
The Pressure Pack

Three moves for the moments that matter

Under pressure, people give themselves away in the way they phrase things. Here is what nine of the best in the world revealed without meaning to, and **how to use it yourself**.

LeBron James / Carlos Alcaraz / Joe Rogan / Alexander Zverev / Linda Noskova /
Victor Wembanyama / Mirra Andreeva / Aryna Sabalenka / Flavio Cobolli

BEFORE Point your attention at something you can actually do

Identify Your Outcome

DURING Calm the body so the thinking brain stays on

Manage Your State

AFTER When it goes wrong, say the right thing and get back faster

The Elevate Formula



Confident



Capable



Inspirational

Mark Sapsford

Author of *The 7 Skills to impress™*

She knew exactly what was happening to her

Knowing made no difference at all.

Aryna Sabalenka led her Roland Garros quarter-final by a set and a double break, and lost it. The part worth studying came in the press conference afterwards, where she described what had happened to her with real precision.

“You overthink, then you make easy mistakes, then you miss opportunities.”

“I got into a very deep, dark hole over there, and I just couldn't get back mentally on track.”

ARYNA SABALENKA

She could take the whole thing apart frame by frame once it was over. While it was happening she could not stop a single frame of it. That gap between knowing and doing is what most people mean when they say they went to pieces, and it says nothing at all about their character. It is biology, working exactly as it was built to.

Two systems run your thinking. **System 1**, the fast, instinctive one that scans constantly for danger, and **System 2**, the slower one that reasons, plans and weighs up options. Under real pressure **System 1** takes the wheel and **System 2** goes quiet, which leaves you with fight, flight or freeze at the moment you most need to think. Your ability is still sitting there. What pressure takes away is your access to it.

So the three moves in this pack work with that rather than against it. Two of them keep **System 2** switched on. All three give **System 1** something more useful to point at. Together they cover the whole shape of a pressure moment: what you do beforehand, what you do while it is happening, and how you talk yourself back when it goes wrong.

HOW TO USE THIS

Read it through once. Then practise Move Two on an ordinary Tuesday when nothing is at stake, because a breathing technique you have never used will not be available to you at the moment you need it. Keep the summary card near the back of this pack on your phone.

Every quote in this pack is something the person actually said, usually within minutes of the moment itself. Nobody was performing, it was all instinctive, and without meaning to, each of them was describing how they had interpreted the pressure they were under.

Point your attention at something you can actually do

Identify Your Outcome

Miami were behind in the third quarter of Game 2 of the 2012 Eastern Conference playoffs, and LeBron James was having a poor game by his own standards. In the fourth quarter he scored seventeen points and the series turned. Afterwards ESPN asked him what had changed.

“We got stops, and we made a couple of shots. We just continued to fight.”

LEBRON JAMES

What interests me is everything he left out. No mention of the scoreline they had faced, nothing about the pressure of the moment, no reference to the opposition. He never framed the challenge by its size. His attention had narrowed to two things that were immediate, achievable and entirely inside his own influence.

That is where the term **Stops and Shots** comes from. When something feels too big to act on, the feeling is almost always a signal about where your attention is pointing rather than a verdict on what is possible. The mountain does not shrink. You just stop looking at the top of it.

Carlos Alcaraz does the same thing with time rather than with actions. Asked how he kept going when a match was slipping away, he said:

“Every step more, even just one second more of suffering, one second more of fighting is always worth it. I just fight until the last ball and always believe I can come back.”

CARLOS ALCARAZ

I love this language. He has broken a Grand Slam down into the smallest unit available to him. The pressure is no longer “win this tournament”, which is enormous and largely out of his hands. It is one more second, which is small, temporary and completely survivable.

The trap that catches almost everyone

Now the counter-example, and it is the most useful page in this pack, because this is the mistake most of us make without noticing.

Flavio Cobolli reached the 2026 French Open final, where he would face Alexander Zverev. Asked about Zverev in the build-up, he said this:

“He's my reference.”

FLAVIO COBOLLI, ON ZVEREV

That one word tells you where he was measuring from, and he was measuring from the other side of the net. If your opponent is your reference, every point you win or lose updates your sense of how you are doing, and you end up watching the gauge instead of playing.

He also described the self-talk he used during a break in his quarter-final:

“You're here. You deserve it. Let's try.”

FLAVIO COBOLLI, TO HIMSELF

This may sound like confidence, but the word to look at is “deserve”. Deserving is a question about whether you belong, and a question like that wants an answer. Every mistake asks it again. So the scoreboard ends up as the judge of whether he was good enough to be out there, and his **Attention Direction** is on what the match means rather than on how he is playing it.

Zverev, who went on to win that final in five sets, had his attention somewhere else entirely. Here he is in the press conference straight after his semi-final, having just won his place in the final two days later:

“This victory doesn't mean much yet. We have a match on Sunday to play, and that's why we're here. I want to play the best match possible and simply concentrate on that.”

“I try to completely empty my head and not think about anything.”

ALEXANDER ZVEREV, AFTER HIS SEMI-FINAL

He has a win in his hands and he puts it straight back down. His **Attention Direction** has already moved on to Sunday, and then narrower still, on to playing the best match he can. The title and the history sit outside that frame entirely.

Cobolli spent the afternoon looking at what the match meant. Zverev spent it looking at the next point. That is the difference, and it made a hard day harder than it needed to be for one of them.

How to do it

An **Outcome** is what you want to have happen, stated in a way your subconscious can actually use. There are five rules, and they matter more than they look.

RULES FOR SETTING AN OUTCOME

- 1 Express it positively, around what you want to happen.
- 2 Keep it within your control.
- 3 Be ambitious.
- 4 Avoid negative commands. “Don't mess this up” puts messing it up in your head, and that is now the thing your attention is pulled towards.
- 5 Be precise and concise.

Then find your version of **Stops and Shots**. I worked with a football club sitting near the bottom of the table with the league already written off in the players' minds, and we found three: keep the talk positive after a mistake, stay on your feet rather than diving in for the one big tackle, and reset quickly instead of letting one error become three. None of them were glamorous. All of them were things the players could actually do. They went unbeaten for three months and climbed to within three places of the top.

Your version might look like this.

- **Before a presentation:** "Speak slowly enough that I finish my sentences," rather than "don't look nervous."
- **Before a difficult conversation:** "Ask three questions before I make my case."
- **Before an interview:** "Give one specific example in every answer."
- **When a discussion turns heated:** stay on your feet, in the defender's sense of it. Hold your ground and let the small points do the work.

And when it is already going badly and you have no time to think, there is a thirty second version of the whole move, which is to ask yourself what the next thing you can actually do is, and then do that one thing.

Calm the body so the thinking brain stays on

Manage Your State

This is the move people skip, and it is the one with the clearest mechanism behind it. Your heart rate is never perfectly regular. It rises a little as you breathe in and falls as you breathe out, and when you are calm that rise and fall settles into a smooth, even wave. That ordered pattern is what is meant by **Cardiac Coherence**, and it is produced by the vagus nerve, the same system that keeps your reasoning brain in the conversation.

Under pressure the vagus stands down, the heart speeds, and the smooth wave breaks up into something jagged. That loss of order goes with losing access to **System 2**, which is why thinking clearly gets harder at the moment you need it most. The two move together, so hold the rhythm and you hold on to your reasoning.

What you have direct control over is your breathing. The instinct under pressure is short, shallow breaths high in the chest, which keeps the whole system braced. Breathing low and slow, so the diaphragm leads and the stomach moves rather than the upper chest, does the opposite. Your body responds to the breathing whatever your mind happens to be doing.

7-11 BREATHING

- 1 Sit upright. One hand just under your ribs, the other on your upper chest. Breathe normally and notice which hand moves.
- 2 Adjust until only the lower hand rises and falls. That tells you the diaphragm is leading. It may feel odd at first, and you might need to exaggerate the movement slightly.
- 3 Now make the out-breath longer than the in-breath. In for a count of seven, out gently for eleven. The long out-breath does the work, so if the full count is a stretch, shorten both and keep the ratio.
- 4 Keep going for a minute or two. It may take that long, but the rhythm always returns.

Practise this when you are calm. Under pressure your breathing shifts up into the chest by itself, so countering it has to be a habit already in place.

Linda Noskova produced an improvised version of this in a Wimbledon final. She had led by a set and 5-2, served for the title, double-faulted twice and let five championship points go, and walked off Centre Court with the match level.

“I was in the bathroom. I just splashed some cold water on me, started over again.”

“What really helped me was the first step I took off court, the trophies were there. I was like, I'm not going to take the small one, I'm taking the big one.”

“I'm going to leave my soul on court in the third set, whatever that be.”

LINDA NOSKOVA

Look at what she assembled in about ninety seconds. She starts with the cold water, which does the same job as **7-11 Breathing** by a different route. Cold on the face triggers a reflex that runs straight to the vagus nerve, the heart slows and the breathing settles with it. She went for her physical state first, before trying to think her way anywhere.

Then a new frame, because “started over again” quietly deletes five championship points from the story. And then an **Outcome** built entirely out of her own effort, with the result detached from it in four words. “Whatever that be” puts the judgement on her own effort, whatever the scoreboard ends up saying.

She had used that reset before. A month earlier, after a tournament she called disastrous, she reached for the same phrase: restart, reset, focus on enjoying the time on court. So when the collapse came at Wimbledon she was repeating something she had already done, which is the only reason it was available to her that quickly.

The upgrade: Realisation

Breathing alone will let you beat the stress response and perform in spite of it. If you want more than that, add **Realisation**: while you are breathing, hold a clear, vivid picture of the thing going well. The performance rather than the result. Pick two or three qualities you want to bring, such as calm, focused or patient, and imagine yourself with them. This fuses your **Outcome** with your sense of who you are, so your instinctive mind scans for routes towards it rather than for evidence of danger, and it takes no effort, which is why it works when the pressure is on.

And the adrenaline

You will still feel it. I teach athletes to welcome adrenaline as fuel and to feel it moving through the body with every in-breath, because it is there to make you sharper and faster. The feeling is welcome, and it is what you do while it is there that counts.

What you are doing is staying level while you feel it, and that matters just as much when things go your way. A moment that goes well lifts you as sharply as a bad one drops you, and going up with it costs the same composure that going down with it does.

Victor Wembanyama came into the NBA as the most talked about prospect in a generation, seven foot four and first overall pick. He is open about what that does to him:

“I wanna win so bad. It's like my life depends on it.”

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA

That is about as much weight as a player can put on himself, and he says it out loud. The wanting stays exactly where it is. What he manages is the swing, and he keeps six words for it:

“Don't get too high, don't get too low.”

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA

What this looks like away from a court

None of this needs a stadium, and most of it is invisible to anyone watching.

- **The ten minutes before a presentation:** find a quiet room, a stairwell or an empty corridor and give it two minutes of **7-11 Breathing**, holding a picture of yourself finishing it calmly.
- **Waiting outside an interview:** the same, with two or three qualities you want to bring in with you.
- **In the meeting, when it turns:** nobody can see you breathing. Lengthen the out-breath where you sit, and let the next thirty seconds be about the rhythm rather than the reply.
- **When bad news lands in your inbox:** cold water on the face before you answer it. Noskova's version, at a desk.
- **Parked outside a difficult conversation:** do the breathing before you get out of the car, while you still have somewhere private to do it.

The pattern in all of them is the same. Deal with the body first, then think.

When it goes wrong, say the right thing and get back faster

The Elevate Formula

Move Two calms your body and brings your thinking back online. This one is about what you then do with that thinking, and it turns on the sentence you say to yourself in the minutes afterwards, which is where recovery either starts or stalls.

In September 2020 Joe Rogan posted this on Instagram, having very nearly talked himself out of a workout.

“My inner bitch put up a hell of a fight today. All sorts of convincing arguments about enjoying the morning and just drinking coffee and relaxing instead of doing the workout that I planned.”

“There's always this nagging voice telling you, you're busy, you don't have to do this. It's so hard to tell that voice to f off. It almost got me today. F off, inner bitch. I'm not hearing it.”

JOE ROGAN

Set the crude vocabulary aside and look at the structure, because there is a piece of genuine craft buried in it. Most of us have a version of that voice, and most of us answer it with something like “I'm so lazy” or “I always do this.” Those sentences do three things at once. They make the failure part of who you are rather than something separate from you. They stretch it across your whole character rather than one morning. And they make it permanent rather than temporary.

The framework for this is the **Elevate Formula**, which describes three dimensions your mind is quietly assigning to everything that happens to you.

THE THREE DIMENSIONS

- **Self or Other.** Is this about who I am, or is it separate from me?
- **Broad or Narrow.** Does this touch everything, or one specific thing?
- **Lasting or Fleeting.** Is this permanent, or does it pass?

People who hold up under pressure treat their strengths as **Self**, **Broad** and **Lasting**, and their setbacks as **Other**, **Narrow** and **Fleeting**. People who don't have it the other way round.

Now look at what “inner bitch” does. The voice becomes a character with a name, which makes it **Other**, no longer part of him. The argument is about this morning's kettlebell session, which makes it **Narrow**. Two of the three, from a man who as far as I know has never read a word about **Explanatory Style**. He worked it out in a gym.

The third is missing from that phrase, and it matters, because an inner critic that is **Other** and **Narrow** but still **Lasting** will be back tomorrow. Rogan supplies it elsewhere, talking about the years he spent dying on stage as a comedian:

“The only time you lose is when you stop trying. Every failure is just more data.”

JOE ROGAN

Every failure is just more data. No drama in it, no self-pity, no special claim on the difficulty. A bad night stops being a verdict and becomes information, and information is something you use and then move past, which is exactly what makes it **Fleeting**. Put that next to the inner bitch and all three dimensions are there, worked out by one man across a dojo and a comedy club.

Compare Sabalenka's account of her own defeat, where she said she had lost “*not because she played incredible, just because I made all of those mistakes*”. That puts the whole thing on herself, across everything, with nothing marking it as temporary. Then compare Mirra Andreeva, nineteen years old, after winning the title:

“I want to thank myself for believing in myself, always giving my 100%, even when it's tough.”

MIRRA ANDREEVA

She thanks the process she kept up rather than the result she produced. Earlier in the same year she had smashed a racket at one tournament and hit herself with it at another, and she had done real work in between. What that sentence tells you is where her measuring point now sits, which is inside her rather than on the scoreboard.

How to do it

Give the voice a name that isn't yours. It can be anything. One student I worked with used Panic, so that a bad thought before an exam became “that's just Panic doing its rounds again.” Nothing about the exam changed. The power of the voice did.

Then narrow the argument to the specific thing, and add the time limit. It fits into one sentence:

“That's [the name], and it's about [this one specific thing], and it'll be gone by [when].”

Or use Rogan's version and call the thing that went wrong data. Both supply **Fleeting**, and some days one is easier to reach for than the other.

And when something goes well, resist the urge to credit the result. Credit what you did. Results change from one week to the next and you do not fully control them. What you actually did is the part you can repeat.

What this looks like on an ordinary bad day

The voice rarely turns up about kettlebells. It turns up on the drive home from a meeting that went badly, or at eleven at night when you are replaying something you said.

- **After a presentation that went wrong:** “That's the Critic. It's about the middle section, and it'll be gone by Friday.”
- **After a rejection:** keep it to this application. Ask what the attempt taught you and what you will change next time. That is Rogan's data.
- **When you hear yourself say “I always do this”:** say, “I did this today.” That small change moves the setback from **Lasting** to **Fleeting**.
- **When something goes well:** write down what you did that made it work. That gives you something you can repeat next month.

AN HONEST CAVEAT

Naming the voice manages it. It does not remove it. Rogan's inner critic will be back tomorrow, which means this is a fight he has to win daily. Changing the belief underneath, the one that generates the voice in the first place, is deeper work than a technique. It is worth knowing that from the start, so that a returning voice doesn't feel like evidence the method failed.

The Pressure Pack

Screenshot this. It is the whole thing on one page.

BEFORE

Point your attention

- › What is my **Outcome**? Positive, in my control, precise.
- › What are my two or three **Stops and Shots**? Small, immediate, mine to do.
- › Am I measuring myself against someone else, or against something I said I'd do? Only the second one holds.
- › Check for negative commands. "Don't mess this up" is an instruction to think about messing it up.

DURING

Calm the body

- › Lower hand moving, not the upper one. Let the diaphragm lead.
- › In for seven, out for eleven. The long out-breath is the part that works.
- › Hold a clear picture of it going well, and the two or three qualities you want to bring.
- › Adrenaline is fuel. Breathe it in rather than fighting it.
- › Don't get too high, don't get too low.
- › Next ball. Only the next ball.

AFTER

Talk yourself back

- › Name the voice. It isn't you. (**Other**)
- › One thing, not everything. (**Narrow**)
- › Today, not always. (**Fleeting**)
- › Went well? Credit what you did, not the result.

Which of these three will do the most for you?

It depends on something you can measure in three minutes.

These three moves work for anyone. What differs is which one you most need, and how hard you will have to work to make it stick, and that comes down to how solidly your sense of yourself holds when things go wrong. In *The 7 Skills to impress*™ that is called your **Identity Quotient**.

A high **IDQ** means setbacks stay **Narrow**, **Fleeting** and separate from who you are, so Move Three comes almost naturally and Moves One and Two are where your effort belongs. A lower one means the voice in Move Three is louder and more persistent, and that is where the real gains sit. Knowing which you are lets you put your effort where it will do the most.

Take the IDQ Snapshot

A short set of questions that shows how your mind currently behaves under pressure, where your confidence comes from, and how quickly you recover when things don't go to plan. Under three minutes, nothing to prepare, and no judgement attached to the result.

7skills.co.uk/idq-snapshot



SCAN ME

Where the fourth move lives

Plenty of pressure moments involve other people, and for those there is a fourth move that would not fit in a pack this size: **Practise Rapport**. It is the skill of getting someone on side when they are angry, frightened or dug in, and it changes what is possible in a difficult conversation more than anything else in the toolkit. That one, and the language skills that go with it, are in the book.

[Start reading *The 7 Skills to impress*™ at 7skills.co.uk](https://7skills.co.uk)



Confident



Capable



Inspirational

A full list of sources, with links to the pieces where each quote is examined in detail, follows on the next page.

Sources

Every quote, and the piece where it is taken apart properly.

Each of these was said by the person named, in a press conference, broadcast interview or their own social media post. The links go to the Pressure Reveals piece where I look at it in detail.

Aryna Sabalenka

"You overthink, then you make easy mistakes..."

Press conference after her Roland Garros quarter-final defeat, 2026.

Discussed in full: [Pressure Test: Aryna Sabalenka](#)

LeBron James

"We got stops, and we made a couple of shots."

Post-game interview with ESPN, Game 2 of the 2012 Eastern Conference playoffs.

Discussed in full: [Stops and Shots: The LeBron James Approach to Impossible Goals](#)

Carlos Alcaraz

"Every step more, even just one second more of suffering..."

Press conference after the longest semi-final in Australian Open history.

Discussed in full: [2026 Roland Garros: The Mental Strength Leaderboard](#)

Flavio Cobolli

"He's my reference." / "You're here. You deserve it. Let's try."

Build-up to the 2026 French Open final, and his own account of a break during his quarter-final.

Discussed in full: [The Cramp That Won the French Open](#)

Alexander Zverev

"This victory doesn't mean much yet..." / "I try to completely empty my head..."

Press conference after his 2026 Roland Garros semi-final win.

Discussed in full: [The Cramp That Won the French Open](#)

Linda Noskova

"I was in the bathroom..." / "I'm taking the big one." / "...whatever that be."

Press conference after the Wimbledon final, with the earlier "restart, reset" quote given to Reuters.

Discussed in full: [Wimbledon's Champions Said More Than They Realised](#)

Victor Wembanyama

"I wanna win so bad." / "Don't get too high, don't get too low."

Interviews during his NBA career.

Discussed in full: [Pressure Test: Victor Wembanyama](#)

Joe Rogan

"My inner bitch put up a hell of a fight today..." / "F off, inner bitch."

Instagram posts, September 2020.

Discussed in full: [What Joe Rogan Accidentally Discovered About the Voice in Your Head](#)

Joe Rogan

"The only time you lose is when you stop trying. Every failure is just more data."

On his years in stand-up comedy.

Discussed in full: [The Pressure Test: Joe Rogan](#)

Mirra Andreeva

"I want to thank myself for believing in myself..."

On winning the 2026 Roland Garros women's title, aged nineteen.

Discussed in full: [2026 Roland Garros: The Mental Strength Leaderboard](#)

Framework terms in bold throughout are from *The 7 Skills to impress™* by Mark Sapsford, where each is explained in full, and are defined in the glossary at 7skills.co.uk. © 2026 7 Skills to impress™