



THE INSTITUTE OF  
**SPORTS**  
PSYCHOLOGY

## Handling Performance Pressure: Keys to Understanding Your Peak Pressure Range

*By Robert Andrews, MA, LMFT, CSC*

Pressure is an internal or external force that can influence performance in a negative or positive way. How you handle pressure will be a key factor in determining how well you perform on the gym floor.

Gymnastics, perhaps more than any other sport, is executed under tremendous pressure. All eyes are on the competitive gymnasts, and the higher your level of competition, the greater the levels of stress and pressure.

Level five gymnasts will not feel the same level of pressure as a gymnast in the Olympic trials feels.

External pressure comes from outside sources like coaches, parents, and specific situations in competition. Internal pressure is self induced pressure that is the by product of negative thoughts and self talk, perfectionist attitudes, and self induced stress.

Pressure itself is not a bad thing. It is a necessary ingredient to achieve peak levels of performance.

Too little pressure and you are not mentally or physically ready to perform. Too much pressure and your mind creates negative and stressful thoughts. Your body tightens up and performance is hindered.

Every athlete has an optimum level of pressure that helps them reach their peak in performance.

By gaining an understanding of this “pressure principle” you can learn how to move your mind and your body into the peak range of performance pressure.

Here is how it works.

Make an L shaped line. Number it from one to ten under the horizontal line. Number it from one to ten to the left of the vertical line.

The horizontal line measures pressure. One represents little or no pressure and ten represents tremendous pressure.

The vertical line measures performance. One represents low levels of performance, and ten represents high levels of performance.

Somewhere on that continuum is a representative level of pressure that allows you to perform at your best. Just the right level of pressure creates the highest level of performance.

For example, Raj Bhavsar has an optimum level of pressure in the seven range. This means that to perform at his best, he has to get the internal pressure he feels to a seven on the pressure/performance scale.



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If he is at a two or three he does not have enough pressure to perform at his best. He is not stimulated enough to reach peak performance levels.

At a nine or ten he has too much pressure and his body tightens, his mind begins to create stressful thoughts and his performance suffers.

In the team finals of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Raj had to hit his pommel routine to help keep the U.S. men's hopes for a bronze medal alive. Raj hit the routine, Sasha Artemev followed by hitting his now famous anchor routine and the U.S. men's team against all odds captured the bronze.

When Raj saluted the judges the energy in the arena was electric. It was absolutely quiet, but the intensity was beyond measure. My hands were sweating, my heart was racing, and I noticed I was not breathing. Keep in mind I was only a spectator.

Raj was an Olympic gymnast being asked to hit a critical routine on the biggest stage in sports, under enormous pressure. This moment could define his career as a gymnast.

At dinner after the Olympics I asked Raj if there was anything he did to help him stay centered and focused at that moment. With millions of television viewers, the entire U.S. gymnastics community at home, and twenty thousand spectators in the National Indoor Stadium watching, how did you do it?

Raj said, "That one is easy, I found the level of stress in my body, it was a twelve. I imagined myself on the medal podium wearing an Olympic medal. I took three deep breathes to move the stress level down as low as I could get it, and I started swinging."

Raj utilized the pressure principle to move his stress level down as much as he could. He knew the pressure was not going to go away, but he also knew that breathing calms the mind and body, and lowers pressure.

Put this tool to work in your own training and competition routines.

Practice working with the pressure principle. See it in your mind. Visualize the graph and identifying your optimum level of pressure.

Begin to create awareness of this concept by working with mental imagery and breathing to move your pressure level to just the right place.