

Seeing Challenges, Not Threats

Tomorrow you're going to give a presentation to your most important client. Or you're going to face the toughest player in a tennis tournament. Or your manager just handed you a critical project. How do we react when faced with these challenging situations? Most of us would feel a tightening in our stomach or the blood in our veins run cold. Yet, there are others who are unfazed by these situations. Why? What makes them different? This article, [The benefits of seeing a "challenge" where others see a "threat"](#), sheds some light on this.

As the title suggests, "viewing a situation as a challenge will lead you to perform much better than viewing the same exact situation as a threat." The article describes studies on why some people thrive on pressure while others dread it. It comes down to how a person perceives the challenge relative to their abilities.

People who are preparing for an event that they construe as a threat find the entire process far more demanding and stressful, while those who are preparing for a challenge end up performing much better.

The article shows that we can be taught how to prepare for this.

People can be trained to actively and intentionally engage in reconstrual; in fact, this process is one of the hallmarks of cognitive behavioral therapy. This model and its effects may rest on the assumption that people are prone to consistently construe situations in one way or the other based on their resource assessments, but that doesn't mean that this tendency is immutable. *If you actively re-frame stressful situations as challenges and your elevated heart rate as excitement (or "efficient effort mobilization"), you can improve your health, well-being, and performance level, all at the same time.* [Emphasis added.]

In other words I think we can tell ourselves that we're looking forward to the challenge rather than dreading it. We can tell ourselves that we welcome the opportunity to show what we can do. Yes, it's a form of "faking it until we make it." And, yes, there are limitations to when this works. For instance I can't fool myself into thinking we can, say play star quarterback in the NFL. Nonetheless, I do believe in our normal daily environment we can improve our performance by self-

talking ourselves into looking at it as an opportunity to excel, not a threat to fail.

I've tried it before important presentations or meetings and before key tennis matches. I do believe this has helped me perform better by keeping me loose and relaxed. Anyway, the article starts off with a quote about how gymnast Aly Raisman handles pressure.

You ask [Aly Raisman] about feeling the pressure and she says, 'I don't really feel it,' and you know, I think it's because she labels it something different in her head. Some kids feel anxiety, feel pressure, she feels excitement. It's just how you label that.

I'd say it's more than just labeling a situation. It's how you visualize the outcome. When I know I'm heading into a potentially stressful meeting or encounter I'll take a few seconds to stop, close my eyes and visualize a positive outcome. I think it helps because doing this keeps me relaxed as opposed to tensing up. I also think it shifts the focus from internal ("I hope I don't screw up and look bad!") to external (keeping my focus on the outcome and on the person I'm dealing with).

One last point. I think framing situations as challenges instead of threats helps us reach "flow." Flow is a concept identified by psychologist [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#). See this Wikipedia entry on [flow](#). We reach a flow state when we're completely absorbed by a task, when the challenge of the task stretches our abilities but without overwhelming us. If it doesn't challenge us to stretch the activity bores us. If it's too daunting it intimidates us. I think Aly Raisman and other people who calmly face challenges believe they're up to the task or they've labeled the task as a challenge, not a threat.