some butterflies before a performance of any sort – nerves are normal and they keep you focused, improve your concentration, and keep you alert to what is going on around you."

But what if it does go all pear-shaped? "Great performance is, above all, a risk," says Goyder. "You're flying a plane, and there may be turbulence. Stay cool and calm, the pilot of the plane, no matter what, and keep your passengers happy." Sometimes, yes, that might involve eating a slice or two of humble pie... ■