

A friendly pat on the back can improve performance in basketball

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A free throw in basketball will have every eye glued to one person. It's an intensely stressful situation. A research team led by the University of Basel studied whether a friendly tap on the shoulder increases the odds of making a shot.

In difficult situations, physical touch like a hug or a pat on the back can reduce stress. Whether this influences performance in stressful life situations has not yet been studied in detail. A team of researchers headed by Christiane Büttner at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Basel investigated this question in the context of basketball games. Their results [appeared](#) in the journal *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*.

One of the most stressful situations during a game is a [free throw](#). A player receives a free throw if they were fouled while attempting to score. In most cases, the fouled player gets two free throws and can win one point per successful shot. Free throws decide many games.

Büttner and her colleagues at the University of Landau and Purdue University studied precisely this situation using videos of basketball games. The study included a total of 60 games played by women's [basketball](#) teams in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the US. The games contained 835 incidents of two free throws.

Your team has your back

The researchers counted how many of her four teammates touched the shooter before a shot, for example, by tapping her on the shoulder or squeezing her hand. They then calculated whether there was a statistical association between the number of touches by teammates and the success rate of the subsequent shot.

The data showed that the chance of scoring rose when teammates showed their support through touch. The effect only appeared after a failed first shot. "So support from teammates is most helpful when your [stress level](#) is already high because you've missed the first of the two shots," Büttner says.

It's conceivable that a pat on the back or squeeze of the hand could also help manage stress and improve performance in other team situations, says the psychologist.

More information: Christiane M. Büttner et al, The power of human touch: Physical contact improves performance in basketball free throws, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102610](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102610)

Provided by University of Basel

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