



## **How to Stay Calm and Centered Under Pressure** by Sally Ward, Ward Leadership [www.leadership.com](http://www.leadership.com)

*"To lead others, first lead yourself."*  
John Maxwell

We are under more intense pressure to accomplish than at any time in our history. Challenging workloads, tight budgets and deadlines, and ongoing change are nearly constant companions. We feel pressure to accomplish more in our leisure time as well, creating conflict between family and relationship needs and our own needs.

As the Latin writer Syrus quipped, "Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm." One of the distinguishing features of leadership is how we handle ourselves when the seas are choppy.

The ability to stay calm and centered amidst multiple demands and occasional setbacks is invaluable. It helps leaders inspire confidence, marks employees for greater opportunities to advance, and enables a more peaceful life.

### **Losing Our Minds**

The term "I'm losing my mind" refers to the loss of reason and focus that occurs when the brain's electrical system is altered as a result of stress and pressure.

Elaine was conducting a performance review. She began by acknowledging the goals that the employee had met. However, as she moved into areas that had fallen short of goal, the employee angrily got up and walked out. Elaine's first reaction was disbelief, followed by fury at what she saw as an utter lack of respect and professionalism.

Pete was planning for his quarterly sales meeting, in the midst of negotiations for a major contract, training a new sales rep, and navigating a tangle of options for care of his elderly father. He describes the sensation of having too many balls in the air: "It's like Pop Rocks exploding in my head. When it happens, I lose the ability to focus."

When a situation is stressful, there are three choices: React, Suppress it, or Hit the Pause Button. Venting may feel good in the moment, but can be costly to relationships and reputation. Suppressing negative energy all the time is exhausting and unhealthy.

## **Training the Brain**

Hitting the Pause Button offers the opportunity to regain perspective and equilibrium. Elaine felt like going after the employee and giving her a good dressing down. But realizing that conversations conducted in anger are rarely productive, she decided the better course would be to wait and give both parties a chance to cool down before re-engaging. Pete stepped away from his desk and took a brief walk outside to gather his thoughts.

When the brain's electrical system is hyper-stimulated, hitting the Pause Button as Elaine and Pete did brings it back into balance so that a negative interaction or loss of focus doesn't seep into your next meeting or interaction.

## **Releasing Pressure**

Once you've selected the Pause Button, you can begin to release pressure. Here are eight of my favorite ways:

▶ **Breathe.** Breathing is the first line of defense. Breathe in slowly through your nose to a count of five. Then breathe out slowly through your mouth to a count of five. Repeat for several minutes until you feel calmer.

As you breathe in and out, notice where you're holding tension in your body. In the shoulders? Roll them forward and back. In your neck? Turn it gently from side to side. In your back? Change position. Continue to breathe and imagine that your body is a lake. Think of dropping a stone into the center of that lake and feeling the ripples of water flowing out through your body, calming and relaxing you.

▶ **Journal.** Unload the weight of worries, disappointments and conflicts onto paper. Set a timer if you like and let 'er rip. Write whatever comes into your head. Just be sure that your journalings are not left where others will see them.

▶ **Create an environment that supports you.** De-clutter your office and home to give yourself mind space and make it easier to find what you need. Add personal touches to your office that make it more comfortable. A memento from a favorite trip, an awe-inspiring nature scene, a gurgling indoor water fountain, that gap-toothed photo of your first grader---- whatever grounds you and reminds you of what life is all about.

▶ **Delegate what you can.** Under pressure, assuming the Lone Ranger mentality ("It's easier to do it myself than have to supervise someone else") generally means that you'll take on too much.

▶ **Don't take things personally.** Sure, it's hard to do when someone makes a snarky comment or fails to appreciate your hard work. But don't make it about you. It's more likely that the offender is under pressure, too, and isn't handling it as well as he might.

▶ **Remind yourself of who you are at your core.** What values and character qualities define you? Who are you when you are at your best? Pressure can cause us to lose sight of our best selves. Make a decision about which self you choose to present.

► Ask questions. When we're under fire, there is often a sense of urgency to make rapid decisions and take action. Sometimes the wisest course is to get more information first. When my daughter was hospitalized as an infant with a life-threatening illness, I ensconced myself in the hospital's medical library to learn all I could about the illness and treatment options. Doing so allowed me to regain some sense of control and organization.

► Do a good turn for someone else. When demands mount, one the best antidotes to pressure is perform a kindness or good deed. A businessman recently confided that he'd had the worst day of work ever. He was sorely tempted to head for a bar after work for a stiff martini, but decided instead to visit a florist and buy a bouquet for his sister, a florist herself who arranged flowers for others all day but never received them from anyone.

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