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Play "In the Zone" with Joan

Joan will be giving a workshop, "Entrain Your Heart & Brain for Peak Performance---Use Hypnosis to Play in the Zone State" at the world's largest hypnosis convention in August in Massachusetts. Here's your chance to learn about using hypnosis and much more to improve your golf game. Log on to www.ngh.net

CHOKING FROM PRESSURE

By Joan King

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines choking as "performing badly in a critical situation." That seems like a simple definition for such a huge emotional upset. Choking under pressure can happen not only to athletes, but to anyone in a highly stressful performance situation. Golfers are particularly prone to choking because of the large amount of time in-between shots to think about the situation and the consequences.

Only those golfers who care about how well they perform experience the pressure of choking.

I remember the first time I played in a national tournament where there were spectators lining every hole. Instead of playing my own game, my fear of hitting one of the spectators grew larger with every hole we played. I didn't hit anyone with my golf ball, but I can still remember the awful fear that consumed me and made it almost impossible to take the club back. I just wanted to get off the golf course as soon as possible.

When Morgan Pressel qualified for the USGA Women's Open Championship at age 13, she faced the same situation. Using her creative mind, she envisioned all the spectators as trees, reframing the situation and removing the fear of hitting one.

When a golfer succumbs to the fear, he reacts with "fight or flight."

Choking describes a very specific kind of fear of failure. Choking is about thinking too much about the emotional response to fear. Choking is about the loss of instinct. When a golfer "chokes," his/her swing becomes less fluid. S/he goes back to the mechanical, self-conscious thoughts about how to swing. This pressure causes the performance to suffer.

Choking is characterized by being too analytical. Golfers "fight" back by trying to perform while their physical bodies are responding to the fear thought. Tests of brain wave activity measured by an EEG showed that those who choked had an imbalance in brain activity. The left side of the brain, which controls the thinking about mechanical moves, dominated the thinking. The right side of the brain, associated with creative activity was secondary. The golfers who were too mechanical suffered from "paralysis by analysis."

As a golfer focuses his attention on mechanics, all ease, fluidity and effortlessness disappear. By being mechanical, he has lost the sense of touch or feel. The golfer no longer trusts his swing, and tries to resurrect it by thinking through the different parts and positions in the swing. Conscious thinking blocks out the skills learned in practice.

Poor performance is not the result of lack of effort. It is the result of too much effort that results in second guessing and becoming tentative and indecisive. Increased effort reduces performance. The conscious mind then takes over and blocks out instinctual play.

Choking is when you move out of your arousal zone and pay more attention to your anxiety feelings than your game. Your heart beats faster, you breathe faster, and your muscles get tense and tight. Mentally, messages from your eyes and ears become unclear and distorted: judgment becomes less accurate; you become indecisive; and your thoughts jump from one thing to another.

The physical anxiety triggers negative thoughts which lead to more physical anxiety. These distractions keep you from organizing your thoughts and suddenly you can't make decisions or keep your eye on the ball. Instead of attending to the task of preparing for the shot, you concentrate on the negatives and fall farther and farther behind.

As with all mental training, it is important to train yourself in mental techniques to keep this negative cycle from starting. Golfers know what to do to play well, but when they become anxious they forget to do it. Here are some strategies to practice for overcoming the mental and physical signs of pressure:

1. **Take deep, deep breaths through the diaphragm.** Hold the breath as long as you can and then exhale fully. This will slow down the controlling left brain wave activity and begin to relax all the muscles in the body.
2. **Visualize a safe place where you feel calm.** When you begin to feel the pressure, imagine yourself rocking in a hammock, relaxing in a hot tub, beach, or other place in your imagination where you feel calm and relaxed.
3. **Keep your perspective.** Think about all the wonderful things in your life that for which you are grateful. One missed shot in your lifetime will not have that great of an impact in your life.
4. **Swing your club.** Take practice swings to find your tempo. Program an easy, effortless swing by saying "oily" like Sam Snead did, or humming a favorite tune.
5. **Use process cues.** Instead of thinking about how to swing the club or the outcome of the shot, use process cues such as "see the target."
6. **Use a consistent preshot routine.** Be diligent about using the same routine to focus your attention on preparing for the shot. Do all thinking and aligning behind the ball. Take a deep breath before you begin your backswing.
7. **Picture in your imagination an safe shot.** If you are hitting a wood or long iron over water, imagine the water as fairway.
8. **Know that you are going to enjoy swinging the club, no matter what the results.**

When you find that you are pressuring yourself to win or hit perfect shots, ask yourself if you would be disappointing someone else. If the answer is yes, you may be dependent upon others for feeling good about how you play.

Playing your best golf is about how you feel about yourself and the effort you put into your own game. Embarrassment shows a sense of low self-esteem because you are allowing others to determine your self-worth.

When you try too hard to win, you will put pressure on yourself that results in poor play. When you have fun playing the game and let go of winning and all potential outcomes, you will probably play well.

Golf and life is about you. Play golf for your own enjoyment. Giving 100% effort to your performance makes you a winner, regardless of the score. Believe in yourself and your ability.

Entrain Your Heart & Brain for Peak Performance

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