

Basketball teams playing for survival in critical NBA playoffs are more likely to lose

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If a sports team plays a critical game in which losing means elimination from a league, do they work harder to win—or does the high pressure mean they are more likely to make mistakes and lose? A new study in

Frontiers in Psychology suggests the latter, finding that basketball teams playing for survival in critical NBA playoff games are more likely to lose. This suggests that the threat of elimination caused the teams to 'choke.' The study is the first to illustrate this effect in a real-world team sports environment—and may be applicable to a variety of high-pressure performance situations, such as those found in the workplace.

With the NBA 2018 finals drawing to a close, many teams will have experienced intense pressure to avoid elimination by winning critical games during the playoffs. Researchers are working to understand how athletes and others handle pressure, and how this affects their performance. Previous studies led some researchers to predict that high-pressure situations can help to focus minds and increase motivation, leading to increased success.

"Theories predict that individuals exert the most effort, and therefore produce their best performances, when the possible returns for their success—or the consequences of their failure—are highest," says Dr. Yair Galily, of the Interdisciplinary Center, Hertzlya, Israel.

However, other studies found evidence that high-pressure situations can lead to reduced performance and less success, when someone becomes overly focused on how to complete a task, rather than just doing it.

Many of these previous studies looked at performance under pressure in controlled conditions, such as asking soccer players to take penalty kicks while observed by researchers. Until now, no-one had explored the effect of high-pressure situations on performance in a real-world team situation.

To investigate this, Galily and a colleague examined stats from NBA [playoff games](#), to see how athletes with a lot at stake coped with varying degrees of pressure in real games. The researchers predicted that teams

would perform better when their backs are against the wall—meaning they would be more likely to win critical playoff games where losing meant their elimination.

"We analyzed 1,930 playoff games to test this prediction," says Galily. "We calculated the probability that a team would win, if losing meant that they faced elimination from the playoffs."

The researchers included the relative strength of the teams in their calculations to make sure that their results took this into account. Strikingly, they found that the threat of elimination actually made teams more likely to lose, suggesting that they choked in 'sink or swim' games.

The effect was significant. For example, the researchers found that if a home team had a 65% general win probability during the playoffs, this was reduced to 55% in games that were critical for the home team, but not the guest team. However, if the [game](#) was critical for the guest team, and not the home team, the home team's win probability increased to almost 74%.

This is the first time that anyone has studied this effect in teams in a real-world environment, so more studies are necessary to further understand the phenomenon. However, the results are not just applicable to team sports, but could have wide-reaching implications.

"The results from our analysis are relevant to the workforce and many other domains," says Galily. "We suggest that leaders and managers should refrain from deliberately building high-pressure environments to try to enhance [performance](#) in their subordinates. They should adopt the 'just do it and enjoy' path."

More information: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00979](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00979)

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