

Sir Graham Henry sure knows a lot about pressure and stress

How is Sir Graham Henry coping with the stress of releasing a book and the furore surrounding his suspicion about match fixing in the 2007 World Rugby Cup game against France? From the comments he has previously made about pressure and stress, we would imagine he is not doing too badly.

Henry seems to be a student of pressure and stress, whether consciously or not, and researchers at University of York and the Challenge of Change programme, www.challengeofchange.co.nz/ agree with much of what he says.

Knowing the difference between pressure and stress

Pressure is the demand to perform. It is characterised by feelings of fear and excitement: we might lose the game (fear), yet it is exciting playing it. Says Henry of the preparation for the 2011 World Cup: *“There were three basic aspects to what we were trying to do. The first was understanding and acquiring the knowledge and the mental skills to handle pressure. (Pressure is) about brain biology and how the brain and the mind react under stress. We wanted to understand how to change a bad mindset to a good mindset.”*¹

Henry is right. We all experience pressure – the demand to perform. We can’t escape it. We can only imagine the pressure Henry and the All Blacks must have experienced playing the World Cup in their homeland: the intensity of the excitement and the fear. However, while we can’t avoid pressure we can avoid stress, and Henry’s absolutely right that it is the mind that turns pressure into stress.

Stress is ruminating about emotional upset. That upset can be real (we lost the game) or imagined (we could lose the game.) *“Graham admits that with about 15 minutes to play, when the French were racking up about their 16th phase deep in All Black territory, he endured a terrible “What if...? moment. “It was the only time in the entire world cup I was stressed and I had a momentary anxiety attack. How would I handle it, how would Raewyn (his wife) and the kids and Mum handle it if we lost?”*²

Knowing how to stop pressure turning into stress. 4 steps

The Challenge of Change programme has four steps to developing resilience and preventing pressure turning into debilitating stress. The first step is to “Wake Up”. Much of the time our mind is captured by our thoughts to the effect that we are not really giving our full attention to the task at hand. We need to stop drifting and wake up. We need to be at the game, ready for the next pass, now.

*“We’ve all seen guys under extreme pressure who don’t appear to be there. They can’t seem to focus on the requirement at the time and have escaped the reality of their situation. We gave them information about why that occurred and provided triggers to get them back on task.”*³

To wake up – to realise that you are not “at the game” - you need to be self aware. Henry says his first step in managing pressure was *“to become self-aware; and I am a very slow learner, so it took me 100 years to get there.”*⁴

And when we are awake we need to keep control of our attention: once you are at the game you need to stay there as long as you can. Controlling Attention is the second step in developing resilience. People often find the easiest way to control attention and to focus on the immediate task is to attend to their senses for a few moments.

*“In the final you might have seen Brad Thorn throw water over his face. He found that centred him, brought him back to the present. Other players stomped on the ground during a break in play when they were drifting and losing concentration. They’re not necessarily big things. Some of the squad found that slapping themselves on the knee helped.”*⁵

Step three of managing stress is to Detach from your thoughts and see them as just thoughts. The thoughts might just be about what you’re planning for next weekend, which is called ‘waking sleep’, or it might escalate into rumination by adding negative emotion – what Mark Twain described as the worst things in his life that never happened! Avoiding

stress requires the perspective that detachment provides. As Henry says, *“we lost by two points in 2007, and I was the villain. We won by one point in 2011, and you are the hero.”*⁶

And step four is to Let Go. Asked what he would have done if the All Blacks had lost the 2011 final Henry says: *“I’ve talked about it, but it’s not a reality, so I don’t worry about it.”*⁷

Resilience. A performance and a life skill

There are many more talented rugby players than those who go on to become All Blacks. How come some take the step up to the All Black pinnacle and some don’t? One vital reason is because some learn to handle the pressure and some find that the pressure gets in the way of their performance. We are not all born with the innate athletic talent that the All Blacks have, but we all have the choice as to whether we let pressure turn into stress. Developing resilience is not only an essential foundation for peak performance, it is also a life skill, as many All Blacks who were unable to handle the pressures of life and the game can attest.

¹ Ackford, 2011 “All Blacks coach Graham Henry: my team and I nearly choked before our moment of Rugby World Cup glory,” The Telegraph, 29 October

² Howitt, B (2012) Graham Henry: Final Word. Extract published in Sunday Star Times July 29

³ ibid

⁴ Kilgallon 2012 “Reconstructing Henry” Sunday Star Times, April 15. The other steps were to prepare as thoroughly as possible, to exercise every day, and to ignore the media.

⁵ Ackford, ibid

⁶ Kilgallon, ibid

⁷ ibid