



Why People Block

Blocking is one of the most frequent and nagging problems facing conscientious or highly motivated people. On one occasion or another it will happen to everybody and only the frequency or the degree of embarrassment varies.

People often seek help in an effort to solve this kind of problem, whether it's an applicant anxious for a job, a person with a need to make a good impression, or a person taking a test.

Of course, there are no simple buttons to push. However, there are some aids that can help once the reason for blocking is identified.

THE BASIC REASON

Basically, people block for one general reason. They are so interested in the “effect” of what they are trying to do that they lose touch with what they are actually doing. The student taking his test is worried about the grade he'll get — not the content of the test. The job candidate is concerned with what the interviewer might be thinking and that interferes with his thinking about what he is saying. The hostess at a party is concerned with how everybody is going to like the party when she forgets her friend's last name.

In a sense, people block when they have other things on their minds that are very important to them, that they feel strongly about ... that increases their emotional concern.

EMOTION IS A KEY

It has been said that emotion is the deadly enemy of clear thinking. A slight increase in emotions constricts thinking ability a little bit ... a great deal of emotion can severely cripple the functioning of higher brain processes. Emotions, after all, are designed to increase physical responsiveness, not intellectual responsiveness. The extreme case happens when a person becomes so emotionally involved that he speaks and acts without knowing later what he did or said. In legal language this is cited as “temporary insanity” ... the legal definition of not knowing right from wrong. Blocking, of course, is not nearly so severe, but it can become so intense that a person may have difficulty in remembering his own name.

A CASE OF NERVES

The following explanation of the blocking process is theoretical, but useful in understanding the “body process.” Man has a central nervous system that consists of nerve fibers that innervate every muscle in his body. The fibers gather together and become the spinal cord. This in turn leads to the brain. At the top of the brain is the cerebral cortex. The cortex dictates to the central nervous system to such an extent that it is referred to as the voluntary nervous system. Any action of the body that we can consciously control ourselves is controlled by the cerebral cortex.

The cortex is the seat of higher mental processes. Man's learning, memory, intelligence, thinking, judgment, and wisdom are all stored there. When someone studies, for example, the material he learns is retained in the cortex. In any kind of a testing situation, the material is pulled from the cortex.

A human also has a second nervous system. Lying outside the spinal cord are huge clumps of nerve fibers. A few of them go to the spinal cord and are controlled by the brain. The great bulk of them go to the visceral organs — the lungs, diaphragm, stomach, intestines, heart, bladder, bowel, and other internal organs. A number of them go to the endocrine system including the pituitary, thyroid, and adrenal glands.

THE INVOLUNTARY NERVOUS SYSTEM

This second system is called the involuntary nervous system because it is not under a person's complete control. It is also referred to as the emotional nervous system. When a person experiences fright, anger, love, or some other emotional state, the involuntary system is called into action.

It changes brain waves, increases perspiration, respiration, pulse, and blood pressure — the physical mechanisms measured by the lie detector test. (Actually, the whole purpose of the lie detector tests, whether used in the criminal justice system or psychiatric institutions, is to measure underlying emotional changes.) It also affects digestion, and extreme emotions can even discharge the bowel or bladder.

Finally, and perhaps of most importance, the involuntary nervous system causes the endocrine glands to discharge their chemicals into the blood stream. These chemicals, called hormones, are very powerful. They are picked up by small blood vessels, carried into the main bloodstream, and finally into the brain. It is as though these endocrine chemicals act as a temporary toxic or poison to the brain, preventing it from fulfilling its function of clear thinking and reasoning.

OVERCOMING BLOCKING

The key to overcoming blocking is relaxation. Easier said than done? Yes, but several ideas may help.

First, one must remember that blocking is an increase in anxiety or emotion and anything that reduces anxiety will help relaxation and reduce the chance of blocking. A helpful tip is developing alternatives. If a person is highly concerned about the effect of what he is doing or its outcome, he is likely to block. For example, the applicant can prepare several alternatives to the job he is seeking (maybe other job possibilities) so that one particular interview isn't seen as a make-or-break opportunity. If he can afford to "blow" the interview in his own mind, he can afford to relax — if he can't, he won't relax.

Second, be prepared. A little preparation can reduce a lot of anxiety. A person seldom blocks on material that he's confident he knows. If he "thinks" that he knows, then he is kidding himself and when the chips are down he won't be able to kid himself any longer and anxiety will increase. A little practice to convince himself he does know it can go a long way to buying blocking insurance. If he won't practice, he is probably kidding himself.

AN EMOTIONAL BLOCK IS A FORM OF PANIC

It is the result of permitting the emotional system to get out of control and allowing it to dominate the brain. The best way to solve the problem is to be aware of its existence. A person has some warnings ahead of time that should be heeded. When he becomes tense or afraid, when he starts perspiring, or he starts feeling fear, he has to stop and think, "OK, which will it be? Am I going to let my emotions dictate to me or am I going to restore calm and answer questions on the basis of knowledge I have stored in my brain, and on the basis of my intelligence?"

REDUCING THE TENSION

Relaxing is a lot easier to say than it is to accomplish. There are, however, a few things which will relax tense muscles and allow a person to regain control over his thoughts and action. The easiest method of easing tension temporarily is taking several deep breaths. Slowly filling the lungs with air, then slowly letting it out again can prove relaxing. It does not need to be a noisy process or one that attracts attention.

Visualizing the end results of a tension-producing situation can also relieve the stress. The trick here is to imagine the worst that can happen and then think out alternatives to it. This relieves some of the pressure of, "This is it folks!" that creates blocking. Once an alternative plan is in view, nothing becomes all-important – there will be another chance.

SUMMARY

KEEP THE EMOTIONS UNDER CONTROL

Some great fighters maintain that when they go into the ring they do everything they can to get their opponent angry and emotionally aroused. A cool-headed opponent is a tough adversary. But if a fighter can get the other guy to lose his cool, sooner or later he'll drop his guard – and probably lose.

This happens to everyone at one time or another. The times that are the hardest to take are those when a person feels he has made the biggest fool of himself, and these are the times when he's let his emotions rule, dropped his guard, and wasn't thinking straight.

It should be apparent that there is a close relationship between internal self-confidence (a topic which was discussed in a previous monograph) and emotional blocking. The more sure a person is of himself, the less chance there is to block. The less confident he is, in spite of tremendous knowledge, the more likely it is that he will block.