

## Choke with Sian Beilock

[00:00:00] **Sian Beilock:** what's so interesting about all these psychological skills is like it's pretty obvious when you're studying for a test or getting ready for an interview or a presentation there's like information you have to learn and you can learn but it's less sort of explicit the psychological tools you need that's just as important a piece of a puzzle as anything else

**Yael Schonbrun:** that was Sian Beilock on psychologists off the clock

**Diana Hill:** We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships work and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado.

I'm Dr. Diana Hill practicing in seaside, Santa Barbara, California.

**Yael Schonbrun:** From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of *Be Mighty* and *The Big Book Of Act Metaphors*.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn [00:01:00] here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Diana Hill:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

\ we're thrilled to be partnered with Praxis Continuing Education here at Psychologist's Off The Clock because we really value our own continuing education. And I know Jill you've participated in a number of Praxis events.

**Jill Stoddard:** I have. Praxis is my favorite. I think probably the most memorable was when I participated in an ACT Boot Camp after I'd already been learning and doing ACT for about 15 years. And I still got so much out of the training.

**Diana Hill:** I have a memory of Steve Hayes jumping off of a phone book to demonstrate how small your committed action can be. And sometimes I'll bring up that memory and use it with my clients. And that's probably from 10 years ago. Praxis also continues to evolve and change over time. It integrates new therapies as they come out.

it has trainings in Compassion Focused Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Radically Open DBT.

**Jill Stoddard:** If you go to our website at [www.offtheclockpsych.com](http://www.offtheclockpsych.com) and visit our [00:02:00] sponsorship page, you can get a coupon for \$25 off. So check it out.

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**Yael Schonbrun:** this is Yael Schonbrun airing live from my studio, AKA prerecorded from my closet with Jill Stoddard, to introduce an episode with Seon, Beilock the author of *Choke*, what the secrets of the brain reveal about getting it right when you have to, I am a lifelong choker. not like choking on a piece of food, but performing some optimally,

and the process of choking can really be driven by a lot of different factors, but one is, you know, a fear of failure and a sense that we're the only ones that are struggling to [00:03:00] perform well.

, one of the things that came up for me as we were having the conversation was thinking about the podcast and what a whole lot of editing goes on in the background. And I think it's an example of putting out a product that doesn't really reflect the reality and instead can sort of give this impression that we podcast co-hosts, just have an ease of speaking that we may not actually have.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. And you have to wonder how often people are listening to things like that comparing themselves because we're humans and that's what we do and thinking, wow. You know, these women are so smart and articulate and having no idea what's happening behind the scenes. and you know, the other thing I just thought of, as you were talking about this yet, Yael and maybe it's kind of ironic is.

When I first started on the podcast, which has been almost a year now, I was so nervous all the time. I mean, I felt on the verge of choking. I mean every intro, every episode, but then once I realized we [00:04:00] could edit the heck out of ourselves and make mistakes, it was like that pressure reduced.

So it's a little bit of an ironic twist. And you know, the other thing I was thinking related to this is about social media and technology, and she talks about how self-consciousness is a predictor of choking. And again, in this same vein with social media, we're constantly comparing ourselves. To other people's highlight reels.

And so it makes me wonder whether self-consciousness and therefore choking has increased as part of our more like tech savvy culture in the last decade or so.

**Yael Schonbrun:** . it does really kind of make you just naturally drop into that self conscious mode.

How many people have liked it? What are the responses? Are there any comments? Are there, are people sharing it? And that is just a part of how we evaluate the ways in which

we're getting by others. just coming back this idea of being more open about our failures and admitting that we edit ourselves a crap load behind the [00:05:00] scenes, I think.

Can give a little bit of perspective because that's what most people are doing, you know, when they post on social media or when the air, a podcast episode. And I think the more that we normalize the experience of stumbling over our words of being imperfect and the way that we present to the world, the easier it is to practice doing it.

And then the more skilled that we get, the more that you've done, podcasting, , , the more skilled you've gotten, the, less, Anxious you get part of it may be that, you know, you can edit the work that you've done. And part of it may really be that you're building the muscle of doing this well.

And so if we kind of open ourselves up to the discomfort, which is a process that we talk a lot about as therapists, this stronger, we get in the skills that we're trying to build. Even as we make mistakes, doing them.

**Jill Stoddard:** I think that's absolutely true. And one thing I've noticed that has nothing to do with editing is that I'm getting more willing to be personal, vulnerable, uncomfortable, the more I've done that, the more positive feedback we've gotten. So there's [00:06:00] really something to be said for allowing that humanness to come through, even in, you know, in all of its imperfections and how that common humanity helps connect us.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. So check out this episode, Sian Beilock talks about a whole host of really terrific tips to reduce choking and to optimize your performance in lots of different circumstances from interviews to athletics, to, podcasting. So we hope you enjoy it.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Sian Beilock became president of Barnard college in 2017 After spending 12 years as faculty at the university of Chicago her work as a cognitive scientist revolves around performance anxiety and reveal simple psychological strategies that can be used to ensure success in everything from test taking and public speaking to athletics and job interviews in 2010 she read the critically acclaimed book choke that we'll be talking about today And in 2015 she wrote How the Body Knows Its Mind. in 2017 she won the troll into war from the national Academy of sciences and [00:07:00] her recent Ted talk has been viewed more than 2 million times Welcome See ya

I'm in good company struggling with choking athletically academically and professionally So like for many of your book really struck home with me so much so that I've actually been talking a lot about it with my three boys all summer I can see choking evidence already in them And this morning I told them I was finally getting a chance to speak to the author of the book that I'd been talking about And they asked if I was worried that I would choke which of course made me more worried that I would joke So I actually I wanted to ask you I know you do a lot of public speaking but when you do really high pressure performances like say your Ted talk on the topic of choking how worried do you get that You'll choke

**Sian Beilock:** Worried and people always ask me why I was interested in this topic in the first place And I do A little bit of me search in addition to research right I'm interested Didn't why sometimes I haven't performed at my best And I think you know everyone gets worried in different situations whether it's performing in [00:08:00] front of a large crowd or even doing something simple like calculating the tip on a dinner bill while your friends are watching And the goal is not necessarily they need to get rid of all the worries Um but to learn how to funnel them into something productive And that's what I research What happens in those stressful situations when we are worried how do we make sure that we can put our best foot forward

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah so let's start at the beginning because choking is a term that gets used colloquially but you define it in a particular way How do you define it

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean I think we all have performance ups and downs There's no secret to that but what I'm really interested in and when I talk about choking I'm talking about worst performance men expected given what one knows or their skill level precisely because they feel pressure in a situation They feel pressure is really important because what could be pressure field to me my mom watches she may give a big talk which sometimes happen would probably not be pressure [00:09:00] filled to you Um so it really matters about how an individual interprets

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah so it it depends a little bit on the situation but you do in the book and and in your speaking engagements talk a bit about some Characteristics that make it more likely that you might choke both personal characteristics as well as the characteristics of the circumstance itself

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah well maybe actually before the personal characteristics I'll talk about the environmental ones Cause I think that's really important Right So any situation where people are watching you I'm a value weighting you where there's something on the line for how you perform whether they're positive or negative and where where there's expectations potentially historical expectations about how you prep Um so if I'm the only woman in a room um that could create expectations that I shouldn't succeed or that I don't have what it takes and and that can lead to choking Um and of course there's also peer pressure when others are depending on you [00:10:00] And we see that a lot in team situations So all of these things come together and they can really create pressure filled situation

**Yael Schonbrun:** that really struck home for me that it can even happen in situations that have friendly faces like your teammates or even like around friends who you care what they think about And so I think that that might be a surprising thing for folks to realize that choking can happen even when you're surrounded by people that you like

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah Um you know they example you'll notice the example I gave of my pressure situation is my mom watching Right Um you know when people care about us and we care about what they think we tend also to look at ourselves through their eyes And so it can make us really self conscious So one thing I talk a lot about with parents especially around kids in sports is that if you're going to go to their matches make sure that you also show up to a practice or two don't make the first thing where you're there as an audience

the important event um because getting used to people watching you that you care about and want to impress [00:11:00] um is part of getting used to playing under pressure

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah whenever we record introductions for these podcast episodes I record them with Co-hosts that I'm really good friends with And every single time as soon as that record button starts lights up I get a little anxious in my mind kind of goes blank So it's an interesting thing Cause I I do this regularly It's a repeated experience And yet I find myself sort of physiologically reacting the same way every single time So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about what's happening physiologically

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah you want to impress them Right And um you don't want to waste everyone's time and have to do it over five times And so yeah There's you want to perform well and I will say that um you know a little bit of stress is not a bad thing right If you didn't care at all that might be just as bad And so what my research shows and that of my colleagues is that a lot of it has to do with how you're interpreting that physiological response That's sweaty palms and beating heart I remind we [00:12:00] remind students that for example that if you didn't have that sweaty palms and beating heart you wouldn't be alive right Those are important things And actually those physiological responses are getting your body ready to perform So that beating heart is shunting blood to your brain So you can think And it turns out that research shows that when you remind people to re-interpret those bodily reactions as a sign they're ready to go rather as a sign that they're ready to fall and their face they actually perform better So the simple act of how you think about how you're reacting matters

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah and I think that that's such a cool mini intervention and it really fits in with a kind of therapeutic approach that I and my cohost do which is called acceptance and commitment therapy because it fits in with this idea of Being strategic in how you relate to what's happening internally and externally that we have not perfect control over what's happening internally but we have some control over how we interpret it And so I think your advice really falls in line with that which is to sort [00:13:00] of reinterpret it in this way That is More positive and more helpful this exact same physiological signal that your brain is getting that you know you're you're sort of preparing for something exciting or nerve wracking that you can decide which interpretation you land on

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah And it's almost like I love how you're talking about it It's almost like giving credit to your body for ramping up and now you have to figure out how to use it

**Yael Schonbrun:** So we had been talking a little bit about the environmental circumstances that can contribute to choking Um and I wonder too if there are some things that are common with people who are more likely to choke and I guess what I'm thinking of not to sort of lead the witness here is um is self-consciousness

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean self-consciousness is is one indicator and I think it's partly a tendency to worry about what other people are thinking but also to be highly aware of your own monitoring of yourself and No Oftentimes when we're doing things that [00:14:00] should just be left on autopilot um whether it's you know hitting a ball we've hit a hundred times or raising our hand to ask a question When we start paying too much attention to

what we're doing we can disrupt a fluent performance and being self conscious can be one mechanism by which we do that It's also true that people who are high performers who tend to strive for perfection can be likely to choke And again it's you know those people who want it most who want to succeed

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah And actually maybe you could even talk a little bit about the neurology behind that So what is happening in the brain when somebody is getting really concerned and how does that interfere with

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah So we a lot of it is interesting It happens even before you go into the high pressure event So we use a technique called functional magnetic resonance imaging or MRI Um it's really where you can put people inside I'm a hollow tube which is just a big magnet And you can for what areas of the brain are [00:15:00] working the hardest when they're doing all sorts of tasks solving math problems or getting ready for a public speech And what we show is that um areas of the brain that are really our neural alarm signals that go off and signs of threat they are really active right Yeah For a high pressure situation So right before people go into that Wharton event and then it has these downstream yeah Consequences and that it affects The front part of our brain the part that helps us focus our frontal cortex from doing its best when they're actually taking a test or giving a talk And so what we've interpreted these findings to mean is that a lot really rides on how we are right before we go into that impact So rather than worrying or doing what ifs or even cramming right before you step in to give that speech or that test or go onto the field um Distracting yourself a little bit something different taking your mind off of what you're about to step into can actually be really [00:16:00] important And this can happen in all sorts of ways Um we know that there's professional athletes who sing songs as they walk onto the field or do crossword puzzles right before you know my Trek Before I go into an important interview or speeches I read us weekly like something that just takes my mind off of what I'm about to do

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love that tip and it's it is kind of a counterintuitive tip Cause I had always that that it's you know take advantage of every moment before a big Interview or a big you know high pressure situation to prepare right Cause there's this emphasis and and you talk about that in your writing as well That being really highly prepared is important but that right before is actually the time to sort of let your body come down a little bit so that your brain can perform optimally

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah and it's hard to let go Like we want to cram up to the last moment but I will say for example there's lots of studies of students who test who study over a certain number of days versus students who cram right at the end And it turns out that [00:17:00] cramming can help you for a few minutes or mem remembering cursory things But if you want to remember anything longterm the cramp it's not so good and so we want to we have this tendency to want to work until the end And one way that I get over this is I talk about it as kind of cognitively offloading my thoughts and the way I do that as I write down like the three take home points of my talk right at the top of my talk or the three things I want to get across And it's there it's on a piece of paper I have it And it sort of gives me permission to stop and do something else for a couple of minutes to let my mind calm down and actually having with that with you Yeah During the interview um you know during a test even or even

during you know a talk gives you peace of mind if you yeah You sort of start panicking you think you're going blank just knowing that you have these three key points can be really helpful

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah Yeah I love that strategy I mean I I am a huge fan of writing down notes but [00:18:00] sometimes I write down too many notes and then I can get lost in the chaos of all my ideas So I love that idea of just simplifying it so that if you're sort of in the midst of a high pressure situation you don't have to figure anything complicated out It's just kind of simple and right in front of you

**Sian Beilock:** And it tends to be really helpful in important meetings where um you know lots of people are talking back and forth Then you have an agenda or things you want to get across and it can be nerve wracking to sort of figure out what you need to say when and there's something calming about just being able to look to those notes and seeing that reminding yourself those three points Are there even if your mind goes blank you know what you need to say

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah one other area that I wanted to just directly ask you is that you sort of there's sort of two messages So one is that choking can happen because we're overthinking this is paralysis by analysis but choking can also happen when we're not devoting enough attention to what we're doing

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean so the way I talk about it [00:19:00] is that you know when we're in pressure situations we worry we worry about the consequences What other people will think about us What's on the line And that worry um in itself can distract us if we're doing something where we need really to focus

**Yael Schonbrun:** and that's sort of when you're interrupting you're working what your capacity for working memory

**Sian Beilock:** yeah If you're doing something right to juggle numbers in your head or you know do something on the fly um reason on the fly those worries in itself can derail you It's like driving and talking on the cell phone which is not a good thing to do Even if it's hands free it's all about the attention right We only can pay attention to so much at one time But it's also true that certain aspects of what we do run on autopilot Like we can't pay attention to everything in our environment Like right now you're not paying attention to your pinky toe until I say it Right Um and oftentimes when we're doing skills that are pretty well learned talking um hitting a ball you know starting the at the top of the story speech that's been memorized we actually don't need to pay [00:20:00] attention to every step of what we're doing And when we worry about the situation that's consequences one of the the ways we try and react it's counterproductive is but we try and start controlling what we're And that's where we start paying too much attention to aspects of our performance That really should just be left on autopilot It happens a lot when we become self conscious When you know if someone comes into the room that we want to impress and then you know we've all had this feeling where all of a sudden we're thinking about every word coming out of our mouth Um or we're thinking overly thinking about what we're doing and it actually can disrupt



**Yael Schonbrun:** so it sounds like the the general tip is to try to just in high pressure situations find ways to relax and let things happen more naturally as opposed to controlling them And that that's true both for things that require muscle memory but also for more cognitively heavy lifting tasks like having a difficult conversation in an interview or something

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah the key is to focus on what's helpful Right And [00:21:00] so um what we know is that when we are panicking We tend to start focusing on things that are not helpful Right And so either that focusing on the fact that our body is panicked or we're doing these what ifs in our mind and that could also involve starting to control everything We're doing starting to think about how the other person is looking at us and what's coming out of our mouth and how we're sounding And we've all had these experiences where then all of a sudden we're not making any sense at all

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah And that kind of gets to an idea that you talk about extensively in your book how the body knows the mind this idea of embodied cognition So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the role of embodied in choking

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah embodied cognition is really the idea that our thinking and our ability to operate in the world is not something that just happens within the confines of our brain Um so All of these things we know about health and wellness that exercise can affect our mood that it changes how we feel Um that being [00:22:00] in nature can affect our ability to attend to what's going on in an important test All of this sort of displays the notion or exemplifies the notion that that our thinking isn't just happening in one place Um and that's really what embodied cognition is Um and so you know I urge people as they're thinking about high pressure situations or even you know during COVID being in front of their computer all day um we know like our ability to focus is like a muscle that wears out over time So what are some of the things that you can do to capitalize on the impact Um too yeah To perform better So for example there's research showing that just spending a couple of minutes in nature Yeah I'm looking at the leaves looking at the birds Taking a step back can help us get our focus Um and you know that's oftentimes it's really hard when we're stuck inside all day So being intentional about how we take those breaks about how we use them environment to our advantage I think is really important

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah [00:23:00] it that that example reminds me a lot of conversation that I had with the author of a book called rest And it was the idea that Our our brains do better when we sort of honor the limits and take breaks so that we can work focused for approximately an hour and a half to two hours And then it's really helpful for especially for more cognitive demanding kind of work to take a break And often out in nature is really the ideal place to do it

**Sian Beilock:** And I think it's important to remember that especially if we're hard driving like we have this tendency or inclination to S to tough it out to you know to bang our head against the wall until we get to the answer But there's a psychological phenomenon called the incubation effect actually shows that when people step away from a difficult task they're more likely to come back and be able to solve it And the idea is that when you step away um it's almost like rebooting a computer that has crashed right And it when you [00:24:00]



reboot it you get rid of dead ends and you're able to come and see things from a new a fresh perspective it's why we you know oftentimes figure out the problem that we were working on after we've slept or in the shower and I always talk about it It's why we come up with the best retort to our spouse 10 minutes after the fight

**Yael Schonbrun:** the worst

**Sian Beilock:** ability to step away I think we we often forget that even when we're not thinking about something we're psychologically working on that it's why we often learn We can learn through sleep because our brains are working on things when we're not actually focused on it

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah well I just love the advice that you know turf perform better take more breaks and it seems counterintuitive but it's actually incredibly effective

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah and it's hard to do I mean I think recognizing that we are we don't want to often with wine of finished So knowing this knowing the science now you have a tool right That you can use And the idea is to really be disciplined [00:25:00] in using it or your kids I mean I have kids and my nine year old is like you know a perfectionist like her mother and wants to just finish the homework even if like it's difficult she's tired and I we really have to talk a lot about taking a break and stepping back and doing something else and coming back to it

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah

**Sian Beilock:** It's not easy

**Yael Schonbrun:** so I write about the balance between work and family roles And one of the things that I like to talk about is that working parents often feel frustrated by not being able to finish a task before they need to go on to the other role But I think it actually provides this nice Sort of way to force you to take that break from one and to switch your brain off from that task and switch it onto something else to allow that incubation period as you're describing to happen Um so it can be frustrating but it it it is ultimately quite effective If we can have the discipline or or have our environmental [00:26:00] constraints set up that kind of pushes us to do that

**Sian Beilock:** That's about it right That we give ourselves a break for not finishing everything you know a hundred percent or perfectly I think that's an important part of it

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh yeah I love that You talk about compassion in in the world of trying to reduce choking because I think it is it's so critical Cause that negative self talk as you describe can actually make it much worse So can you actually talk a little bit about What are the recommendations that you give for how we talk to ourselves to help optimize our performance in our different roles

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean I talk a lot about the power of You know coaching ourselves at a distance and the the the evidence I give you know I think we all have it like the things that we say to ourselves we're so hard on ourselves And some of the stuff we say to ourselves we

would never say to a good friend trying to amp them up or support them And so we have to be compassionate with ourselves [00:27:00] and think about how you would talk to yourself as you were talking to him friend right Reminding them of why they should succeed Right Giving them evidence For what they've done in the past and what they're going to do in the future and building them up rather than building them down and even talking to yourself in the third person like that can be really important for giving yourself a little distance and and it's it is so important not just before an event but actually after because we know that we can get into these Psychological sort of self sabotaging rumination spins And I talk I talk about a phenomenon oftentimes called spotlighting um where we're so focused on what we did and picking it apart And it turns out that were way more focused on what we did than everyone else

**Yael Schonbrun:** right Yeah And I think that self critical voice wants to be helpful you know by pointing out what we did wrong so that we can do better Better but ultimately what happens is we get so disheartened [00:28:00] about every aspect of our performance that it can be hard to find that relaxed focused flow looking for an optimal performance

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah So I mean how would that voice talk to someone who's a good friend right To or even a child your child to like pump them up or to reflect on a situation and move forward we have to have the discipline and it's work and I talk about it as discipline to like To push ourselves forward with it rather than and sort of ruminating on the past

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love the advice to talk to yourself as you would to your own child or to a really good friend who has been struggling in a similar way to you how you've been struggling There's really interesting research on this that we are Much harsher with ourselves than we are even towards like our pets We're we're more careful in kind with their feelings than we are with our own

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah And it's like sort of catching yourself when you start to go down that spiral of like focusing on the negative Okay Can you [00:29:00] pull out one thing that's positive right If you if you were if you replaced yourself with your friend what would you say to them Like actually catching yourself in the moment and it's something you have to work on Like I think what's so interesting about all these psychological skills is like it's pretty obvious when you're studying for a test or getting ready for an interview or a presentation there's like information you have to learn and you can learn but it's less sort of explicit the psychological tools you need which is why we're really fascinated with it But that doesn't But it doesn't reduce the need to practice them And so you know if it's practicing that those psychological tools that help us put all the information and skills we have forward that's just as important a piece of a puzzle as anything else

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well I think that is such as strong push for practicing self compassion Cause it I think that's exactly right It is a skill and it's just as important as learning the information even though we might discount it in the kind of culture that we live in

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah And I [00:30:00] mentioned spotlighting but I think it's a really interesting phenomenon and it's when people know about it it can be really helpful So it's this idea that you know we're all we tend to remember and pay a lot more Attention to what we're doing

than to what other people are doing And so we're always worried that people have remembered things that we did wrong and look at us in a bad light And this especially seems to be especially true of women who tend to be very self-conscious about you know pleasing others Um there's a lot of great research on this showing that people are mostly paying it yeah Attention to themselves And so they actually don't remember all the things you did And and and you you we've all experienced this when you're with a group of friends maybe you said something you didn't want to say And later you say to one friend who I can't believe I said that and your friend is like I don't remember you saying that Or like you're in a meeting and you said something kind of you thought was foolish And then you say to a colleague Oh I probably shouldn't have said that And your colleague was like I don't remember I thought that was a great comment Right So the idea is that we're all pretty consumed with ourselves and we're not paying attention to it all the little things that someone else does that they're mortified about And just [00:31:00] remembering that is really important

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah I will admit that that's something that I actively work on Cause I'm I'm actually I fall into the category of highly self-conscious and I'll probably be self-conscious that I shared that on this podcast but um It's it's one of these things where because I know the research behind it I'm constantly reminding myself like nobody's paying as much attention to you as you are to yourself and everyone will forget it If you don't bring it up and apologize for it And I have to sort of bite me my tongue to say Oh was that you know what did you think of when I said that or no Did I was I off putting there Do I need to apologize

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah exactly I mean it's like such and it's a skill to practice and um you know in the spirit of you know self-revealing I like I I sometimes go out of my way to embarrass my nine year old when I'm dropping her off at school doing things I mean first of all it's just kind of fun for me

**Yael Schonbrun:** parenting has to be fun

**Sian Beilock:** Something that you gotta get some parenting fun [00:32:00] But second I kind of feel like gotta get used to being like a little embarrassed and like no one else remembers it And so I try and use it as a teaching moment

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love that

**Sian Beilock:** horrible but you know all like she's you know wants me to wait across the street while she goes into school and I'll I'll yell by and she's like mom no I'm like no one's paying attention

**Yael Schonbrun:** Ooh I love that I'm going to tell both my older boys that the author of this book on choke told me that I should practice embarrassing them They'll love it

**Sian Beilock:** Sometimes you have to think about yourself as a parent right And you have to do things that make you

**Diana Hill:** psychologist Off the Clock is happy to be partnered with Dr. Jud Brewer's app-based behavior change programs, Unwinding Anxiety, Eat Right Now, and To Quit. They offer step by step guidance to support you in making lasting change. Go to his website, [drjud.com/offtheclock](http://drjud.com/offtheclock) and enter the coupon code OFFTHECLOCK to get 20% [00:33:00] off his programs.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I also wanted to make sure that we talked about different prejudices And you write That the very act of asserting group differences in cognitive function such as working memory based on sex or race can create a stressful situation where the individual's being pigeonholed Are likely to perform below their abilities So this idea obviously has huge social justice implications but I wonder if you can explain how being stereotyped negatively can in and of itself diminished performance

**Sian Beilock:** So I talk about this idea as like evaluative apprehension And the idea is that If you remember we only have one so much ability to focus at one time right It's this limited capacity we want to focus on What's important And we want to focus on things we should and not what we shouldn't but now all of a sudden if you as a member of a minority group or a member of a group that's been stereotyped to not perform as well is also you are now also working I read about whether or not you're living up [00:34:00] Or down to a stereotype that takes attention away your ability to perform it's like a cognitive load right And that can really affect well you do And so understand standing that some people by nature of the groups that they're being identified with have that cognitive bias that's not a level playing field And so understanding that is really important So You can think about this as a manager or as a teacher Sure Like in meetings are you how are you working to take some of that cognitive load off Like if some people you know and this can be anything it can be men being a member of an underrepresented group It can be I'm also the new person on the team so how do you get rid of some of that Do you at meetings Are there people sitting at a big table and then some people who sit behind like Can you figure out how to take that load off of sort of rotating seats or assigning people in different ways Like what are the do some people not [00:35:00] speak at meetings Can you like make sure that everyone automatically has a chance to speak Are there different ways that you can get rid of some of the load Some people might feel in a particular situation And I think it's really important to always be thinking about that because These stereotypes and the inequalities that people bring into a room we can't just say that we're not acknowledging them or that we don't We think of everyone the same in the room We have to actively counter those inequalities with the babies

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah and the the research on this is just it's it's a really Startling I think to look at how that the effect of stereotypes can really cause a downturn in performance for people who are experiencing that stereotype threat And you can see the opposite I mean I

wonder if you could describe the Obama effect in this study that was done during Obama's run in 20 I think it was [00:36:00] 2008 actually

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean I think this idea is that you can also be lifted up by who is around you And part of that is seeing people like you succeeding Right And so there's great studies that I talk about in choke and then how the body knows it's mind really focused on this idea that when people are aware of individuals like them who are succeeding whether it's A girl seeing a female math teacher who's successful in that or an African American seeing this fantastic president who was African American it increases their your ability to perform well it's getting rid of some of that cognitive load and that's why representation and will those matter It's also the case And the research is very clear that having diverse team members both in lived experience and identity leads to better decisions of teams You don't get into group think you're more likely to have to defend an opinion to someone else which requires which causes you to read I think it and or to think about it better There's just the research is [00:37:00] very clear that these diverse groups make better decisions

**Yael Schonbrun:** And I wonder too if like having Duke diverse groups just helps reduce the likelihood of having stereotype threat because if you have a bunch of different people who all have different backgrounds and different ways of thinking about it then it's less likely for people to um divide in the way that we sometimes do

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean I think you're hitting on a metric of why diverse groups make better decisions It's that you know you're not coming into a situation or you know a meeting with preconceived notions about how everyone should act and that sort of lets down everyone's guard and It allows people to push in different ways to disagree but to ultimately come even if if the decision that or one predominant you prevails that view will be better thought out

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah And then I wa one of the recommendations that you give for [00:38:00] reducing the likelihood of choking under pressure that I loved is to recognize the diversity of skills and attributes that you have inside of yourself

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I think this also comes back to our conversation about parenting and work life balance and that you know we all have multiple self aspects So I'm a college president I Lou Barnard college at Columbia which is you know the premier institution focused on women's intellectual leadership in the country but I'm also a cognitive scientist I studied performance under stress and I'm a mom My friend And the idea is that you know we have better and worst days and yeah Specs in each of these areas of our lives And so being able to come home and hug one of my kids when I've had a bad day at work can be mentally Beneficial for me it's like a buffer in a way and actually focusing on those self aspects and focusing on what you value about yourself in each of those there's research showing that that can increase your positive [00:39:00] outlook that can make you feel better and and ultimately perform better

**Yael Schonbrun:** you know if you can recognize that you can get those kinds of experiences from different roles it can help you to feel that competency or that autonomy or that

connectedness that we're all looking for It doesn't have to just be you know on this one test for this one you know objective that you're trying to achieve

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah And also it helps you gain I think perspective is something you're talking about you know when there's a high pressure situation right is this one thing going to decide my life you know that could In some situations it will but not in many and it does take the pressure off of that one individual situation or circumstance or aspect of yourself

**Yael Schonbrun:** So I actually I wanted to welcome you to talk about your role as president of Barnard it's such a Beautiful way that you bring your your research to life by showing women in leadership [00:40:00] roles and modeling for your amazing students And I wonder you know was that something you consciously thought about when you took the position

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I mean I you know I before Barnard I was at the university of Chicago for 12 years and I was a faculty member and then executive vice provost And I was really You know Barnard was not I hadn't planned to take the step but the position came open And the idea that I could really think about affecting an entire institution of of women focused on on changing the world um in terms of the research I do and the importance of health and wellness was exciting to me And we're actually rolling out a lot of These ideas of course you know I know I'm not doing it alone by any means It's really the faculty and staff and students that are at Barnard But one thing that we started last year that I'm really proud of is a whole initiative around health and wellness called fuel Well do well And the [00:41:00] whole idea is that health and wellness is not just the responsibility of the counseling center or the our health center It's everyone's responsibility

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh I love

**Sian Beilock:** Staff So last year we trained all of our frontline workers from dining hall workers to resident hall to faculty about how to notice signs of mental distress in our students and and then we're putting we put in a lot of yeah support programs the idea that it's a culture of wellness and care and and that it's everyone's responsibility And then the second part of it is that You know Barnard is an academically excellent institution and our students work hard and strive hard but and so we've also put really pushed the idea that you can't be successful in the classroom or at work without being mentally healthy as well And so really trying to show that these two are really intertwined and and that's something that I'm really excited about I think You know we are are a [00:42:00] model for how other yeah Institutions can think about tackling health and wellness across the entire campus And that certainly comes right from my

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love that Yeah And I love how core your focus on psychology mental health is in performance because they're not distinct right Like working hard and pushing yourself to excellence does require a foundation of mental wellness And I love that You're sort of bringing that right into the programming and the day to day functioning of the college

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah And in all sorts of ways I mean we talk we've talked a little today But I talk in choke about you know how the power of failure and you know not being afraid of of

getting something wrong and how we can learn from it and and we sort of have put this in in different ways of Barnard One of my favorite things we did last year is we had these fail forward dinners where faculty would get together with a small group of students and talk about when they've failed or really screwed up And I think you know for high achieving students especially for [00:43:00] high achieving women you know there tends to be sort of a desire to not push or risk take outside one's comfort zone and it's really important to understand that everyone in leadership role has got they're not in a straight line Like I want every student to know that your major doesn't dictate your career path That it's okay to mess up in a class or do something that you have to have these failures your experiences to figure out where you're going

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm so glad that you said that I actually just recently had on as a guest justly he who wrote the gift of failure and this is a topic that's just near and dear to my heart And it kind of gets to the whole idea of like you know growth mindset that in order to grow and do better we have to be willing to Mess up and fall on our faces because that is actually how humans learn and grow most effectively But we do live in a culture and I think this is especially true for women for young women too where failure just feels [00:44:00] incredibly risky And I think I mean I don't know sort of what it's like on on the Barnard campus but I think worldwide that The exposure on social media just really makes failure and embarrassment feel that much more risky

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah Well first of all I will point out that Carol Dweck who you know um coined the growth mindset went to Barker Just

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh I didn't know that I know she's at Stanford now and I knew she went to burner That's so cool

**Sian Beilock:** Um but yeah I think you're right Like it's first of all we know that there's overall on average women tend to be less likely to use their past performance as evidence of success And I think this is a sign of being less likely to take a risk So a woman will only apply for a job if she has all of the qualifications where a man will apply If he has half a woman who gets a B in a class rates her ability to go on to the next class is much lower as a man who gets the same grade Um and women overall we tend to be very I'm [00:45:00] aware of what other people think and feel And of course I'm painting in broad strokes but these are on average And I think you know social media and being out there and being called on your every move really really Yeah Sort of exaggerate that And I worry in this time when people are coming from different places especially around issues of racial justice that there's like a fear to talk about that and a fear to to be seen as as not understanding or I'm not saying the right thing And I worry if we don't get around that if we if we aren't normalizing being uncomfortable these conversations we're not going to make the progress that we so desperately needed to me

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love that you're pointing that out And this reminds me of a conversation that I had with one of the other co-hosts on this show Diana and we were talking about that It's Less about making sure that we always say the right thing and more about the courage to have the uncomfortable conversations but it does take a lot of courage I'm just curious on the on a college campus where I think [00:46:00] you know political correctness is especially



important What kinds of things do you encourage for your students so that they don't just shut down in order not to say the wrong thing

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah Um you know one thing is we're we have so even on birds on campus who helps students faculty and staff deal with issues among other students faculty and staff but She just leading conversations last year and this year with our student government around difficult dialogue So I think it's practicing like anything else

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah

**Sian Beilock:** about how to talk to people who are different than you and come from really different lived experiences And I feel like A place like Barnard We we have a really diverse student body you know we're we're need-blind and we meet full financial need and I'm so proud of of the students we have but that's not enough just to have different students on campus We have to help students learn to talk to each other about these difficult issues So I think it really is putting structures in place whether it's learning how to have these [00:47:00] conversations having programs top down you know we're putting a whole series of programs together after the elections And you know one of our faculty members is a commentator on Fox news who will bring a particular perspective and other faculty members we'll we'll come at it from a more likely liberal side And I think it's so important to have these to model the different perspectives on what's happening

**Yael Schonbrun:** So you've offered throughout our conversation a lot of specific tips but one of the ones that you discuss a lot in choke is practice being uncomfortable And that's actually something that's really core to acceptance and commitment therapy Therapy too which is to sort of make space for discomfort so that you can act in line with your values And to me that That advice is directly in line with that which is you know assuming that the value is to like keep moving forward on social justice and keep working to understand better it Then the committed action would be to make space for [00:48:00] feeling uncomfortable as you do that kind of work to know that you're going to make mistakes Some things are going to come out awkwardly and maybe even you'll have to apologize for having said something but that the value he was to kind of keep moving forward even though it's uncomfortable

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah And I think you know especially on a college campus that is where this uncomfortableness should be encouraged right The classroom is the the model place to feel uncomfortable you know that doesn't mean you can't make spaces for like minded or you know people come from similar places to have conversations just with each other But the classroom in my mind is a place where it's like Being uncomfortable should be the modal experience

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah welcome to Barnard You're going to be uncomfortable it's really good advice And the reality is people who are successful are those that are okay with being uncomfortable and sort of doing the work Anyway The other thing [00:49:00] that kind of reminds me of in terms of advice that you give in the book is to think about what to say instead of what To avoid saying And I think that does kind of open you up to have more interesting open conversations even if once in a while you're going to say something that you'd rather strike from the record

**Sian Beilock:** Yeah I think that's really true And you know when we're in this sort of avoidance mentality we also are under this cognitive load We're monitoring everything And so you know being in a more sort of approach going forward thinking about the things you want to understand rather than what you want to avoid is so important You know this idea of practicing being uncomfortable is sort of at the heart of Barnard Anna Quinland is another famous alum and her date her quote that's all over Barnard is that um she says she majored in unafraid

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh I love that Can I just give another shout out to the previous president of Barnard Debra spar I feel like if you become president of Barnard you're sure to have a bestseller I loved her book wonder was it was really impactful for [00:50:00] me like ago yeah there's just a lot of amazing

so before I let you go I'm just curious if there are other core tips that you think listeners might really appreciate in terms of Strengthening their performance and reducing likelihood of choking under pressure What are your favorites

**Sian Beilock:** I think obviously my book choke is a great resource Um but I would just like I you know I'd just end by saying like we're not born chokers or threats right This is learning to succeed under pressure is a skill that you have to learn like anything else and it's about having this toolbox of psychological techniques It's about figuring out the ones that work for you and then implementing that And um if that's what's so interesting about I think what we both do is that There's really opportunities And we see it all the time in terms of growth and success It's just about figuring out what works and pushing on it

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah I think that is the perfect message to leave on that this is something that you can work [00:51:00] on You can always improve your ability to perform under pressure Um I'll just echo that the book is chock full of really awesome tips In fact tips that right before this interview and tips I'm sure I will continue to use because I'm I think performing under pressure is hard for Lots of people I also just have to give a shout out you put up this really terrific slide or maybe somebody else put it up but it was it was like this pie chart of people who are imposter syndrome So it was basically like everybody's imposter syndrome Is everybody a choker too So sometimes

**Sian Beilock:** Of course Yep Everyone has

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah So pick up this book and try out the tips cause they really do help Thank you so much Seon for joining me today This was wonderful

**Sian Beilock:** Oh really happy to be here Thanks for having

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