CHAPTER ONE

PRESSURE

The mind operates at both an instinctive and a highly conscious level. The instinctive brain is an action brain. It doesn't think; it simply reacts. It serves as an energizer, transforming impulse into action, receiving incoming (sensory) messages, relaying them, and firing outgoing (motor) responses. With the conscious mind we set goals, analyze, interpret, image, affirm, reason, adjust, and respond.

When we're performing well, there's an effective and remarkably complex interplay between these two levels of mental function. However, there are times when we get frightened, nervous, and tense up, when the conscious mind overanalyzes and over-responds to incoming messages. We think too much, say negative things to ourselves, and interrupt the smooth flow of input to output. There are times when we try too hard, ignore our intuition, and worry about things going wrong, instead of focusing on being smooth and effective and fully embracing the moment. This kind of performance "dis-ease" is frequently called *pressure*.

"What is pressure? Where does it come from? Is it inside or outside you? Who creates it?"

I was seated in the office of the vice president of sales of a company I'd been consulting with for several years. The VP was

interviewing for the position of regional sales director and asked me to listen in. The man being interviewed was an experienced, successful salesman. Still, it was an important career meeting for him, and he was nervous. His response to the pressure of the interview was to talk too much. He felt uncomfortable and was attempting to fill the uncertainty of the moment with sound. While trying to make a good impression, he presented himself poorly. A little conscious breathing would have enabled him to feel better about himself and allowed him to be more calm and clear. When the salesman left the office, the vice president asked me, "What do you think?"

I replied, "I think he talked too much."

"Way too much," said the vice president, "If he gets the job you'll have to do some training with him." The man never did get the job.

There are many people whose response to pressure is either to push too hard and talk too much, or to contract and withdraw from expressing their full response-ability. Either way, they are operating from the fear and pressure in their lives. Either way, the result is that they reduce their effectiveness and pleasure.

Pressure is a feeling of dis-ease that is inextricably linked with motivation and the desire to be or do something more. Pressure is about being attached to outcome, about really wanting to make something happen and feeling maybe it won't. It's about pressing to meet your goals and the expectations of others. It's also about struggling to avoid the fear, pain, disappointment, and embarrassment you associate with failure.

It's pressure that visits the golfer close to the lead when he suddenly loses his touch on the last few holes. It's pressure that gives the young pitcher the uncomfortable sensation that the plate is moving. It's pressure that robs the speaker of her confidence and ease as she stands before the audience she's about to address. And it's pressure that causes the actor to blow his or her lines in audition, the salesperson to press too hard, and the student to "go blank" in an exam.

Pressure can be intense (one young athlete competing for a place on the Olympic team confided, "If I don't make the Olympic team, I'll die.") but it is not confined to the obvious "test situation." Pressure can follow you anywhere: into career, relationships, and quiet moments by yourself. It's there when you are struggling to get ahead, and to make ends meet. It's there when you are concerned about saying and doing the right thing, and about being accepted. And it may be there at times when you reflect on the meaningfulness of your life.

The Seminar

I am standing in front of a business audience of about 200 people giving a seminar on *Performing Under Pressure*. I begin by asking the group to imagine a scene. It's the same scene I presented at the start of the book.

"It's the sixth game of the World Series. The batter stepping up to the plate is acutely aware his team is losing the game and the Series. It's the tenth inning and they're trailing 5 to 3. There are two out. It's their last chance. If he makes an out, the Series is over

and his team loses." I pause for a moment. "I want you to imagine that you are the batter stepping up to the plate at that critical moment in the drama." (There's some laughter.) "There are 60,000 people in the stands, 60 million more watching you on television. You desperately want to get a hit, to come through. Imagine that you have the talent and the ability. The question is, what could you do in that high-pressure moment to help you be at your best? Even if you're not a baseball fan, please consider what you might feel like in that situation, and what you could do to perform under pressure." After a moment, I continue, "The image may seem more dramatic and high-profile than what most of us experience in our daily lives, yet in many ways it's about the very same fear and pressure. Each of us is an expert regarding pressure in our lives. Please relate some of the things that cause you to feel pressured."

My seminar audiences have some responses in common. "Deadlines": a favorite pressure stimulus.

"Just the word *dead-line* is pressure," I interject. "What does it mean? If you don't deliver the goods on time, you die? The project dies? The boss dies? Deadline is a frightening word. What else causes you pressure?" I ask.

"Being successful in my career," says a young woman.

"Quotas," volunteers another.

"What kind of quotas?" I ask.

"Having to maintain a certain sales volume," is the reply.

"Working on commission."

"Having to ship so much a day," adds someone else.

"Pressure is meeting the goals I set for myself."

"It's speaking to large groups."

"It's accountability."

"Pressure is picking up the kids on time."

"It's having call waiting."

"It's paying the mortgage."

"Making money."

Now the audience is engaged. This is about every aspect of life.

"There's pressure to be in shape."

"Being on time."

"Getting around the city in traffic is pressure."

"Being supervised can be real pressure."

"Especially if you work for more than one supervisor," adds someone else.

"It's rising production costs and trying to compete with the tide of cheap foreign imports flooding the market."

"Pressure is about trying to produce a better-quality product, for less money, in less time."

"It's trying to be a good parent."

"Staying on my diet, losing weight."

"Working for someone who's demanding and insensitive."

"Making a partnership work is pressure."

"It's trying to satisfy others."

"Pressure is playing to a four handicap."

"It's keeping up," says an older gentleman.

"Keeping up what... or with what?" I ask.

"Everything," he replies.

Laughter. The group is engaged and communicating. They are all experts. They know the subject.

"Pressure is having to make right decisions."

"It's keeping the home office satisfied, and off my back."

"It's getting the job I want."

"Getting along with the rest of the family when we're all operating on separate agendas."

"Pressure is exercising patience dressing my three-year-old daughter when I'm already half an hour late for work."

"Two jobs usually mean pressure," I remark.

"Pressure is keeping my job."

"It's getting everything done on time."

"Pressure is making the most of my life."

"It's satisfying others."

"Pressure is making enough money so I don't have to worry about money all the time."

The seminar continues. I explain, "The term pressure means to press. As you can see, all kinds of thoughts, situations, and demands press on us every day. For most people the "biggies" behind an intense desire to do well are the need to feel good about ourselves; striving to meet the expectations of others; and operating with what we believe is a limited supply of time, talent, or money.

"To summarize, pressure is a force we experience as a feeling of dis-ease, growing out of an intense desire to be or do something more, accompanied by the uncertainty and fear that we may not succeed."

What does pressure feel like? Pressure is a personal phenomenon. Many different situations can trigger it. And pressure feels different to each of us. I ask the seminar group, "How do you experience pressure? When you are facing a deadline with career-altering consequences, when you feel ill-prepared, when you are losing a sudden-death playoff game and time is running out, when you're stuck in traffic and are already late for an important meeting, when you haven't closed a sale or got a hit in weeks, when the bottom line is trending downwards, when the mortgage payments look enormous, what does the pressure feel like to you?"

"It's feels terrible," says a woman in the audience. "It makes me tense."

"Specifically where in the body do you feel the tension?" I ask.

"I feel a band of tension around my head," she replies. "I get headaches."

"I usually feel it in my neck and shoulders," says someone else.

"I tense up and stop breathing."

"I reach for a cigarette."

"I feel it in the pit of my stomach," says another. "I can't eat."

"I eat too much."

"Pressure gives me back aches."

"When I'm under pressure, I grind my teeth."

"It makes me feel tense and irritable."

"What's the 'it' you're talking about?" I ask. "Is the pressure inside or outside you? Does something out there in the world actually cause this feeling of tension or are you creating the sensation from

within? Until you take responsibility for creating these feelings it will be impossible to create another feeling in its place. As you can see, there's plenty of variation as to how and where we experience the dis-ease: head, neck, shoulders, jaw, bladder. And those are just the feelings of pressure we're aware of. Pressure can also be subliminal."

A client of mine had been a police officer with the L.A.P.D. for 11 years. Imagine what it would be like to work at a job where each call you respond to has a potential for explosive violence and could be the last call you'll ever make.

The policeman told me, "I didn't think that way. I used to say to myself, 'It'll be okay. There's nothing to worry about. Nothing's going to happen to me. Just take it easy and do it right.' I thought that the danger of the job didn't bother me as much as all the supervision and the internal politics. It was only after I retired from the force that I felt this tremendous weight lift off my shoulders. Almost immediately I noticed I had more energy. I slept better, related better, and drank less. For years I had been living with the pressure of operating on the edge all the time. And I hadn't even realized it was there."

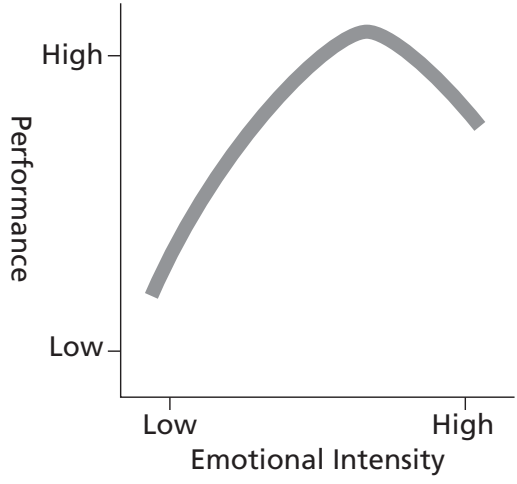
Whether we are aware of it or not, what's fairly consistent is that pressure causes us to tense and prepare ourselves for fight or flight. While that may be valuable for survival in the wild, in many ways it's counterproductive for health and high-level performance in our complex, results-oriented society. In addition to the tension, the effect of prolonged or excessive pressure is that we move out of the present and begin to worry about the future ("What'll happen

if... “) or the past (“I should have… ”). Our sense of confidence, ease, and being in control diminishes. Our thinking shifts from a positive, creative, “I am,” “I will,” or “Anything’s possible,” to a more fearful, defensive, “Don’t mess up,” “Be careful,” and “Just hang in there,” all of which limits performance and well-being.

Some people don’t see pressure as an exclusively negative force. They say they enjoy pressure and think of it as a positive creative force. Well, *some* pressure is not only enjoyable, it’s essential. In physiology and medicine, pressure is a necessary part of normal function. In the sexual response, the buildup and release of pressure is an integral part of the pleasure of orgasm. In the circulatory system, it’s pressure that enables the blood to circulate through the arteries and veins. What is undesirable and dangerous is to have repeated and prolonged periods of excessive pressure.

In general, people require a moderate degree of pressure to perform at their best.

Figure 1.1: Optimal Performance Range



Of course, there are marked individual differences as to what constitutes optimal pressure. What is ideal for one individual may be too much for another. Relief pitchers, hockey goalies, field goal kickers, stockbrokers, air traffic controllers, surgeons, and police officers all regularly have to perform under what most of us would perceive to be tremendous pressure. Those who can perform consistently well and seem relatively less affected by this pressure either have a higher "pressure threshold," or they have developed better techniques for dealing with it.

Pressure and stress are two terms that are often used interchangeably and they are similar in many ways. Originally, they both referred to physical forces, like air and water pressure, and the mechanical stresses operating on a structure like a bridge or building. These days they're more commonly used to describe psychological phenomena. People talk about "feeling pressure," or "being stressed." The principal difference I see is that pressure tends to be somewhat more situational and time-specific. For example, it's *pressure* that the kicker feels to make the field goal, or the golfer to sink the putt. It's the *pressure* to close the sale, finish the job on time, and "to do it right." "Stress" seems to be more general, and diffuse. We say, "It's more stressful to live in a big city." Stress is so pervasive these days it's now being used as a verb. It's not uncommon to hear someone say, "Don't stress." I don't think the distinction between pressure and stress is very important. What is significant is the pattern of pressure experienced, one's appreciation of the circumstances that create it, and learning how to reduce the pressure and enhance performance.

Feeling Less Pressured: Two Approaches

Basically, there are two psychological viewpoints about pressure and how to handle it. The more psychodynamic approach suggests that much of the pressure we experience is in part a function of the way we feel about ourselves, and that we become more vulnerable to the limiting effects of pressure when we lack confidence and self-esteem. From this perspective, it is our fear, specifically our fear of not being okay, that pressures us into feeling stressed and avoiding failure. As we become more self-accepting and comfortable with who we are, we identify less with our goals and are less in need of having to achieve and succeed in order to feel better about ourselves. *Less need means less pressure* and often better results. That's not to say we shouldn't be motivated, set goals, and direct our behavior—not at all! The psychodynamic orientation is simply that it's healthier to work from preference rather than addiction. Addiction is about responding from need. "I *need this* to happen (e.g., to get a hit, to close a sale, to be a better lover) in order *to feel good about myself*." It's having to fulfill the need, to avoid the fear, that exaggerates the pressure. In a sense, this approach implies that if you could accept yourself more fully, you would experience less anxiety, less tension, and less inhibition, and you would be freer and better able to express yourself and realize meaningful goals.

From the psychodynamic point of view, the ideal "therapy" is one that provides insight into who you are and helps you to become more self-accepting and less fearful. It's living more as a human being instead of a human doing. Therapy focuses on

insight and self-acceptance rather than on performance. It explores why: "Why are you pressing so hard?" "Why are you so concerned about impressing others?" "Why does success mean so much to you?" Therapy can be a lengthy process.

The second orientation is more behavioral. It addresses the specific behaviors involved in experiencing pressure and provides training to release tension, change feelings, refocus on thoughts and images that enhance performance and well-being, and create effective pressure-reducing routines. The ideal is to develop more psycho-physical control. That is, to have more focus, power, and ease in situations that previously were tensing and limiting. Training focuses directly on enhancing performance. It may, however, produce lasting positive changes in self-image. Treatment is usually brief.

Both types of therapy are valuable. People who lack esteem are more vulnerable to pressure. And they are more inclined to be adversely affected by it. However, from a more in-the-moment point of view, if you're about to address a business meeting, make a significant financial decision, take a test, attempt a high-pressure golf shot; if you're caught up in traffic while late for an important meeting, performing surgery, playing in a concert, or struggling to pay the bills, if you're a policeman responding to a call; if you're about to step up to the plate at that critical moment in the World Series, or attempt the game-winning field goal with one second to go and your job on the line—what you're probably looking for at that instant is not some insight into who you really are, but rather

something that will give you the focus and feeling that will empower you to excel, now.

This book embraces both orientations. It explores mind-body relations, and how our thoughts, images, and attitudes affect performance. And it describes how to manage pressure-induced sensations and emotions like tension and anxiety and transform them into confidence, power, and ease.

Who Are You? What Are You About?

Who am I? and *What are my goals?* are two basic questions to consider as we enter into a discussion of the various techniques that can enhance performance and manage pressure effectively.

The Doing: I often remind my clients of two separate aspects of consciousness. One level of consciousness is what I call "the doing." I define the doer as a performer who is motivated to be the best he or she can be. The doer is goal-directed and focused primarily on what it takes to achieve his or her goals. Some of the thoughts and images (programming) that can help the doer excel under pressure are described in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Being: The second aspect of consciousness represents that part of us that appreciates that we are something more than our performance. In effect, we are human beings as well as human doings. Most of the clients I see are decidedly more in their "doing" mindset. To improve performance we address their goals, thoughts, images, and feelings. However, I believe that to excel and thrive, a balance between doing and being is the ideal. It's acquiring the

ability to be totally focused in the moment on the task at hand—and yet appreciating that life is more than just succeeding at that challenge.

The comments of two Olympic divers represent the extremes. The first was a young diver competing to earn a spot on the Olympic team, who confided, "If I don't make the Olympic team, I'll die." While that kind of thinking may motivate intense training, it creates an underlying state of desperation and dis-ease that can limit performance and well-being (and make living with the aspirant an uncomfortable experience). Along with techniques that helped the young diver excel (and make the Olympic team), I coached her to relax and breathe. Tension-release and the breathing exercises described in Chapters 6 to 9 were very helpful. I also counseled her to shift perspective away from a life or death mentality, to embrace the moment and the challenge, and at the same time appreciate that life was more than being a world-class diver.

In contrast, a more balanced perspective was voiced by another diver, Olympic gold medalist and World Diving champion Greg Louganis, who is quoted as saying, "Even if I blow this dive, my mother will still love me."[1] Having this broader *being perspective* is life-enriching. Instead of performing with a survival mentality, I encourage clients to embrace the situation with focus, power, and ease.

1. Greg Louganis, sermonillustrations.com.