

Fact or Myth: Does Thinking “Don’t Miss” Really Make Us More Likely to Mess Up?

Description

It was March 15, 2017, and the San Antonio Spurs were trying to pull out a close win over the Portland Trailblazers. With 2.5 seconds left in the game, a Portland foul put Manu Ginobili at the free throw line. Trailing 105-108, the plan was to make the first free throw, and then deliberately miss the second free throw, so that they would have a chance to rebound the ball and score quickly to tie the game up and go to overtime.

Of course, what ended up happening, is that Ginobili missed the first free throw (which he intended to make). And then he accidentally *made* the second free throw, which he intended to miss, clinching the win for the Blazers (see it [here](#)).

Ever notice, whether it’s hitting a big shift, navigating an icy sidewalk, or eating a chili dog while wearing a white shirt, how telling yourself to *not* screw up often leads to exactly the result you’re trying to avoid?

You’ve probably heard that it’s not such a great thing to tell yourself what not to do. That saying “don’t miss” or “don’t slip” or “don’t get any chili on your shirt” is going to make it more likely that you do.

But is this actually true? Like, does our brain really have *that* hard of a time [processing contractions](#) (and no, that’s not a grammar video – it’s funny, I promise)?

A tennis study

A recent study ([Gorgulu, 2019](#)) looked at what would happen when experienced tennis players were asked to serve, and not miss, under a bit of pressure.

32 collegiate tennis players were recruited by coaches, and given the following instructions:

“Please try to serve into the target zone to get 1 point for each ball; however, please be careful not to serve into the net or out as you will score ?1 point for each ball; and finally, for any ball you hit within the serving box rather the target zone, you will get 0 points”.

In other words, the athletes could score points by hitting into the target zones at the sides of the service box, would get **no** points for hitting a safe serve in the middle of the box, and would be **penalized** for hitting the ball long or wide of the service box.

From: Gorgulu, R. (2019). Ironic or Overcompensation Effects of Motor Behaviour: An Examination of a Tennis Serving Task Under Pressure. *Behavioral Sciences*, 9(2), 21.

Warmup

Everyone started out with 10 warmup serves. And then they took an assessment to measure their cognitive anxiety (i.e. worries), somatic anxiety (i.e. tension), and self-confidence.

Low anxiety

Then, the athletes hit 20 serves, with no particular stress or pressure added to the situation.

High anxiety

And after a 10-min break, they were told that they would then be entered into a contest with everyone else in the study. Where the participant with the highest serving score, would win a new tennis racket, worth ~\$150.

After taking the anxiety and confidence assessment once again, they hit 20 more serves. This time, of course, with a bit of pressure added to the equation.

So what happened? Did this pressure lead to more inaccurate serves in general? Or did they accidentally hit more serves into the areas they were specifically told to avoid hitting to?

What happened?

Well, first off, the racket contest did seem to work. In that participants' cognitive and somatic anxiety increased significantly, and their self-confidence went down.

And yes – the increase in pressure did correspond with a drop in performance.

Specifically, when their anxiety went up, participants hit more balls long and wide – the exact thing they were explicitly told *not* to do. Meanwhile, the number of balls hit into the middle of the service box – the 0-point area, where they neither gained nor lost points – was pretty much the same regardless of whether they were nervous or not.

In other words, under pressure, the athletes didn't just become less accurate servers in general. They became less accurate in a very specific way – hitting more balls to the exact place on the court that they were trying to avoid.

Which is pretty weird, when you think about it – so why does this happen?

Why???

Well, there are a few possibilities, but the theory of “[ironic error](#)” essentially suggests that we have two mental processes in play – an “operating” process and a “monitoring” process. And that when we’re under pressure, given the limited cognitive resources available to us, monitoring our performance ends up taking resources away from the operating process, which makes us more likely to mess up in exactly the way we’re trying not to.

Takeaways

To me, this all seems to speak to the importance of watching your language, and cultivating the habit of telling yourself what *to* do, as opposed to what *not* to do. I think it’s probably important to make this a habit 24/7, even when you’re *not* under pressure, so that this way of speaking to yourself (and others) becomes more natural and automatic, and you don’t have to consciously remind yourself of it when you’re in a high-stress situation.

And I know this all sounds simple enough, but for the next 24 hours, pay attention to what you say to yourself and others. See how often you think and phrase your speech in the negative, as opposed to the positive. If you’re like me, especially when it comes to parenting (and managing your toilet paper-eating dog), the negative phrasing really sneaks in there and happens a lot more than you might think!

References

Gorgulu, R. (2019). Ironic or Overcompensation Effects of Motor Behaviour: An Examination of a Tennis Serving Task Under Pressure. *Behavioral Sciences*, 9(2), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs9020021>

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