

## THE BIG IDEAS

### The Pressure Principle

Eight strands.

#### Take Command

Body language and posture.

#### Inevitability

Know success is coming...

#### Language

The performance-enhancing drug.

#### Process vs. Outcome

Did I win?

# The Pressure Principle

Handle Stress, Harness Energy, and Perform When It Counts

BY DR. DAVE ALRED MBE · PENGUIN LIFE © 2018 · 272 PAGES

“The Pressure Principle is no quick-fix, sticking-plaster solution; it is a multifaceted philosophy, but its lessons are simple to apply. You’ll see benefits in the short term, certainly, and, if you commit to it fully, the long-term gains can be huge. You *will* see improvements. You *will* be better able to deal with pressure and perform at your best. ...”

This book examines not only the importance of practice per se, but also how different types of practice can prepare us for the pressure environment. It explains both how a skill is learned in the first place and the most effective ways to execute it when the tension mounts. Techniques are offered to build confidence and develop a productive mindset to tackle the mental interference that might inhibit us at crucial moments in our lives. The power of the body, as well as the mind, to help us cope with stress will be explained, too. Going beyond sport, we will look at what we can learn from the Royal Marines, dolphin trainers, fighter pilots, skateboarders, car salesmen, and the world of advertising.

My hope is that anyone wishing to improve their performance in a pressured environment will be helped by this book. My message is that you are capable of achieving so much more, whoever you are. I don’t have all the answers—I too subscribe to the no-limits mindset and am always learning and keen to improve—but I am about to share the results of my experience as a teacher, a learner, and a coach to some of the best in the world in the most pressured environments imaginable.”

~ Dave Alred from *The Pressure Principle*

*“Anxiety should be regarded as high-octane fuel for elite performance and as a normal reaction to a pressured environment. The skill is managing it so we can perform to our limits under pressure. If anxiety is perceived as a weakness, it will have a detrimental impact on our ability to perform under pressure.”*

~ Dave Alred

I got this book after a new friend of mine (who happens to be one of the world’s most elite athletes) pulled it off the shelf in his study and recommended it to me.

I read it as part of my deep dive back into mental toughness books as part of my work with that athlete and a bunch of other elite athletes, teams, and coaches.

Other titles in the recent binge include [Changing Your Story](#) by [Bill Beswick](#), [Pressure](#) by [Geir Jordet](#), [The Captain Class](#) by [Sam Walker](#), and [Belonging](#) by [Owen Eastwood](#). And, of course, check out the mental toughness collection in the app along with [Peak Performance 101](#) for more.

Dr. Dave Alred MBE is an elite performance coach who works with the world’s top sports stars and teams, helping them deliver when the tension is at its most extreme.

He has a PhD in Performing Under Pressure (how cool is that?) and has worked with athletes in sports ranging from golf, rugby, and cricket to judo, polo, and soccer.

As you’d expect, the book is packed with Big Ideas and, as always, I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

*" Working on your posture can have a dramatic impact on your state of mind as you prepare to deliver under pressure."*

~ Dave Alred

## THE PRESSURE PRINCIPLE

"The Pressure Principle comprises eight intermingled strands, each of which is the subject of a separate chapter:

**Anxiety** - the source of many of our issues when confronted with pressure, the physical symptoms of which can be mastered to perform effectively.

**Language** - the lifeblood of all the strands—its power and influence can never be underestimated.

**Managing Learning** - how we learn more effectively and improve our skills under pressure.

**Implicit-Explicit Balance** - how the balance of information in our minds is kept in equilibrium.

**Behavior** - the power of effective practice.

**Environment** - how we can manage our expectations and surroundings when the pressure's on.

**Sensory Shutdown** - what happens to our minds and bodies when extreme pressure hits us, and how we can delay its impact.

**Thinking Correctly Under Pressure** - the final component to complete the Pressure Principle.

These eight strands are all interrelated, so there isn't a neat cut-off between each of them; instead, they feed into one another: seven intertwining strands woven around the common thread of language."

That's from the intro.

As Dave mentions, each of the eight "strands" of his Pressure Principle gets its own chapter.

Before we explore a few of my favorite ideas, let's define pressure.

Dave tells us that PRESSURE is "The interference with the ability to concentrate on a process, consciously or subconsciously, causing deterioration in technique and decreasing the level of performance."

Got it. Then he tells us: "If I had to give a high-concept appraisal of my coaching philosophy, it would be: 'To rekindle youthful learning and create a 'no limits' mindset.'"

No matter who you are—the world's number-one golfer, a nurse in an overburdened department, rugby's best goal kicker or one employee among thousands in a big company—you can always improve. At the margins of your performance, you can still get better—and you can learn to enjoy and embrace the challenge of improving and celebrate your progress."

LOVE that. I repeat: "No matter who you are, you can ALWAYS improve."

Note: That's a REALLY exciting perspective.

And... Very importantly: "We can all learn to enjoy and embrace the challenge of improving and celebrate your progress."

Let's do that. TODAY.

P.S. I also love his "No limits" perspective. Check out our Notes on [Michael Phelps's](#) book called [No Limits](#) for HIS take on how to dominate.

P.P.S. Any time I think of pressure, I think of an interview I did with [Steven Kotler](#) years ago. We were talking about his great book [The Rise of Superman](#). I ended our chat by asking him what ONE thing he'd like us to think about. His answer? "No pressure, no diamonds."

*" If I had to give a high-concept appraisal of my coaching philosophy, it would be: 'To rekindle youthful learning and create a 'no limits' mindset.'"*

~ Dave Alred

*"The importance of physical fitness, then, cannot be understated. Fitter people, with lower resting heart rates, take longer to get into the zone that adversely affects the task they're attempting. They are capable of making better decisions under fatigue and pressure, a vital skill in occupations such as the armed forces and the emergency services."*

~ Dave Alred

## BODY LANGUAGE & POSTURE

"As we've discussed, when we move into a stressful state, we aren't always consciously aware of it. As we come under increasing levels of pressure, our awareness diminishes and our natural reaction is to become more tense and tighter, and as a result our movements become physically smaller.

Before we enter into a stressful situation it is always worth resetting our posture. With a rugby goal kicker, a footballer about to take a penalty, a cricket batsman about to face a delivery and a golfer lining up a shot, I always make it a part of a player's pre-shot routine to set their body shape in the 'command' posture and to make themselves as physically big as possible. I advise anyone in a stressful situation to adopt the same approach.

Command posture involves having the shoulders down and packed, with the neck stretched and the chin held in line with the sternum. Despite the title 'command,' think less of a military-style standing to attention and more of a trained dancer, upright, lithe and graceful: you are in control of your situation, not standing to the attention of someone or something else."

That's from the first chapter on "Anxiety."

After we define pressure and discuss how to deal with it, the first thing we learn is how to take command of our PHYSICAL PRESENCE.

Which is EXACTLY what we teach our Heroic Coaches and athletes/teams we train via our "Flip the Switch" protocol.

As I read that passage, I thought of some parallel wisdom from a couple of old school mental toughness/peak performance gurus and their books: [Timothy Gallwey](#) and his classic book *The Inner Game of Tennis* and [Jim Loehr](#) and his book *Toughness Training for Sports*.

First, Loehr.

In *Toughness Training for Sports*, he tells us: "All great tennis champions have that same walk between points—between their battles—that marching soldiers display. Top tough competitors show the same focus, confidence, energy, and precision that soldiers do when they walk. No weakness, nothing sloppy, nothing but strength. Tennis champions walk the way soldiers march to bolster courage and control. I've come to refer to it as the matador walk.

Practice looking and acting the way you want to feel in your performance situations. Doing that pays off in terms of victory in combat for soldiers; it can pay off in terms of victory in competition for you."

Now, Gallwey.

In *The Inner Game of Tennis*, he tells us: "Asking for qualities' describes the other kind of role-playing. When introducing this idea, I usually say something like this: 'Imagine that I am the director of a television series. Knowing that you are an actor that plays tennis, I ask if you would like to do a bit part as a top-flight tennis player. I assure you that you needn't worry about hitting the ball out or into the net because the camera will only be focused on you and will not follow the ball.

What I'm mainly interested in is that you adopt professional mannerisms, and that you swing your racket with super self-assurance. Above all, your face must express no self-doubt. You should look as if you are hitting every ball exactly where you want to. Really get into the role, hit as hard as you like and ignore where the ball is actually going."

And...

When I read that line about the elegant poise of a dancer, I also thought of [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#). His advice on how to sit in meditation is relevant on AND off the ol' meditation cushion.

*"It simply isn't possible to master something new without getting ugly."*

~ Dave Alred

*"And why is it that when our head is full of interference and thought about technique we don't play well? Because we forget to take dead aim.*

*In fact, it is the single, engaging process of taking dead aim—really seeing that very small target in extreme detail—that helps to displace the potential interference and allows your subconscious to deal with the finer details of technique."*

~ Dave Alred

*"No matter who you are—the world's number-one golfer, a nurse in an overburdened department, rugby's best goal kicker or one employee among thousands in a big company—you can always improve. At the margins of your performance, you can still get better—and you can learn to enjoy and embrace the challenge of improving and celebrate your progress."*

~ Dave Alred

He tells us: "When we describe the sitting posture, the word that feels the most appropriate is 'dignity.'

Sitting down to meditate, our posture talks to us. It makes its own statement. You might say the posture itself is the meditation. If we slump, it reflects low energy, passivity, a lack of clarity. If we sit ramrod-straight, we are tense, making too much of an effort, trying too hard.

When I use the word 'dignity' in teaching situations, as in 'Sit in a way that embodies dignity,' everybody immediately adjusts their posture to sit up straighter. But they don't stiffen. Faces relax, shoulders drop, head, neck, and back come into easy alignment. The spine rises out of the pelvis with energy. Sometimes people tend to sit forward, away from the backs of their chairs, more autonomously. Everybody seems to instantly know that inner feeling of dignity and how to embody it."

Let's go back to Dave.

He also tells us: "Command posture isn't only of use as a means to reset your body language before a specific event. It is advisable to maintain this posture throughout whatever you're doing—be it a sales conference or, say, the 2012 BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth.

It was during this tournament—and in the lead-up to it—that I worked with Luke Donald to help him concentrate on maintaining his command posture not only during his shots, but also throughout his entire four rounds. We put particular emphasis on keeping it up between shots, when it is easier to switch off, even for a moment, and fail to adhere to it, in the hope that it would become second nature."

Let's shine a spotlight on YOU. The next time YOU are about to do something under pressure, remember to reset your posture. Take command. All day. Every day. Especially... TODAY.

## INEVITABILITY

"When I first started working with Luke [Donald], in January 2010, one of the first things we worked on together was getting him to show 'inevitability'—imagining that his shot would perfectly match his intention—in his body language *before* the shot, *during* the shot, and *after* the shot, while the ball is in the air. Luke quite rightly asked: 'How do I physically show it?'

Think about how you would feel if you knew you couldn't fail in performing a particular feat. If the penalty you were about to take was sure to go screaming into the top corner. If the presentation you were about to make was certain to end in a standing ovation. The expressions you'd use to describe the feeling after the event would be things like 'feeling ten feet tall' and 'walking on air,' but such statements would almost certainly not reflect your posture prior to the event if you were feeling nervous and anxious.

It's a question of reframing your thoughts to believe that there is an inevitability about what you're doing to do: if you know you're going to perform brilliantly, then your anxiety before the event will become excitement; your nerves will become anticipation. You can adopt your command posture and assume an air of confidence because you know you're going to be successful. It's inevitable. ...

This is the challenge to us: as pressure increases and we naturally become tense and tightened, we need to remember and practice resetting our posture the way top athletes do—not only resetting it before the big occasion, but also maintaining it throughout. And we need to use the confidence this gives us to feel a sense of inevitability about what we're doing—this is going to be a great success, I'm going to feel ten feet tall—so that those feelings of anxiety can start to be welcomed as a natural and expected part of what is to come: a great performance."

That's another idea on how to deal with anxiety from chapter #1.

*"I dislike the term 'choking.' It has negative, almost cowardly implications. Many excellent, heroic performers have been unfairly labeled as weak under pressure, often by those who could not even begin to comprehend the kind of stresses involved in performing at the pinnacle of sport. As golfer Tom Watson says: 'A lot of guys who have never choked have never been in a position to do so.' And, in fact, it isn't mental fragility that causes choking at all; it's more like a lack of mental discipline, or a failure to organize one's thoughts when the pressure is on."*

~ Dave Alred

*"Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind."*

~ Rudyard Kipling

It reminds me of a couple other peak performance gurus: [Bob Rotella](#) and [Nate Zinsser](#).

In [The Confident Mind](#), Zinsser defines confidence as "a sense of certainty about your ability, which allows you to bypass conscious thought and execute unconsciously."

He also quotes Sun Tzu about 100 times to make his point: "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win."

In short: We need to see our success as inevitable.

In [How Champions Think](#), Rotella gives his take on the idea of inevitability.

He tells us: "Some of my clients have a hard time envisioning themselves with this much confidence. If they're golfers, I sometimes suggest to them that they imagine that God appeared to them and said, 'You're going to have a great career. You're going to win dozens of tournaments. You're going to win several major championships. Don't worry about it. You just keep working hard on your game. I've taken care of the results.' And then imagine that the vision ended before the golfer could ask God which tournaments he would win and when he would win them.

He'd play from that time on with tremendous confidence. He wouldn't know exactly when his wins would come, or where. But he'd know that if he just kept doing the things he was supposed to do, the results were guaranteed. He'd step up to the first tee every Thursday thinking, 'Oh, boy! I can't wait to find out if this is going to be one of my weeks.'

If you want to transform your life, if you want to grow, you have to change the way you see yourself and the way you respond to the world around you—just as surely as you would if God appeared to you and told you everything was set.

The truth is you don't need to wait for divine intervention to have that sort of confidence. The miracle has already happened, in the creation of the human brain. You need to take responsibility for using it and give confidence to yourself."

## THE ULTIMATE PERFORMANCE-ENHANCING DRUG

"A new performance drug is now being used in the development of England's elite cricket players and coaches. It has been said that it is the most powerful drug known to mankind. The performance edges that can be achieved from skillful and consistent use of this drug include: increasing self-esteem, creating a dramatic boost in confidence, reframing and transforming meaning, and changes in behaviors and attitudes. The 'health warning' that accompanies this powerful drug is the fact that it is in abundance, has no monetary cost, and many people simply are not aware of its existence or power! Therefore, it can easily be misused and is often abused.

Most people are unaware of its existence. Individuals often suffer untold damage without knowing what or who the culprit is until it's too late, and this makes it even more dangerous. Even after the cause (careless use) and effect have been recognized and understood, it can potentially take years to repair the damage. Sadly, in many cases the individual never fully recovers from its misuse, and it can destroy self-esteem, shatter confidence and severely limit performance potential, particularly when the performance involves making decisions."

That's from the second chapter on the power of language, appropriately called: "The Ultimate Performance-Enhancing Drug."

What's the drug? LANGUAGE.

As Dave says: "Skillful use of language directly increases self-esteem and develops confidence; the fundamental prerequisite of your ability to perform at full potential under pressure. Careless, clumsy, thoughtless use of language can destroy confidence and result in low self-esteem, which interferes with your ability to perform under pressure."

P.S. I just LOVE it when authors use the metaphor of a drug to describe the power of their recommendations. [Check out this +1](#) for some fun ones on meditation, sleep, and exercise.

## PROCESS VS. OUTCOME

*"His total commitment to the process ensured that the outcome took care of itself."*

~ Dave Alred

"Focusing on the process rather than the outcome is the essence of performing well under pressure. The tension between process and outcome seems to heighten in proportion to the amount of pressure someone is under to achieve, or, to look at it another way, the significance of not being successful. The more there is at stake, the more likely that thoughts about the outcome will interfere with thoughts about the process. ..."

This is the conflict that every performer goes through when dealing with pressure: how do I commit to the process in such a way that I don't allow any thoughts about the outcome to pollute my thinking?"

That's from chapter #8: "Thinking Correctly Under Pressure."

The correct way to think under pressure? FOCUS ON THE PROCESS!!!

Dave references the iconic golf coach Harvey Penick who told us to take "dead aim" at the smallest possible target as he tells us: "*Once we become totally engaged in the process, we can then displace our thoughts about the sources of our anxiety—our worry about the outcome—and perform close to our best.*"

My all-time favorite story re: the power of a RELENTLESS focus on the process? It's in [my book](#). [Check out this +1](#) and page #471 for the 145th micro-chapter called "Did I Win?" for the full story. Here's the super short story...

Once upon a time, a golfer got coaching from [Lanny Bassham](#)—the gold-medal-winning author of [With Winning in Mind](#). Our golfer hadn't won in awhile. But Lanny wouldn't let him think about winning. All he was allowed to think about was EXECUTING HIS PROCESS RELENTLESSLY.

He's playing a tournament at Torrey Pines early in the year. It's the final hole of the final round. He's EXECUTING HIS PROCESS SO RELENTLESSLY that, after he sinks the final putt, he didn't know he won until his wife jumped into his arms. "Did I win?" he asked. Yep. You won.

Spotlight back on YOU...

What do YOU do when you're at your absolute best?

Flip the switch. Forge excellence. Activate your Heroic potential.

Focus on doing THAT. All day. Every day. Especially...

TODAY.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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