



Patrick Cohn

The Mental Side of Golf

By [Patrick Cohn, Ph.D.](#)

Heimlich maneuvers for the golf course

All golfers have felt the pressure competition at some point in their career. The event you play in may differ, trying to win a club championship versus trying to win the Masters, but the response is the same--you feel like you are being strangled. The word "choke" is a dirty five-letter word in sport, especially when it leads to failure. No one will admit to others that they choked. But "everybody is choking their head off out there. It's how you handle it. Some people handle it better. Everyone is choking, if they don't say they are choking they are lying," PGA Tour player Bob Tway says. The issue isn't whether you choked or not. What's more important is how you handle yourself when it happens.

What does it mean to choke? First, choking is a response to perceived pressure. When you feel pressure to win a tournament, the mind kicks into another gear. The end result is that a player doesn't produce good shots or putts compared to what he or she is capable of doing. Choking basically starts with a poor focus of attention. In other words, your mind gets sidetracked in all the "hoopla" of the event. The fear of failure looms even larger when the stakes are higher. Now the mind begins to race with all sorts of thoughts that are unrelated to the task of hitting good shots. "What if I blow a three-shot lead?" you say to yourself. Then the physical manifestations of anxiety set in. Your mouth gets dry, your hands sweat, your breathing becomes labored, and you feel like someone is strangling you. Your smooth and assertive swing turns uncoordinated and defensive.

What can you do to stop the bleeding? The key is to not get sidetracked and strangle yourself in the first place. But if your mind wanders under pressure, here are some suggestions for getting back on track.

Challenge yourself to hit your best shot

Many players take a defensive approach to their game when they feel the heat. Instead of playing defensive and trying to avoid a negative outcome, challenge yourself to play your best shot. Take a positive approach. Use an aggressive mindset instead of an "avoidance" mindset. If you try to avoid the water to the left of the green, most likely you will focus more on the water than on hitting the necessary

shot. Challenge yourself to hit your best shot to the right side of the green.

Play like you don't care

One of the problems you face is that you care so much about winning that you try too hard to make it happen. "You need to play golf like you don't care, but if you work at something your whole life, it's hard not to care. But that is the way you need to play golf. You need to sit on the first tee and not care, just let the ball go. That's how you play your greatest golf," says Bob Tway.

Tame the demons from the past

Memories from the past can also play a role in how we handle ourselves during times of adversity. Some people draw on the past to help them succeed. Yet others focus on negative experiences they've had and this sabotages their play. If you have blown a big lead in an important tournament, it's easy for those memories to pop into your head when faced with a similar situation. If you don't stay grounded in the present, those memories of the past will haunt you. Use the past only if it's to your advantage. If you had a negative experience, don't let your mind wander. Only the present matters. If you have a positive experience to draw from, use it to help you feel confident.

Be your own coach

What you say to yourself can have a big effect on how you feel and behave. Positive self-talk can be one of your most powerful assets on the course. Pay attention to what you say to yourself. Your self-talk should always be encouraging and supportive, just like a good coach. You don't want to be telling yourself, "You will never win if you keep playing like this!" Use your inner coach to pump yourself up, calm yourself down, or to help focus your mind on the present if necessary.

Stay task-focused

Most of your fear relates to the outcome of an event--like missing a par putt to win a match. The fear causes you to get ahead of yourself rather than focus on the task at hand. The best way to deal with pressure is to separate the task from the consequences of your actions. Focus on what you can control, which is execution and staying in the present. Don't get ahead of yourself and think about the consequences of what may or may not happen. For example, your task in putting is to stroke the ball on line with the right pace. Focus on that. Don't think about what will happen if you miss. "If you haven't made many putts all day, that's when you have to really focus on the process of executing and not worry about the outcome," says PGA Tour player Larry Mize.

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