

Under Pressure

The Chess Friends

The Man Benji, The Myth Sarang, and The Legend Vivi

Howdy! It's The Chess Friends!

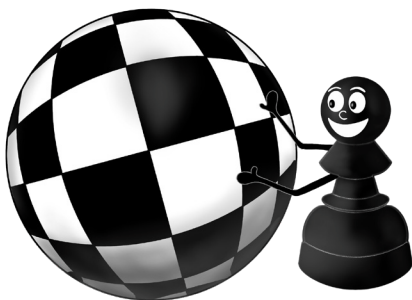
It is August already, and there's only a month left until school resumes! That means the pressure is on! Pressure to prepare for the next school year, pressure to cram as much chess training as you can before that, or pressure to savor the last summer month to its fullest!

Pressure is a very real part of life, and of chess. It can be a big thing; we all have been affected by it, and we all figured out how to handle it, or are trying to. In this article, we will talk about competitive pressure and how the three of us approach it in different ways. We will share mechanisms we use to deal with pressure in many aspects of our chess life and beyond, with the hope that some will resonate with you and help you in your chess journeys!

The Legend Vivaan

Bounce Back

Do I feel pressure? Of course I do. Everyone does. I get sad quite a bit when I do terribly at a tournament or miss a bunch of shots on the basketball court, but I **bounce back quickly**. Knowing that



there's always another game and being excited for the opportunity to play is the best way for me to face pressure.

When I go into a chess game or tournament, my goal is to **have fun and enjoy playing** a game that I love. This is the same every time I step onto the basketball court. When I blunder a piece or miss a shot, I immediately bounce back and say to myself, *there's still a lot of game to play*. This approach always helps me stay motivated to keep on pushing through.

When you become higher-rated in chess and get to face lower-rated players, you tend to feel more pressure as you might lose a lot more rating points if the game doesn't go your way. Often stronger players over-press in equal positions due to pressure and mess up because of this feeling. After a win, you should enjoy yourself a bit, but don't get too overconfident. After a loss, remember, *it doesn't mean you're a bad player*. Losses happen to everyone. A lot. Being able to bounce back is everything.

Chess and basketball players, and really all athletes, get tilted often and perform worse because they're tilted. Part of that is getting upset about what might have been. Reflection is important and a key aspect of learning and growth. That said, I prefer reflecting after a tournament after I've had some time to think about everything. Critically analyzing every game as soon as it happens or getting upset midgame when you realize you've missed something, doesn't help in the moment, it just gets you more tilted.

Play free. Trust your training. Be you. Enjoy your style. Always remember you love this game and are fortunate for the opportunity to play. Pressure is real.

It comes and goes. Don't let it stop you from being you and enjoying the game.

The Man Benji

Pressure Makes Diamonds

The right amount of pressure is a good thing. Even a useful thing. We can't live without pressure. That cozy gas blanket around our planet that, at sea level, applies 14.7 pounds of force per square inch, every single minute of every single hour, from every direction? Atmospheric pressure. Without it, everything would be bubbling up!

We also have useful pressure inside of us. That force that our blood applies to the walls of our arteries? Blood pressure. We need it to be just right, so we can think about our next chess move, or stroll around the chess playing hall.

But the kind of pressure we are talking about today is the harmful



pressure, the one that pins you down to your seat, replaces chess calculation in your head with unwanted thoughts, makes you want to quit. That pressure comes when you find yourself in a situation when the stakes are high, but the future is unknown, like in a wild chess position in a match for first place.

You know how to recognize that pressure. You might sense it physically, in your body. For example, it's your piano recital. You sit in the audience, surrounded by good sounding tunes, waiting for your turn, but you are worried about performing your own piece. You can't even enjoy the wonderful music because your heart is pounding so loudly you think someone forgot to turn off the metronome!

You might hear the pressure in your head. Imagine a tight volleyball match, and it's your turn to serve. If you miss, it is going to be game over for your team. Instead of thinking *I got this, I've done this thousands of times*, the only thought in your head is *what if I miss—what if I miss—what if I miss*. That's pressure talking.

Or you might feel the pressure. Like when you are in a big chess tournament, in sole first place, going into the last round, but if you lose now, someone else would take the top prize. Instead of feeling excited about your game, you feel anxious, and chess becomes no fun anymore.

How do you deal with this type of pressure that does you no good? Let me tell you a story.

It was 2023, my very first National Elementary Chess Championship, in Baltimore. I had to fly on an airplane to play chess, in a huge Convention Center that was more suited for racing car exhibits, not scholastic chess events! I hadn't seen so many chess tables in one place, so many chess players racing to get their games started. I was excited and a little anxious. *Just play your game*, my parents told me. *I guess I could get lost in this crowd and just play chess*, I thought. But the pairings had a different idea. In the first round, I got paired up against one of the top seeds, to play on an e-board, in a more spacious area separated by line dividers, near the trophies.

I couldn't hide in the crowd anymore, but what a great opportunity! When I got to my board, I started to have my doubts.

What if I blundered my queen? What if I sneezed really loudly? Worse, what if I spilled water on the fancy DGT board, frying the precious electronics? My palms were getting so sweaty that the danger of a blundered queen slipping from my hands was becoming real. I was super stressed, feeling the pressure like a pinned knight on the center of the board, questioning what I had signed myself up for.

But when the game started, I realized that I was playing on those same 64 squares, and it was just me, the chessboard, and the pieces. I let myself be in that moment, on those 64 squares, and the pressure changed. Unknowingly, I had unlocked my superpower: **tune out everything except for what lies on the chessboard**. Focus on the here and the now. For me, a new kind of pressure took over. Not the old, toxic one that makes you feel like you can barely move, but one that comes from the excitement of playing chess in the present! That pressure was an extra boost that helped me lock in. In the end, it was a fun game, and I went home with a story to tell and a new experience!

That game took place over three years ago. I lost it, but back then I learned a valuable lesson: **Pressure is my friend**. It always comes during tournaments, to power me to do the best I can. The key is to let go of the future, stop thinking about the results, about your ego, about winning. Of course, when we compete, whether it's chess or any other sport, we want to win. But that's not why we compete. We don't play chess because of the glory we imagine winning a chess tournament. We play chess because we love the game, it's fun, and we want to become the best players we can be!

So, when you're playing in a chess, or any kind of tournament, and the pressure starts to pile up, remember that **you love the game, and at that moment, that's all that matters!**

Billie Jean King, a legendary tennis player and the former world #1, who was no stranger to all sorts of pressure during her decorated competitive career, once said: **"Pressure is a privilege—it only comes to those who earn it."** I didn't get that at first, but then I thought: when we compete, we choose

this path, we train for that moment, we know it comes with pressure. Instead of chilling out on our couch, no pressure whatsoever, we practice hard, we put ourselves out there, into the unknown and unusual, where nothing is guaranteed. We work hard to experience this competitive pressure, so we should enjoy it! **"Pressure is the reward given to those who seek excellence,"** as Jim Murphy, a performance coach and the author of the [*Inner Excellence*](#) book writes.

So, on your competitive journey, with all outside and inside pressure, remember: you are here, you are brave, and that's already a big thing to be proud of!

You don't have to avoid pressure. Pressure is a good thing. Deep underground, 50 miles beneath the surface, **pressure makes diamonds**, the shiniest stone and the hardest material on Earth! Let the pressure turn you into a diamond, and nobody can crack you!

Now let's hear from Sarang about the ways you can take control of the pressure so you can shine like a diamond!

The Myth Sarang

Keep Calm and Play On

In chess, pressure is everywhere. Almost all chess players feel it often. Not going to lie, I tend to underperform



under pressure. First, I'll start with a few reasons I feel pressure on the board.

1. Time Trouble. When the clock gets low, even simple positions can feel stressful. A player may know the right ideas but still rush because the clock is ticking down very fast. That often leads to blunders, missed tactics, and costly mistakes.

2. High Stakes. Some games feel heavier because they affect a title, a rating, a team result, or a tournament standing. When the outcome matters a lot, players may put a lot of extra pressure on themselves. That can make them play more cautiously than usual or overthink moves that would normally be simple.

3. Stronger Opponents. Facing a higher-rated or very experienced opponent can create pressure before the game begins. A player may start expecting threats everywhere and doubt their own ideas. That can make them nervous, even in equal positions. I struggle with this a lot, so I usually just ignore my opponent's rating and sort of tune it out. Also, when "playing up," when you do get a better position, you often second guess yourself that you're winning.

4. Fear of Mistakes. Many players feel pressure because they do not want to blunder. The fear of one bad move can make them tense and overly careful. Sometimes, that caution can cause more mistakes because the player stops trusting their instincts and calculation.

5. Emotions Post Mistakes. A bad move, a missed tactic, or a losing position can shake a player's focus. Frustration and disappointment may lead to panic or "tilt," where the player stops thinking clearly. Once that happens, the pressure grows, and the game can slip away faster.

I used to struggle with this a lot... Until now! Here are some of the techniques to feel a lot less pressure!

One of the most effective tools for managing pressure I use is breathing. When you're stressed, your breathing becomes fast and shallow, which makes your brain feel rushed. Instead, try **controlled breathing**. Inhale for four counts, hold for four counts, and exhale for four counts. Repeat as often as you need. Another powerful method is using short mental resets during the game. After your opponent makes a move, don't immediately react. Sit back and take a deep breath.

Taking a **short walk** and drinking a **little water** are also techniques I use to reset and refresh. Just don't forget your calculations! Lots of strong players also use **visualization** techniques. Before tournaments, visualize tough positions and practice staying calm and finding good moves. This prepares your brain to handle real pressure situations, similar to how athletes train for big games or moments before they happen.

Another helpful way to combat pressure is the practice of building **good habits outside of games**. Regular exercise, like running, volleyball, basketball, tennis, or other sports, improves your ability to stay calm under stress. **Yoga and stretching** can also help with focus and breathing control, which I use often. Even practicing **timed puzzles** can simulate pressure and train your mind to stay steady.

Here's an example from last year. I was playing in a team tournament with my good friend Odbayar, my brother, and a couple of friends from the Midwest. Vivi was resting, as it was a very late round. Odbayar was on board one, I was on board three, and our Midwest friends were on boards 2 and 4. We were playing one of the top teams in our section. About an hour in, our Midwest friends drew and lost, putting us down 0.5–1.5. It was me and Odbayar. We had to win both games to secure a team victory.

We could have scored 1.5/2 to tie 2–2. In the tournament, if your opponent offered a draw, you could ask your team captain (in this case our dad) if we should take it or not. I was in a completely drawn rook endgame, and my opponent offered a draw. I was about to accept it as it looked like there was no way to win. I asked Captain Dad what to do, and he said: "Play." Here's where the pressure kicked in. A high-stakes moment. I had to win a dead drawn position for our team.

Under pressure, I was just wiggling my rook and king, making moves that did little to improve or worsen my position. When Dad said "play," I used my breathing techniques and tried to lock in and push for a win. I played active moves that could facilitate blunders, and my opponent made a mistake! I immediately capitalized on it, and it worked! I won! The match was tied 1.5–1.5! Odbayar had a huge attack against their strongest player and ended up winning too! We were all celebrating and excited after that!

Pressure is something you can feel very often during your games, but these practices on and off the board will help immensely in your games.

That's all for today, friends. We know that too much pressure can feel like a lot to handle, but hopefully, next time you feel it, you can turn that pressure from a foe to a friend, to help you in the moment! **Believe in yourself; you've got this!**

Peshka advises us that another good tool we can use to handle competitive pressure is a good knee-slapper! Here are a few for your enjoyment!

Why did the river sign up for the chess tournament?

Pier pressure!

Why did the tomato quit chess?

It was worried the pressure of competition would ketchup with it.

Why do soda cans play chess so well under pressure?

They know how to fizzle it out.

What technique do volcanoes use to handle chess pressure?

They vent.

Why do eggs never play chess?

They do not want to crack under pressure and get beaten!

Why are musicians so good at playing chess in time trouble?

They can perform well

[Under Pressure.](#)

Three Cheers, Fellow Future Master Chess Friends!

The Man Benji

The Myth Sarang

The Legend Vivaa