

Handling Pressure

By Marvin Zauderer

[\[PezCyclingNews.com/November 2007\]](http://PezCyclingNews.com/November 2007)

You feel it from others, and you feel it from within. Either way, pressure can help you to reach your potential, or it can suck the life out of your cycling. Drawing on the five core mental skills, the mentally fit cyclist manages pressure effectively and uses it as fuel for optimal performance.

Last month, continuing our series on Responding to Adversity, I discussed how you can [sustain your motivation for cycling](#) by noticing and responding to potentially demotivating aspects of your personality, behavior, and environment. This month, I explore **Handling Pressure**, the fourth advanced skill of the mentally fit cyclist.

Where's the pressure in your cycling? Is it in your training? Your races? Your first century? The sprint for the City Limits sign? Your teammates' expectations of you? Your conversation with your spouse before you walk out to the garage to get your bike?

Or perhaps it's in your thoughts. The way you talk to yourself, the way you talk about yourself – is it there? When you think about your goals, your performance, your skills, your challenges – is it there?

It's certainly not unusual to feel pressure in any aspect of life, and cycling's no exception. Performing, having fun, and succeeding under pressure comes easy to some, but for most of us, pressure can sometimes detract from our performance. Learning to handle pressure – and even to *use* it – can make the difference between achieving your goals and falling short. And learning to handle pressure starts with learning how it works on you – and in you.

Sources of Pressure

Let's look first at some of the sources of pressure in your cycling. How about the **people** in your life with whom you have important relationships? Your spouse, significant other, kids, parents, friends, coach, boss, teammates, competitors, sponsors – you might feel pressure from any or all of them. Pressure to....what? Win, improve, cooperate, give up, give in, rest, spend time with them, reduce/increase/justify your commitment to cycling?

Another source is what I'll call **reality**. For example, you might need to achieve certain results to be recruited to an NRC team, or to be invited to the Olympic trials, or to get that certificate they give out at the top of Alpe D'Huez. Nobody's pressuring you; that's just the way things are.

Or are they?

Before I have a first meeting with an athlete, I ask the athlete to complete a brief self-evaluation. One of the questions asks the athlete to identify and assess people from whom the athlete feels pressure. I'll bet you can guess which person is consistently at the top of the list. That's right: **Self**. Many athletes I work with say that being too hard on themselves detracts from their performance. To quote my teenage daughters, what's up with that?

The relationship we have with ourselves often mirrors, for better and for worse, the way important adults related to us when we were younger. As I noted in [an earlier article](#), your self-talk is a prominent sign of the kind of relationship you have with yourself. When you think about your cycling, are you overly critical, judgmental, pushy, or negative at times? If so, do you "sound" like anyone you've known? Who? Strong, influential voices tend to stay with us.

The legacy of our contact with toxic people is not the only source of the pressure we put on ourselves. Let's not forget our old nemesis [anxiety](#), and of course its siblings: stress, tension, nervousness, worry, and fear. It's kind of like the Stress Family Robinson, and pressure is a charter member, too. We have a natural, instinctive, and sometimes impulsive reaction to anxiety: control. If we're able to see – or at least assume – what's triggering our anxiety, we frequently try to exert some control over the trigger, in the hope of feeling less anxious. For example, that's often why we interrupt others in conversation. It's also why you might fall prey to what my colleague Josh Horowitz calls [the Zone 3 Syndrome](#): if you're anxious about your fitness, why not ride harder and longer with less rest? That'll get you stronger more quickly, right?

If we don't (or can't) see what's triggering our anxiety, we sometimes aim our control at something else. For better and for worse, this often provides some relief. Unfortunately, this is one of the reasons trusting dogs and cats can get abused by stressed-out adults (more on that in a moment). It also may be the reason that you grip the handlebars so tightly on a tricky descent, clean the house from top to bottom instead of doing that training ride that you're dreading, or....put too much pressure on yourself. Pressuring yourself is exerting a certain kind of force, a certain kind of power, a certain kind of control. If you're doing too much of it, your self-pressuring may be fueled by anxiety. In that case, you'd be better off finding a different way to get some relief from your anxiety, whether the anxiety comes from cycling or elsewhere. That would likely take the "edge" off of not only your pressure, but your *pressuring* as well.

Going Deeper...

Let's take things a bit further: When pressure has an extra "edge" to it that's fueled by anxiety, where does the anxiety come from? Uh-oh. Now we're in danger of becoming consumed by one of the most important existential questions of our time. (For those so inclined, [Rollo May's](#) book [The Meaning of Anxiety](#) is

a classic.) So I won't go too deep, but I do want to give you a few ideas to consider.

What might be triggering your anxiety? How you might feel when/if you don't reach your goal? Having too much riding on the future when you don't have full control over it? How you might feel if the person who's pressuring you doesn't get what they want? The power these things have over you may have something to do with how you feel about yourself.

Remember the Queen/David Bowie song, [Under Pressure?](#) ("Pressure pressing down on me/Under pressure/That burns a building down/Splits a family in two/Puts people on streets") Some fans believe that through this song, Queen lead singer Freddie Mercury (who later died of AIDS) was conveying the pain he felt from not feeling accepted for who he was.

Perfectionism is a common consequence of not feeling OK as we are. When applied to ourselves, perfectionism is pressuring ourselves to do more, to be more; having too much of our hoped-for well-being attached to the "carrot" we're chasing. Perfectionism has a bad reputation, and for good reason: although it can be a great asset when properly managed, it can drive us (and others) into the ground.

It may be fruitful for you to evaluate how much of the pressure you feel, and particularly the pressure you feel from yourself, comes from trying to fill or transform something within yourself. There's certainly nothing wrong with trying to grow, evolve, and change. The questions are: how much urgency is there to that journey for you, and is there too much? And are you aiming your energy in the right direction?

Last week I attended a benefit for [A Leg Up Rescue](#), hosted by the Pez fans at [Risibisi Restaurant](#), at which Levi Leipheimer was the guest of honor. In between offering tons of time and autographs that were auctioned to benefit dog and cat rescue efforts, Levi chatted with many of us. I was struck by how humble, affable, and calmly self-assured he was – not the norm, it would seem, for one of the world's elite athletes. And yet he's clearly a fierce, focused, and accomplished competitor who has handled huge amounts of pressure with great skill.

Handling Pressure More Skillfully

I suspect Levi's the kind of guy who'd be uncomfortable with a "Be Like Levi" campaign, so I'm not going to suggest that here. Instead, I'll suggest a number of steps – including drawing on the [5 core skills of mentally fit cyclists](#) – that might be of help to you in handling the pressure in your cycling.

1. Increase your self-awareness, if necessary. Particularly if you're a person

for whom pressure has been a long-term way of life, you may not always be aware that it's operating in you. How do you know when you're feeling it? Where do you feel it in your body? How does it affect your mood? Your behavior? Your relationships? How, both positively and negatively, does it affect your cycling? Does it affect the sense of urgency you feel on the bike, your self-talk, how hard you train, your pedal stroke, your positioning in races, your focus? Do you seem to react more to pressure from others, from reality, from yourself, or all of the above?

If you have a tendency to be too hard on yourself, ask yourself how that's serving you and how it's not; ask yourself what's *driving* it. You may have the opportunity to replace the tendency with another, calmer way of relating to yourself, without sacrificing any of the satisfaction, fulfillment, and results you'd like to achieve. Teachings that may be of use to you here include [Pema Chodron's](#) concept of *shenpa* ("being hooked"), Harold Kushner's book, [How Good Do We Have to Be](#), and personality self-tests such as the [Enneagram](#).

2. Reassess your goals. As noted in [the article on goal-setting](#), are your objectives specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound (SMART)? If not, they may be activating unnecessary pressure. And if not, why not? As I mentioned in [the article on recovering from injury](#), are you trying to get your cycling to deliver too much of your identity, self-worth, and fulfillment?

3. Communicate. When you're feeling pressure, talking about it can be useful, at least as a way to make *yourself* more aware of what's actually happening, if not also to get some valuable understanding and input from a trusted person: a family member, a friend, a coach, a teammate, a training partner. I realize that for some of us men (and perhaps some of you women), talking about something that we're feeling can be akin to pulling teeth. Check out [the article on Communication](#) for ideas if need be.

4. Improve your ability to maintain, regain, and shift focus. Particularly with pressure that's "just reality," concentration skills can be key to performing under pressure. [The article on Concentration](#) has a number of suggestions, including practicing competition-level "concentration intervals" in training.

5. Notice, stop, and correct any negative self-talk. When you're under pressure, [coach yourself](#) as you would like to see *any* athlete be coached when s/he is under pressure. Be forthright yet supportive, encouraging, and positive. There's no (good) reason for you to treat yourself more harshly.

6. Manage your emotions effectively, particularly your anxiety. Pressure creates anxiety, and anxiety creates pressure. Reduce your [on-the-bike and off-the-bike stress](#) where possible. Investigate whether anxiety – and sometimes, the resulting perfectionism and pressure – is a sign of avoiding something deeper in you that, if you were to confront it, might bring you some relief. (For an

example of some wise words on this topic, see [John Welwood's writing](#) on the concept of *spiritual bypass*.)

Perhaps Queen and David Bowie give us the most important step of all at the end of Under Pressure:

“Insanity laughs under pressure we’re cracking/can’t we give ourselves one more chance/why can’t we give love one more chance/why can’t we give love/’cause love’s such an old-fashioned word/and love dares you to care/for people on the edge of the night/and love dares you to change our way/of caring about ourselves/this is our last dance/this is ourselves under pressure.”



Marvin Zauderer leads the Mental Training program at [Whole Athlete](#), a performance center in Marin County, California that provides a comprehensive set of coaching, testing, fitting, and consulting services to amateur and professional athletes. He is a [licensed psychotherapist](#), [USA Cycling Level 2 Coach](#), and Masters road racer for [Synergy Racing](#). You can email comments and questions to him at marvinz@pobox.com.