

February 18, 2015 12:40 pm

# Review: 'How to Perform Under Pressure'

Stefan Stern

**How to Perform Under Pressure**, by Hendrie Weisinger and JP Pawliw-Fry, John Murray / Crown Business, £12.99 / \$26

Keith Miller, the Australian test cricketer and wartime pilot, was once asked about the pressure of playing sport at the highest level. "I'll tell you what pressure is," he said. "Pressure is a Messerschmitt up your arse; playing is not."



## More

### ON THIS STORY

- [Review 'Captivology'](#)
- [Review 'Frugal Innovation'](#)
- [Review 'Bold' by Peter Diamandis](#)
- [Review Act Like A Leader, Think Like a Leader](#)
- [Review The Internet Is Not The Answer](#)

### ON THIS TOPIC

- [Comment Analogue dogs, new tricks](#)
- [The Art of Persuasion The power of nonsense](#)
- [Lucy Kellaway The shameless rise of the thirdpartybrag](#)
- [Feedback dads returning to work](#)
- [IN MANAGEMENT](#)
- [Mobile World Congress Top three innovations](#)
- [Disrupted transport will work better](#)
- [Good greed goes bad](#)
- [Fridman threatens legal action against UK](#)

That riposte would appeal to the authors of this thoughtful and well-argued book. Hendrie Weisinger, a psychologist, and JP Pawliw-Fry, a performance coach, provide an unusually sharp account of work and performance under pressure.

They achieve this partly by drawing on the growing body of research into the biochemical workings of the brain, but also by simply observing real life and talking to interesting witnesses, more than 12,000 people over the past decade.

Take, for example, their useful distinction between **pressure and stress**. "With pressure, something critical is on the line," they write. "Having a disagreement with your wife about how to discipline your firstborn child is stressful. Escaping a predator chasing you is more than just stress: it's pressure — either you find a way to escape or fend off the predator, or you potentially will die."

The distinction matters because in mistaking stress for pressure, "we react physically, **mentally** and behaviourally in ways that are out of proportion to the circumstances . . . misdiagnosing stress as pressure reduces our abilities needlessly".

This focus on pressure is pertinent for executives having to hit or beat targets. At the top, the pressure can be unrelenting. As **Julie Howard**, chief executive of the consultancy Navigant, tells the authors: "When you are the CEO there isn't a meeting where there isn't an expectation that you will lead the discussion, contribute in a more intellectually significant way, or be the final decision maker in situations of uncertainty."

Under pressure, the authors say, we can become "mentally rigid". We also behave differently. "We are more uptight in how we show up, more defensive when tough questions are asked, less warm and a little more ill at ease, and less able to engage in humour." We are also, as **Teresa Amabile** of Harvard Business School has shown, less creative.

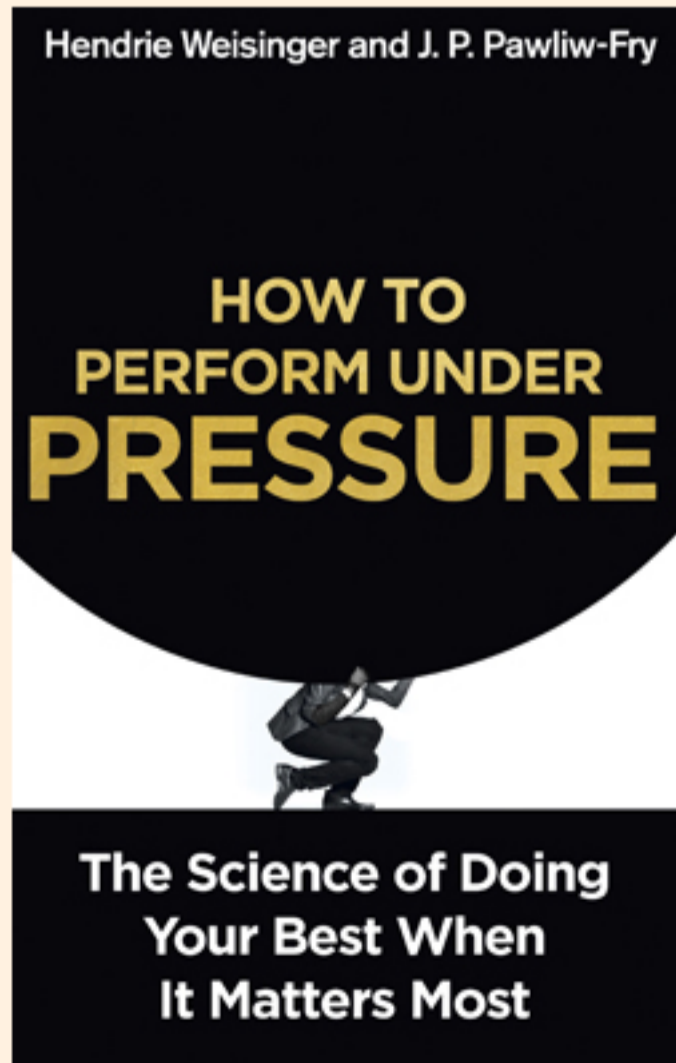
Blunt instruments such as financial incentives do not help either, as research has shown that these increase pressure on those seeking them, leading to "cheating, deception and poor employee relationships", the authors say.

So what to do? In one section, the authors list more than 20 techniques for arresting the bad physiological responses we can have to pressure, providing tips to help deal with them. These include slowing down one's initial response, "shrinking the importance" of the moment in hand, or practising a "pre-routine" to certain regular events.

Lastly, the authors discuss at greater length how four key components — confidence, optimism, tenacity and enthusiasm — can all be developed to equip us to manage pressure situations.

Such a book will not be of immediate use in a crisis. But it forces the reader to reflect on how we could prepare to deal a bit better with unavoidable pressure.

*The writer is visiting professor in management practice at Cass Business School*



amazon.co.uk


[How to Perform Under...](#)