

HOW TO SEE PRESSURE IN SPORT AS A CHALLENGE, NOT A THREAT

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Playing sport is fun. But we can also get nervous about it. Many people competing in sports get nervous and feel pressure because doing their best is important to them. Feeling pressure is not automatically bad. If you see pressure as a positive challenge, it can help you do your best. However, seeing pressure as a negative threat can stop you from doing your best. Why? When you see pressure as something positive (a challenge), you believe in your abilities, feel in control of your situation, and are focused on facing the situation head-on. When you see pressure as a challenge, you might feel nervous, but you know this feeling helps you do your best, which helps your body respond in a helpful way. How can you make sure you see pressure as a challenge? One way is using techniques to help you to face pressure head-on, with self-belief, control, and excitement.

FEELING PRESSURE IN SPORT

In sport, there are many situations in which we can feel nervous. Imagine playing a match in front of a crowd of people or trying to qualify for a regional championship. Feeling nervous and experiencing pressure is completely normal, and in fact, many famous athletes have openly shared that they feel pressure before a match because doing the best they can is important to them. Sometimes you may view that pressure as a bad thing—as a threat. For example, you may feel that you do not have much control over what is happening, you might wish you could walk away, or perhaps you do not feel very sure of your abilities. But pressure does not have to be negative. You can learn to see pressure as a challenge—as something positive. When you make pressure your friend, and see it as a challenge, you feel more in control of the situation, you believe in your abilities, and you can face the situation head-on. Although you might feel nervous and notice your heart beating faster, you know that this means you are ready for the pressure situation. This will help you to do your best because your body reacts in a positive way to these thoughts and feelings, helping you to execute your skills properly.

WHAT ARE CHALLENGE AND THREAT?

To feel **pressure**, something must be at stake. Maybe you have never played the opponent before, your family is watching, it is an important rivalry, you are unsure who is going to win, or you are worried about what others think of you. These are what we call the demands of the situation, and they are what creates pressure. To see this pressure as a good thing—a challenge—you need to know that you have the resources to match these demands. In our theory of challenge and threat states in athletes, we have identified three main resources: self-efficacy, perceived control, and approach and avoidance motivation (Figure 1) [1].

Self-efficacy, or self-belief, is the belief you have in your ability to successfully complete a task or meet the demands ahead of us. It is about the belief of what we can do with our skills in a situation. Self-efficacy is influenced by several factors, including our past experiences (earlier tasks we have succeeded at), having role models (perhaps a sibling or a training partner) who have been successful in a task, positive feedback from others or yourself, and, and how we interpret our physical symptoms of nervousness (heart rate, emotional responses such as anxiety).

Perceived control is the feeling of having control over a situation. It is different from *wanting to be* in control. Perceived control has to do with being aware of what is in your control and what is not, and accepting this. For example, when it is raining, you are aware that you cannot change the weather, but you feel you are in control of your

PRESSURE

A situation where it is important for you to do well, but to do well you will have to try hard, and success is not guaranteed.

SELF-EFFICACY

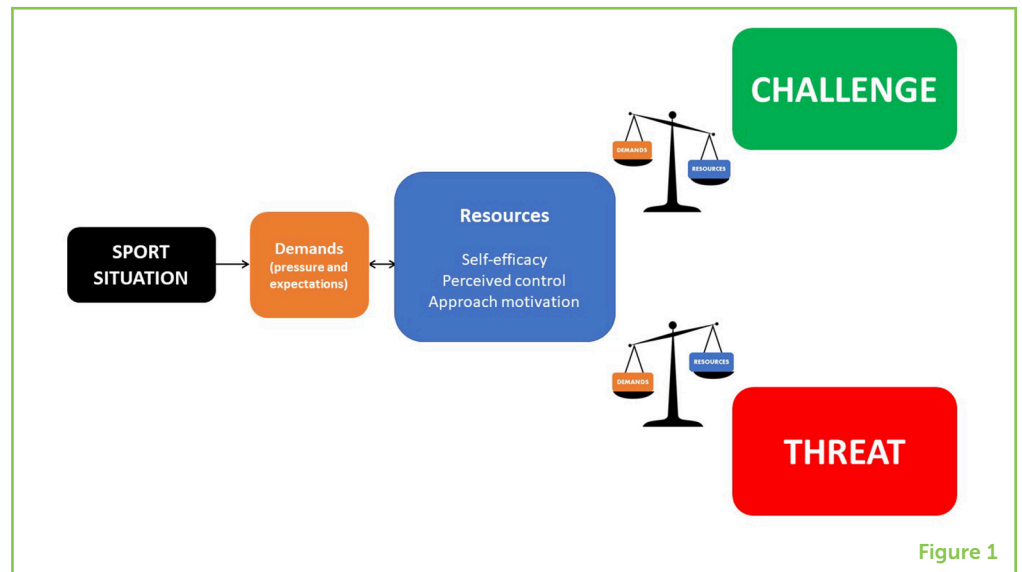
The belief you have in your ability to successfully complete a task or meet the demands placed on you.

PERCEIVED CONTROL

The feeling of having control over a situation.

Figure 1

Challenge and threat states. In a challenge state the resources outweigh the demands, whereas in a threat state the demands outweigh the resources.



APPROACH MOTIVATION

Focusing your efforts on doing your best and facing the situation head-on.

AVOIDANCE MOTIVATION

Focusing your efforts on trying to avoid making mistakes.

CHALLENGE STATE

Seeing pressure as something positive, where you feel you have the resources (self-efficacy, perceived control, approach motivation) to manage the demands of a situation.

THREAT STATE

Seeing pressure as something unhelpful, where you do not feel you have the resources (self-efficacy, perceived control, approach motivation) to manage the demands of a situation.

decision to wear shoes with a better grip. Or imagine that a referee makes a decision you disagree with—you probably cannot change the decision of the referee, but you can focus on your own effort and work hard.

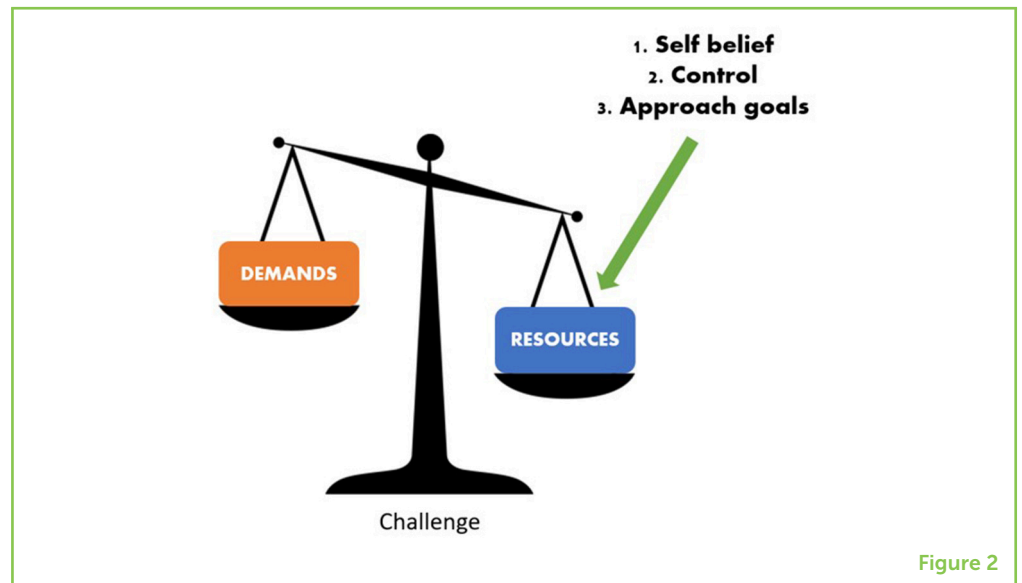
Approach motivation has to do with focusing your efforts on doing your best. At other times, you may focus on trying to avoid mistakes—we call this **avoidance motivation**. The key difference is that, when you have an approach motivation, you focus on what you are going to do to perform well. Sometimes being focused on what you can avoid might feel easy, but it can actually take a lot of energy! Think about a downhill skier who is so focused on trying not to fall that he ends up missing an icy patch and falling. Approach motivation helps to turn pressure into a challenge.

YOUR BODY UNDER PRESSURE

Having sufficient resources (self-efficacy, perceived control, and an approach motivation) helps people to manage the demands of a situation, and this is what we call a **challenge state** (Figure 2). How can we know whether someone sees a situation as a challenge or a threat? Researchers have found that the cardiovascular system (heart and lungs) responds differently when we feel that we have enough resources to deal with demands compared to when we feel we do not have enough resources [2]. When you experience a challenge state, the amount of blood that gets pumped through your heart each minute (cardiac output) increases and your blood vessels widen (which is called less vascular resistance), allowing that increased flow of blood to refuel your body. The way the cardiovascular system responds when you experience a **threat state** is much less efficient. Your blood flow remains pretty much the same, but your vascular

Figure 2

In a challenge state an athlete feels they have the resources (self-belief, perceived control, and approach goals) to manage the demands of the situation.



resistance increases, meaning that our body has to work harder to pump the blood around more narrow blood vessels. Taken together, when we feel we can deal with the demands of a situation, we have a more helpful cardiovascular response. Challenge has other positive outcomes, such as better performance and feelings of excitement and improved mood (Figure 3) [3].

HOW TO MAKE PRESSURE YOUR FRIEND: GETTING INTO A CHALLENGE STATE

Knowing that a challenge state is helpful might lead you to ask, “How do I get into a challenge state?” We suggest trying to increase your resources (self-efficacy, perceived control, and approach motivation) to help you deal with the demands of a situation. To move toward a challenge state by increasing your resources, we propose that you practice **psychological techniques** that will help you to feel more in control, enhance your self-efficacy, and allow you to focus on tackling the demands of the situation head-on.

You can use a technique called self-talk to build the three key resources. Think about it as “What can I say to myself, to help me see this pressure as a good thing?” You can tell yourself what you want to achieve (approach motivation), remind yourself of what you can control (perceived control) and use positive affirmations in which you remind yourself of previous successes (self-efficacy). In one study, researchers asked participants who had never climbed before to mentally prepare to climb a ten-meter climbing wall—a tough task [4]! By reminding participants to be confident, in control, and focused on success rather than failure, researchers helped participants to see the task as a challenge, putting them into a challenge state.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNIQUE

Mental strategies, such as self-talk and imagery, that you can use to help develop resources such as self-efficacy, perceived control, and approach motivation.

Figure 3

An overview of a challenge state and a threat state. Reprinted with permission from Turner, M. J., and Barker, J. B. (2014). *Tipping the balance: the mental skills handbook for athletes*. UK: Bennion Kearny.

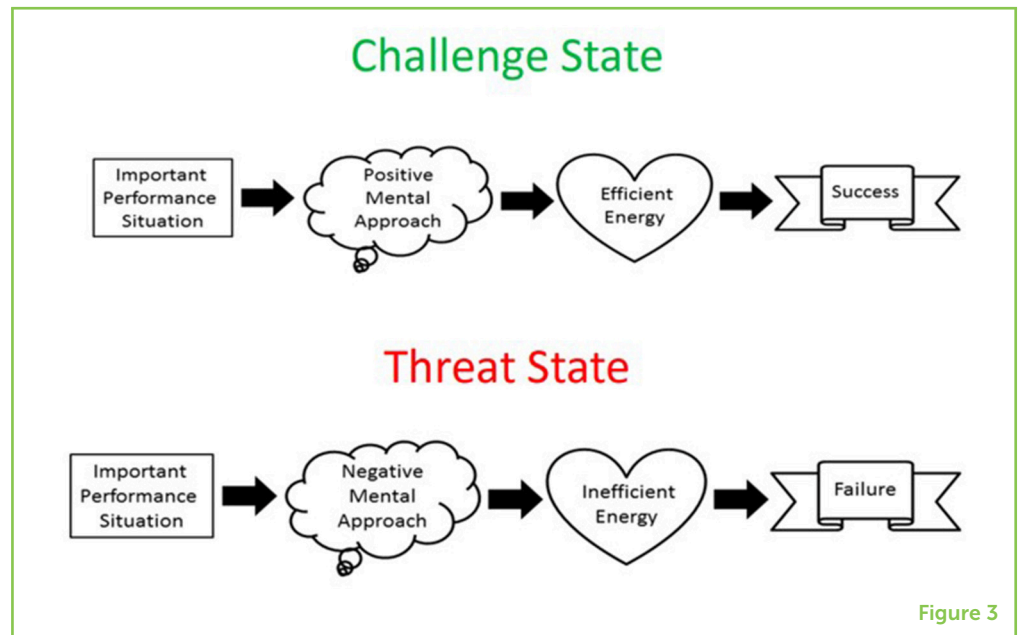


Figure 3

Imagery, where you create or recreate a situation in your mind using all your senses (vision, sound, touch, smell, taste), is another useful psychological technique to optimize your resources. For example, imagine a successful performance (confidence) in which you are focused on what you can control (perceived control) and what you are trying to achieve (approach motivation). The usefulness of imagery was shown by a study in which participants had to prepare to compete against a more skilled opponent [5]. Those who listened to “challenge” imagery, focusing on being confident in their abilities and enjoying the opportunity to compete against an opponent of a higher standard reported being more confident than those who listened to “threat” imagery, which included doubts about their abilities and worry about the competition.

If you would like to try using these psychological techniques in a demanding situation, it is important that you practice them first. Psychological techniques require training, just like you would train your technical skills (football kicks, or the starting position for a sprint) and tactical decisions (when to speed up in a cross-country race, or which offensive strategies to use in basketball).

In addition to using psychological techniques to build resources, you can use the support of the people around you. Getting positive feedback from your coach, or reminders from your family of times when you did well, can help build your self-efficacy. A teammate can help you to keep focused on the tasks you have control over (perceived control), or a friend may remind you of what you are trying to achieve (approach motivation). As an athlete, using the support around you will help you to fulfill your potential.

In summary, seeing pressure as a challenge can help you in your sport. To help the normal pressure of sport feel more like a challenge and less like a threat, we suggest focusing on building your resources so that you can face pressure head-on, with self-belief, control, and excitement. These skills will help you to have fun while playing sports—even if you feel a little nervous!

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SUBMITTED: 16 March 2021; **ACCEPTED:** 10 March 2022;

PUBLISHED ONLINE: 06 April 2022.

EDITOR: Chris Harwood, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

SCIENCE MENTOR: Deepa Cherukunnath

CITATION: Meijen C, Turner MJ and Jones MV (2022) How to See Pressure in Sport as a Challenge, Not a Threat. *Front. Young Minds* 10:681496. doi: 10.3389/frym.2022.681496

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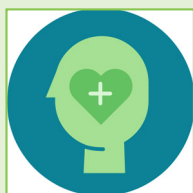
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YOUNG REVIEWERS



ADVAITH, AGE: 15

A prolific reader boasting to become a scientist! I enjoy experimenting physics, composing tunes on my flute and penning my thoughts through essays.



MAYUKHA, AGE: 12

Motivating people around gives me the energy to define my ambitions. Aspiring to join national administrative services, play national level tennis and become a Bharatnatyam dancer!



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Carla Meijen is a senior lecturer in applied sport psychology at St Mary's University in London. She is fascinated by how athletes respond to pressure in sports, which she researches in her work on challenge and threat states. Her work also focuses on how psychological techniques (like self-talk and goal-setting) can be used to develop psychological factors such as motivation and self-belief. As a sport psychologist, she has worked with athletes from a wide range of sports and levels, and Carla enjoys using her knowledge from her research in her work with athletes. *Carla.Meijen@stmarys.ac.uk



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Martin Turner is a reader in psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is most known for his work researching ways that athletes can optimize performance and wellbeing. In his work, he examines the links between the human mind and the human body when under stress, and how all this relates to human performance under pressure. As a practitioner, he has worked within professional, semi-professional, and amateur sport, at the team and individual level. Martin worked as England Futsal Psychologist from 2013 to 2020. Some of the work he did with the team came from his book "Tipping The Balance: The Mental Skills Handbook For Athletes."



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Marc Jones is a professor of psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. His work is focused on understanding the impact of stress on health, wellbeing, and performance. The methods that Marc and his colleagues have developed to study the stress responses and enhance performance have been used in business, education, and sport. In addition to his ongoing work in sport and business, Marc is working on projects related to stress, wellbeing, and health in extreme environments. These include military settings, preparation for space travel, and emergency medicine groups.