



The Power of Pressure

Why Pressure Isn't the Problem, It's the Solution

by Dane Jensen

15-minute read

Synopsis

The Power of Pressure (2021) takes a deep dive into the world of pressure in all its forms, and how high performers deal with it. By noticing the patterns of both single, peak pressure moments and pressure over the long haul, it'll provide you with a practical set of tools to start using pressure to your advantage.

Who is it for?

- Workers feeling overwhelmed by the daily grind
- Productivity hackers looking to boost performance under pressure
- Anyone who has ever been stressed out

About the author

Dane Jensen is the CEO of the consulting firm, Third Factor, where he also manages the leadership development programs in North America. Jensen also teaches in the executive MBA program at the Smith School of Business in Ontario and advises athletes and coaches in the Olympic and Paralympic organizations. This is his first book.

What's in it for me? Learn how to use pressure to your advantage.

Your heart is pumping. You're nervous. There's no knowing what will happen next. You've been preparing for this moment but, now that it's nearly here, all that prep has suddenly gone out the door.

Why all this tension? Chances are, you've landed yourself in a high-pressure situation. But whether you're performing surgery in the ICU, competing in the Olympic Games, or giving an important presentation, pressure always seems to find a way to make – or break – the outcome.

Here's the good news: pressure doesn't have to be a negative thing. In these blinks, you'll learn how pressure, with the right approach and mindset, can actually be incredibly helpful, even unlocking levels of performance that otherwise appear unattainable.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- what three things are always within your control;
- why better time-management is a trap; and
- the long-term health effects of pressure.

Pressure comes from a blend of highly important and highly uncertain circumstances.

"What's the most pressure you've ever been under?" This is a question the author, Dane Jensen, has posed to over 1,000 people. Answers have ranged from elite figure skating competitions to periods of job uncertainty. For one person, a final exam came to mind. For another, it was trying to swim back to shore after being swept out to sea.

But while all moments of pressure are unique, they're also tied together by a few key commonalities. In fact, every high-pressure experience combines the three following factors: importance, uncertainty, and volume – meaning the number of tasks or amount of information to process.

Let's take a closer look at how pressure works.

The key message here is: Pressure comes from a blend of highly important and highly uncertain circumstances.

Pressure is often lumped together with *stress*, but there's one big distinction between the two – the need to do something.

Consider the following scenario: If you're tensely watching your favorite basketball team's playoff match, hoping they'll score the winning points, that's stress. No matter what you shout at the TV, you won't *impact* the result. But if you're *playing* in that game, that's

pressure. Your performance could mean the difference between winning and losing.

While not everyone is a basketball star, the stakes of any pressure situation can feel as high as a playoff match. It all depends on how important the outcome is to you. Perhaps the work you're doing creates a lot of pressure. But while the project itself isn't particularly important to you, some aspects *are* still important. Whether it's holding down a job or not having others think of you as unqualified.

Uncertainty also plays a role in creating pressure, though not all uncertainty is bad. For example, when you're watching a movie, not knowing what comes next adds to the suspense and excitement. But let's say your company merges with another, and managers announce that half of the employees will be made redundant. The period of uncertainty to follow will likely create pressure. It'll also add uncertainty to other aspects of your life.

Lastly, there's a limit to what you can realistically focus on. If you're juggling multiple responsibilities at home and at work – think raising a child while working full-time – this also creates pressure.

These three components come together to make acting under pressure that much more difficult.

Pressure creates both a physiological and psychological response.

Imagine you've landed an interview at your dream company. It's taken a long time to get to this point and you've spent the past weeks working through possible interview questions. But once you enter the interview room, you freeze up. Your mind goes blank and you lose access to all of those thoughtfully crafted answers you've prepared.

Needless to say, it's not your finest performance and you don't get the job. A few minutes later, in the elevator, everything comes rushing back. If only you'd thought of these impressive responses ten minutes ago! But it's too late.

This is a familiar story for many who experience pressure. But by understanding how pressure affects your mind and body, you can learn to change your response to such situations in the future.

The key message here is: Pressure creates both a physiological and psychological response.

When you're under pressure, your body typically responds by speeding up your breathing. As your heart rate increases, more blood gets redirected to your heart, reducing your peripheral temperature – the temperature of your hands and feet and other extremities. You might start sweating and your shoulders and other muscles tighten.

In the short term, it means that performance suffers. Over the long term, elevated cortisol levels from stress are linked to higher cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar, all of which are associated with lower life expectancy.

When your body “activates” like this, your attention narrows too. Your brain continuously decides which sensory information – that is, sounds, sights, smells, and so on – to accept and which to ignore. This is known as *sensory gating*, and without it, we’d all be overwhelmed by every tiny stimulus. But, when under pressure, your sensory gating mechanism becomes much more restrictive. It creates a sort of tunnel vision, and your focus is narrowed so that even the most obvious information is missed.

Extreme sensory gating makes it difficult to absorb and learn new information and also inhibits creativity and your capacity for empathy – skills that are helpful in pressure situations. Over the long term, this *attentional tunneling* can even become your default state, impacting your life satisfaction, social relationships, and emotional health.

So, pressure might seem unbeatable. But while some circumstances are out of your control, pressure itself is an internal experience. And because of that, you can change how you respond to it.

Approach peak pressure moments by first recognizing what isn’t at stake.

So, if pressure is that unhelpful and dangerous to your health then surely you need to do something about it? Yes, exactly! When confronting pressure, there are several steps you can take to manage your response.

You can begin by identifying what kind of pressure it is.

There are two main types of pressure. A short-term pressure situation, called a *peak pressure moment*, is a high-stakes event like a sports competition or job interview. And then there’s long-term pressure, called *pressure over the long haul*, that usually builds toward a peak pressure moment.

Do you remember that pressure consists of three core ingredients: importance, uncertainty, and volume? When facing a peak pressure moment, start by examining the first of these – its *importance*.

The key message here is: Approach peak pressure moments by first recognizing what isn’t at stake.

Think back to that earlier example of the nerve-racking job interview, a typical peak pressure moment. What could you have done to sidestep your default response to that pressure? The stakes were clear: if you performed well in the interview, you’d get hired. But fixating on the stakes is often counterproductive, only

adding to the pressure and making the importance of a result appear larger.

No, the first step is to do the exact opposite: focus on what’s *not* at stake. Zoom out, and identify what in your life *won’t* change regardless of the outcome. Will you still have your partner, children, or other relationships with family and friends? What about your health – will it stay the same? Will you still be mostly financially secure? Think of the anchoring forces in your life, and use those as a counterweight to the pressure of the moment.

Sometimes, that’s enough. But for other peak pressure moments, this technique can’t completely offset the prospects of failure. To avoid spiraling from anxiety to panic, try becoming your own psychologist by asking three key questions.

First, critically examine what you claim is at stake. What hard evidence exists that this is really a vulnerable point? Second, imagine you’re advising someone else in your predicament. If someone on your team blundered through a presentation, would you really think he was a complete failure? And third, if you’re not sure something is at stake, ask yourself this: What value do you get from assuming this is at risk?

Focusing on what’s truly important is a good start. But the next part of the pressure equation requires another tactic: handling uncertainty with direct action.

In the face of peak pressure uncertainty, focus on what you can control.

One day, the trauma center at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto received a patient in dire condition. The patient had been stabbed in the heart, and just a few minutes before arriving, there was no pulse. But there was still a way to save this stab victim: a risky procedure called a *thoracotomy* in which doctors remove blood from around the heart.

Dr. Andrew Petrosoniak, the emergency physician and trauma team leader, needed to act quickly. The trauma surgeon wasn’t there yet, so he and his team started preparing for surgery, ventilating and medicating the patient, and reducing bleeding.

By the time the surgeon arrived, the patient was ready for surgery. Because the trauma team didn’t fixate on circumstances beyond its control – the whereabouts of the surgeon and the procedure’s 5 percent survival rate – and focused on what it could change, the patient survived.

The key message here is: In the face of peak pressure uncertainty, focus on what you can control.

The stab victim from St. Michael’s Hospital is an extreme example but just goes to show the power of blocking out everything that isn’t within your control.

Focusing on things you can't change often amplifies the uncertainty of the situation.

Instead, remind yourself that three things are always within your control: your routine, breathing, and perspective.

A set routine provides you with a flexible structure to adapt to uncertain circumstances. Dr. Petrosioniak's team has a pre-briefing routine which plans out the first five minutes of tasks. This gives the team a sense of control from the onset.

Your breathing, though automatic, is also under your control. It quickens during peak pressure moments, but by consciously slowing down and deepening your breathing – to, say, six complete breaths per minute instead of the usual 12 – your heart rate has a chance to align with your breathing again. This is called *coherence* and helps your heart and your brain to counteract the effects of immediate stressors.

Finally, there's perspective. When you perceive something as a threat, it appears impenetrable. But you can reframe it and create an on-ramp to action by posing a couple key questions.

Ask yourself what you're learning from the experience. Perhaps you're learning humility, or to better empathize with others with similar struggles. Next, ask what you can do right now to make progress.

All of this takes practice, and also requires you to deal with the final element of pressure: volume.

Eliminate sources of pressure that distract you or don't help you grow.

Take a moment to think about when you last felt overwhelmed by pressure. It probably wasn't that hard, right? Too much work, not enough time – it's become an almost universal complaint. And increasingly, the solution is to turn toward time management.

The idea is that if you can manage your time more efficiently, you'll feel less overwhelmed and be more productive. But through the lens of pressure, this approach can actually make things worse. That newfound free time? It just gets filled with even more pressure.

So, the solution isn't more efficiency; it's reducing the volume of tasks which create short-term pressure for you, especially those which aren't immediately helpful. That way, you'll have the focus and energy to take on the most meaningful sources of peak pressure.

The key message here is: Eliminate sources of pressure that distract you or don't help you grow.

Think of organizing your sources of pressure like cleaning your home, something tidying expert Marie Kondo knows all about. At the center of Kondo's

organizing system is a single question: "Does this spark joy?" If not, it has to go. Kondo's solution isn't to buy a bigger closet – the equivalent of the time-management solution to pressure. Instead, she advocates for simplifying your belongings into the most meaningful selection.

You can use this philosophy as a launching pad to simplify the jumble of pressures weighing over you. One approach is to apply a few questions to focus on your goals. For each source of pressure, ask, Will this help me grow? If it's not getting you closer to one of your goals, what's your justification for keeping it around?

The next question filters out sources of pressure that actively distract you: Does this help or hurt my performance? When Canadian swimmer Martha McCabe was training for the 2012 Olympic Trials, the constant phone contact with her family and friends was stealing her attention from the task at hand.

Her solution? Deleting her social media apps, buying a new SIM card, and only giving out her new phone number to a select few family members and friends. She didn't have to keep deciding which messages were important and which could wait.

Maybe McCabe's solution isn't practical for your specific situation, but you can identify other opportunities to simplify. As productivity guru Tim Ferriss puts it, creating space is about finding a single decision that eliminates 100 other decisions.

Manage pressure over the long haul by connecting with why it matters to you.

Now that you're armed with a few tools to take on peak pressure moments and focus on performing at your best, there's another side to pressure that has so far taken a back seat: pressure over the long haul.

Consider the story of Rick Hansen. A talented athlete as a child, Hansen was left paralyzed from the waist down following a tragic truck accident. After his recovery, he started participating in wheelchair races, and over the course of his career won 19 International Wheelchair Marathons and six medals at the Paralympic Games.

Then he had a crazy idea: he'd wheel around the world, raise \$10 million for spinal cord research, and increase awareness of the potential of people with disabilities.

The key message here is: Manage pressure over the long haul by connecting with why it matters to you.

The trip took 26 months as Hansen traversed 24,000 miles and 34 countries. In the end, it was a success. He raised not ten but \$36 million for spinal cord research. But the journey was full of day-to-day struggles, from injury and mechanical issues to frustration and self-doubt. So how did Hansen make it through? He

constantly reminded himself why he was doing this in the first place, and why it was so important to him.

When pressure isn't just a single event, but a long period, you need another approach to stay motivated and focused, and that requires finding meaning to carry you through. You can do that by checking if it provides any of the three core types of meaning: growth, contribution, and connection.

Similar to peak pressure moments, long-haul pressure should help get you closer to your goals in some way. So, when the daily grind leaves you feeling trapped, simply ask yourself: Is this helping me grow? Rick Hansen, in the thick of his expedition, described his feelings with words like "despair," "anger," and "scared." But for him, it was worth the reward.

You can also find meaning and satisfaction in helping others. Think of who you're helping by enduring this pressure. Whose life will improve?

And finally, pressure can help you get closer to those you care about.

These forms of meaning won't just turn pressure around; they can provide you with a deeper motivation to achieve your goals. And if you struggle to find any meaning in your long-haul pressure, perhaps it's time to reevaluate why you've taken on this challenge in the first place.

Manage long-haul uncertainty by accepting that the future is uncertain and unknowable.

Once you connect with the importance of your long-haul pressure, what's next? This motivation will keep you moving in the right direction but how do you keep up your energy in the face of perpetual uncertainty?

For peak pressure uncertainty, the answer was direct action. But over the long haul, this will just lead to more helplessness. The future is infinitely uncertain, so trying to control or minimize future uncertainty is a losing battle.

Some turn to unconditional optimism – having faith that the future holds only the best-case scenario. But that too can create a brittle mindset ready to be broken.

In fact, no matter who you are or what you do, the future will remain uncertain. So rather than controlling uncertainty, aim to accept it.

The key message here is: Manage long-haul uncertainty by accepting that the future is uncertain and unknowable.

The best approach to uncertainty over the long haul requires holding two ideas in your mind which make up what the author calls the *paradox of uncertainty*. The first is coming to terms with the fact that you can't know what the future will bring. The second, somewhat contradictory attitude, is to trust that in the end,

everything will work out. It may not turn out as you expected or desired, but what will happen, will happen.

This two-pronged mindset fueled the resilience of James Stockdale, a US Navy officer who was captured early in the Vietnam War. During his imprisonment, he endured beatings, torture, and long bouts of solitary confinement in a three-by-nine-foot cell. But despite his physical injuries, he emerged seven years later mentally unbroken. This isn't to say it was an easy journey – he didn't know when he'd be released, if ever. He couldn't know what was going to happen. But by accepting this fact, he could focus his energy inward, cultivating inner strength and confidence.

There's a crucial difference between accepting uncertainty and the route of pessimism. It's surrendering any sense of impact over one's challenges. In the face of long-haul pressure, accepting uncertainty reframes the future to contain more than one possibility. Rather than viewing one future outcome as make-or-break, you can consider whatever happens on its own merits. Perhaps it wasn't what you'd hoped for, but you still learned something about yourself or can take value from the outcome for future challenges.

Curb the volume of pressure over the long haul by sleeping enough, eating well, and exercising.

You've seen how having too many sources of peak pressure at once hinders your ability to focus on the most important challenges. Over the long haul, not reining in the volume of pressure will take its toll on your health. And it doesn't help to neglect the signs of long-term pressure.

Just take Phil Wilkins, who was hired by a financial technology start-up to create a business unit in a new market. The goal was to increase revenue from \$5 million to \$100 million within 18 months, and it meant that Wilkins had to get straight to work. He put in 20-hour days on the road meeting with clients, ignoring his exhaustion. After having a seizure at the wheel, he knew he had to rethink his priorities.

The key message here is: Curb the volume of pressure over the long haul by sleeping enough, eating well, and exercising.

Wilkins had been so focused on the job at hand that his health and wellbeing suffered as a result. His recovery plan involved a complete overhaul of the way he lived – starting with sleep habits.

When he was putting in those exhausting days of meetings and commuting, he averaged five hours of sleep each night – two hours below the recommended seven-hour minimum.

Over time, that adds up. One study from Central Queensland University in Australia compared the

effects of sleep deprivation and alcohol consumption. The results suggested that after being awake for 17 hours or more, you have the same cognitive performance level as someone who's legally drunk – with a blood alcohol concentration of around 0.05 percent. It's best to have a consistent sleep schedule, and a routine to transition from your active day to sleep, such as reading or breathing exercises.

Nutrition is also a key factor in supporting long-term performance under pressure. The author recommends eating every few hours to avoid an energy crash, and sticking to foods with low glycemic indexes.

Lastly, movement is vital to dealing with pressure – especially if you spend a great deal of your day sitting. One study by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that routinely replacing 15 minutes of sitting with 15 minutes of running often helped stabilize participant mood and reduced stress.

Prioritizing these three areas will help provide you with the energy and fitness you'll need to tackle pressure over the long haul.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that:

Pressure gets a bad rap for stopping people from reaching their potential. Plus, the short-term and long-term effects can be harmful to your emotional and physical health. But pressure doesn't have to be negative. If you change your approach, it can be helpful. When you approach peak pressure moments, focus on what isn't at stake, on what's within your control, and on simplifying the volume of pressure you need to deal with. For long-haul pressure, identify why this challenge is helping you grow – and helping others. By reframing challenges and taking care of your well-being through sufficient sleep, nutrition, and exercise, you'll be prepared for whatever pressure comes your way.