

To Avoid “Bouncing,” Stay Calm Under Stress

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The summer heat in Georgia can be oppressive and as any Southerner can tell you, it is the humidity that really saps your strength. If you think that the heat alone is unpleasant, imagine how wearing a full length jumpsuit and a 45 pound parachute rig on your back can make you sweat. Such is the case when you are a sky-diver waiting for your plane in the open sun on a concrete runway. As fellow jumpers gather, the conversation is light and often colorful, with little hint of the stress that comes with flinging your body out of a perfectly good airplane. Of course there are always first time jumpers who are already wide eyed with adrenaline or those who simply look as though they are going to get sick. These initiates don't stray too far from their instructors who continually feed them a stream of calm instruction and reminders of what to do to keep themselves and everyone else safe in the air. The dynamic is wonderful and the goal is clearly understood by everyone – remain calm in the face of great stress and remain focused while engaging in an activity that is completely counter intuitive to human nature. In sky-diving terms, if you can avoid panic, you avoid “bouncing” off the ground. Although extreme, the sport of sky-diving offers many insights into how to maintain ones composure in the business world and in life. Stress, an inability to manage stressful situations, and panic, are where bad decisions are made. From 14,000 feet panic and indecision can be fatal; in the corporate world bad decisions may not cost you your life, but can be very costly in terms of revenue, job security and reputation.

Leadership

Whether you are summoning up the courage to sky-dive, or preparing a presentation to a hotly desired client, your success is likely to hinge on strong, effective leadership. The ability to make decisions while falling at speeds exceeding 120 miles per hour is crucial and is a skill that is both taught and learned. In the sky-diving world you have Jump Masters whose experience is of no value unless they can **communicate** effectively a situation and the decisions that must be made along the way. Effective leadership also involves **planning** and the ability to map out a progression that leads you to your desired outcome. When jumping out of a plane there is always a plan that is rehearsed and communicated with everyone before leaving the ground: who is jumping at what altitude, are you jumping alone or with others, are you free flying or belly flying, how are you planning to exit the plane and at what altitude are you deploying your chute? Deviation from an established plan can result in any number of gruesome outcomes. Effective leadership must orchestrate this **collaboration** of activities and foster a **team building** approach that ensures the greatest likelihood of success and remaining calm in the face of great adversity.

Partnership

In addition to leadership, the ability to partner with others is essential to keeping ones cool under pressure. By partnering with others we lighten the load and accelerate our learning curve. Contrary to what most people might think, sky-diving is a team sport. In order to learn and improve, you must be willing to partner with others to master the nuances of how to fly, land and pack your parachute. On every jump you partner with others who provide you with a safety check of your gear. Partnering with others is the only way to learn how to fly in a seated position, on your back, head down, or like a pencil. Check your ego at the door, observe from others who have gone before you and find a partner who can be direct and honest in their feedback of your performance. Effective partnering can be the difference between chaos and calm, as well as, success and failure.

Education

When we gain an understanding of a topic or situation, we are likely to approach it with greater ease. Therefore, another key to remaining calm under pressure is to overcome ignorance by listening and learning. In business, sport and life, there is always more we can learn. When we read, ask well thought out questions, seek advice, and noodle out our own solutions, we develop familiarity with a subject. With familiarity, you can approach situations in a more relaxed manner. In sky-diving there is a protocol for almost every situation. Failure to acquire and access this knowledge can have disastrous results. I learned this not long ago when I accidentally broke my shoulder in mid flight, while diving with some team mates. In this crisis situation, my attention to learning helped me remain calm and figure out how to fly and land my parachute with one hand. Having survived, I can now write the manual.

Practice

Practice relieves pressure. It is no secret that the key to success and performing under pressure is to practice. Athletes like Michael Jordan, Joe Montana and Tiger Woods are renowned for their ability to remain calm and focused during the most pressure filled moments of a game. Consequently, these athletes are also renowned for the amount of time and effort they put in to practice. In pressure situations you don't want to think, but instead want to flow and react. When sky-diving, the most important variable to good flight is to relax. Relaxed flight is comfortable and stable, while tense flight is chaotic and wobbly. Attaining a point of comfort and relaxation under stress only comes with both physical and mental rehearsal.

Imagery and Visualization

If you can't picture yourself finding success in your mind, then you are not likely to find success in real application. I have had hundreds of actual sky-dives, but have rehearsed thousands of jumps in my mind. The technique of visualization is utilized widely in most

sports as a practice of mental repetition that is essential to effective execution.

Visualization is simply the practice of closing ones eyes, relaxing the breath and painting a mental picture your desired situation or event, and its outcome. The key component of this practice is to keep your breath relaxed. Relaxed breathing during visualization will increase the likelihood that you will remain relaxed in real time.

It is always a relief when the plane pulls up on a hot summer's day. I love standing in the prop blast as a way to cool off and clear my mind before boarding the plane. Once everyone is on board, it is throttle up as the plane taxis towards the runway and then full throttle until the wheels leave the ground. Once in the air a strange calmness fills the cabin as the planes engines hum along. It takes 15-20 minutes to reach jumping altitude and this time can be very quiet and focused. The atmosphere is relaxed because there is experience in the air along with partnership, learning and practice. This is the time when most jumpers take a moment to visualize their jump and role they have in it. The successful execution of any task while under severe stress requires these tools.

Once altitude is reached, the energy begins to build. Everything comes together at this moment as everyone "low fives" and does one last gear check. The world below looks awfully small while the horizon goes on forever. Once in the rear door of the plane you watch each person leap out and gauge the spacing of each jumper. As the person in front of you leaves, you count and watch their angle of descent – then go!! The initial wind blast can make you tumble, but a nice relaxed falling position can remedy that. Staying relaxed is the key component to managing chaos and panic. Follow the strategies above to avoid "bouncing," and have a safe, victorious flight.