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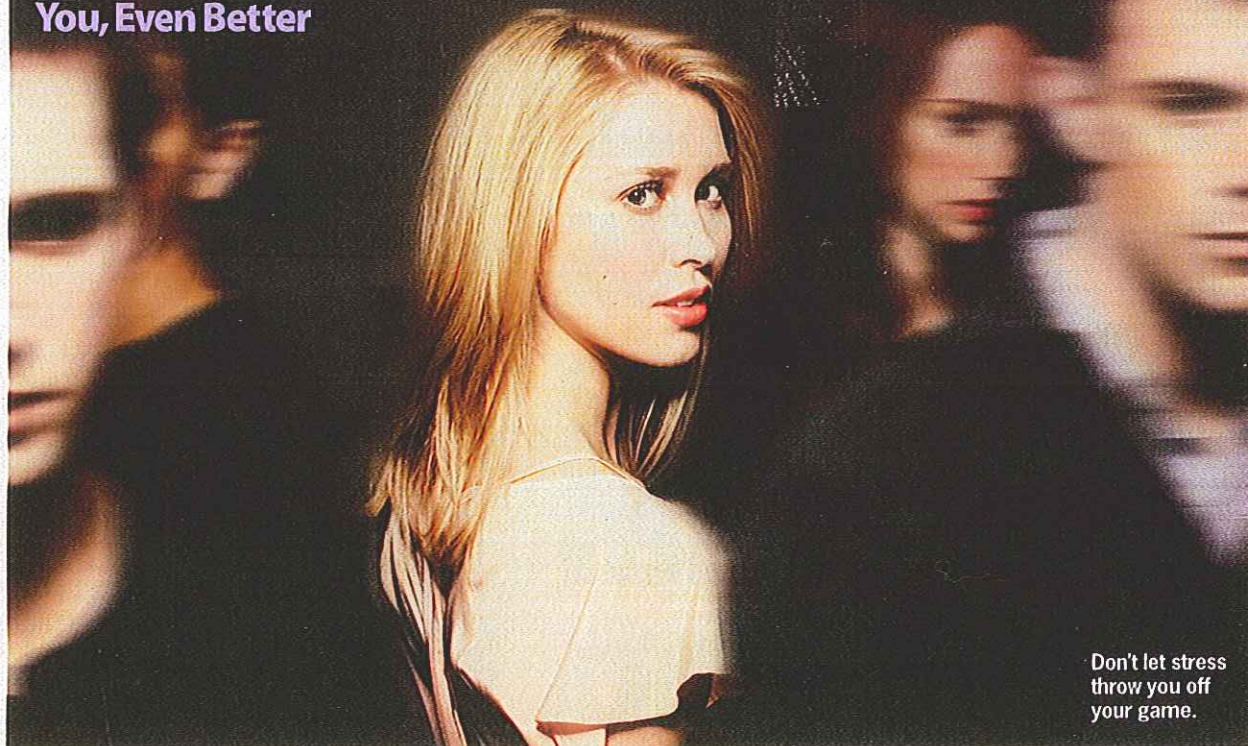
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Don't let stress throw you off your game.

# How to Stay Calm Under Pressure

It's tough to make the right decisions when the heat is on. But cardiac surgeon Kathy Magliato, author of *Heart Matters: A Memoir of a Female Heart Surgeon*, has learned to keep her cool in any situation. Steal her strategies and you'll never choke again.

AS TOLD TO KORIN MILLER

▶ Like most doctors, I spent my first year of training as an intern. It was very *Grey's Anatomy*. My job was to stay out of everyone's way and not kill anybody—that's all you care about. One day, I was minding my own business when a nurse ran out of an operating room and said, "Oh my god. The doctor needs you in there, stat," and she grabbed me and threw me in an OR. I didn't know anything about surgery, and all of a sudden, I was in an operating room where a heart surgeon was saving a patient's life. He called over to me, "Get some gloves on and get up here."

All hell was breaking loose—the patient's chest was cut open, and blood was shooting up into the air—and the doctor told me to reach into the chest to hold the heart

steadily so he could stitch a hole shut. I was freaking out inside while I held the heart, but the surgeon was so relaxed. He calmly said to people, "I need this" and "I need that." It taught me how important it is to keep your cool under pressure.

That was 20 years ago. After that, I spent many years performing heart transplants before segueing into my current position as the director of women's cardiac services at Saint John's Health Center, in Santa Monica, where I conduct heart-bypass and valve-replacement surgeries. I've learned how to be at my best no matter how intense the circumstances may get, and it involves strategies anyone can use when they're under the gun.

## Checking Emotions at the Door

There was a male surgeon who liked to test me under pressure when I was still in training. He would scream at me and hit my hands while I was in the middle of an operation. I hated him at the time, but he made me a better surgeon. I learned that no matter what kind of distraction came up, I had to refocus immediately on what I was doing.

Thriving under pressure is all about locking into an incredible, intense focus. You have to be in control all the time, even when everything around you is chaotic. How do I do it? I've mentally built this place inside me that I call my isolation room. Before I go into the OR, I think of stepping inside this place, which is very sterile and emotionless, and

it helps me zero in on what I need to do to. It's very simple: Just imagine a plain, white room with no one and nothing in it. Then mentally check your chaotic emotions at the door and step inside. The mental isolation allows you to think in a way that's crystal clear.

Staying calm under pressure is only half the battle—you also have to be able to make smart, split-second decisions. In order to become a heart surgeon, I had to teach myself to trust my instincts. I learned the skill by repeatedly throwing myself into crazy situations so that dealing with them would become second nature. As a resident, I'd run to get there first when the hospital called a code blue, when someone goes into cardiac arrest. It's an intense process to try to help a patient in that situation, but I deliberately put myself in those crazy moments to learn how to think on my feet and be sure I knew what I was doing.

It's the same as volunteering to do more projects at work—you're not exactly sure how to handle them so you figure things out on the spot—or frequently agreeing to do something last-minute with a friend so you have to determine the details on the go. Eventually, making quick decisions

**“The best way to pull through a tough moment is to concentrate on what you need to do next.”**



It's all about staying focused.

under pressure becomes woven into the fabric of who you are, so when you're in a similar situation you say, “Okay, I've done this before, and I'm comfortable with this.”

### Letting Go of Mistakes

Just like with any job, things go wrong in the OR: A patient can have bleeding complications, or their blood pressure can plummet. When things take a turn for the worse, it can be hard to fight off the wave of frustration that washes over you, threatening to take your head out of the game. When this happens, I take a deep breath and push myself to go deeper into my isolation room so that I'm hyperfocused. I've learned the best way to pull through a tough moment

is to concentrate on what you need to do next and nothing else. Imagine that there's a chalkboard in your isolation room on which only a single task can appear. It's not until you've completed it that the next one will show up.

When you're a doctor, a patient can die at your hands. While that's difficult enough to deal with, the next day, there's going to be other patients who don't care what happened the day before—they care about what's happening to them. The same is true for most high-pressure situations: No matter how bad the day before was, you need to learn to accept failure and regroup.

If you fall apart at everyone, you can't get things done. Just remind yourself that the people around you care more about what happens today than what happened yesterday. And then get the job done. ■



To order Kathy Magliato's memoir, *Heart Matters*, visit [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

## Why We Choke

*A new series of studies from the University of Chicago has identified the reasons people drop the ball in clutch moments. Researcher Sian Beilock, PhD, author of *Choke*, breaks it all down for us.*

### 1 We Over-think It

Obsessing about the speech you have to give at your sister's wedding can actually “paralyze” your brain, making it impossible for you to get the words out, no matter how much you've practiced. You can reverse the effects by humming to yourself for a few seconds to break the counterproductive thought pattern.

### 2 We Forget Things

Being under the gun steers our mental energy away from the part of our brain that processes info. As a result, we blank on the details we need in the moment, like where you put your keys when you have to drive a friend to the hospital. Force yourself to close your eyes and breathe in and out to reboot your mind.

### 3 Our Emotions Take Over

Worrying that you'll start to cry can make you do just that. When we stress about fulfilling a stereotype, it ties up the rational part of our brain, giving the emotional part free rein to wreak havoc. If you know you have a big-deal situation coming up, try to slip into the bathroom and let your emotions out before you face the music.