

Male athletes more likely to choke under pressure

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Male athletes are far more likely to choke under pressure than their female counterparts, according to researchers at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) as part of a study of men's and women's Grand Slam Tennis tournament play.

Their paper, Choking Under Pressure and Gender, examined these high-level athletic competitions, describing them as "a unique setting in which two professionals compete in a real-life contest with high monetary rewards," to assess how both men and women respond to competitive pressure in comparable situations.

"Our research showed that men consistently choke under competitive pressure, but with regard to women the results are mixed," says Dr. Mosi Rosenboim of BGU's Department of Management. "However, even if women show a drop in performance in the more crucial stages of the match, it is still about 50 percent less than that of men."

"The purpose of this study is to shed additional light on how men and women respond to competitive pressure and use its conclusions to better understand the [labor market](#)," says Dr. Danny Cohen-Zada of BGU's Department of Economics. "For example, our findings do not support the existing hypothesis that men earn more than women in similar jobs because they respond better than women to pressure."

"For this purpose, we use game-level [tennis](#) data on all the first sets of all four Grand Slam tournaments in 2010 and examine, within each tennis

match, whether and how much each gender deteriorates or improves at crucial stages of the match," says Dr. Cohen-Zada. "The analysis is based on 4,127 women's and 4,153 men's tennis games."

The study does, however, explain that caution should be exercised in applying its findings directly to the labor market.

"For one thing, while we analyzed how female tennis players respond to pressure in a contest that is homogeneous with regard to gender, in the labor market women are required to respond to competitive pressure in a different setting where, for example, they compete with men," says paper co-author Dr. Alex Krumer, of the Swiss Institute for Empirical Economic Research at the University of St. Gallen.

"In addition, tennis players may have different preferences and characteristics that may not necessarily make them a representative subject. Nonetheless, the fact that we have uncovered such robust evidence that women can respond better than men to competitive pressure calls for further investigation in other real-life tournament settings."

According to the researchers, stress influenced by an onset of heightened [cortisol levels](#) is one of the possible culprits, and cite other researchers' sports-centric studies that have already shown that high amounts of cortisol correlate with poor second serves in tennis and worse golf performance. "This literature indicates that in response to achievement challenges, cortisol levels increase more rapidly among men than among [women](#), and that high levels can harm the mind's critical abilities," says paper co-author Dr. Offer Moshe Shapir of the Center for Business Education and Research at NYU Shanghai.

More information: Choking Under Pressure and Gender, [DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.19742.74561](#)

Provided by American Associates, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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