



Watching elite athletes represent their countries as they strive to win medals is fun for adults and children alike. It's also an excellent opportunity to have conversations about hard work and how to handle intense pressure that comes from both internal and external sources.

When we start these discussions early, it helps children develop the lifelong skills they need to manage emotional reactions when stressed. Kids that effectively cope with challenges are more likely to enjoy the moment and focus on doing *their best* rather than shooting for perfection.

## Helping kids cope with pressure

Part of Olympian training includes handling the intense pressure of being in the spotlight while simultaneously showing incredible athleticism. These competitors are not alone in feeling the heat of performance pressure; sometimes children experience this, too. Teaching kids constructive ways to handle pressure does wonders for performance *and* mental health.

Here are three ways to teach kids how to relax in the moment:

**1. Be mindful.** Mindfulness is a great strategy for coping with pressure, as it involves focusing on the present moment instead of our worrying thoughts. Learning to focus on breathing, feelings, or surroundings can help kids “get out of their heads” and focus on the task at hand. **Kids of all ages can try mindfulness!** It should be practiced daily in order to keep your skills fresh!

**2. Relax your body.** Whether you're an athlete or not, stress affects your body, making your muscles tense. In a tough moment, try closing your eyes and scanning each part of your body from your toes to the top of your head. Practice diaphragmatic breathing (belly breathing) while focusing on relaxing areas of your body where you hold tension. Diaphragmatic breathing and muscle relaxation activate the parasympathetic nervous



system (PNS), which drops our blood pressure and slows our pulse, renewing our energy supplies that were reduced during stress.

**3. Reframe your thoughts.** In moments of intense pressure, we often catastrophize our thoughts: “I’m not good enough,” “I’ll never finish this,” “This is too hard for me.” Finding ways to make your inner voice work *for* instead of *against* you is easier than you might think. Help your child talk back to their negative thoughts by thinking of ways they have succeeded before, how they’ve handled obstacles in the past, and reminding themselves of the hard work they’ve put in to prepare. When you first try this strategy, it might help to write positive affirmations on index cards and carry them with you.

#### Starting the Conversation

These 11 conversation starters can help you and your family figure out what works best for handling pressure:

1. What's a situation that made you feel pressure or stress?
2. How do you know you are feeling pressure or stress? Does your body feel differently? Do you have certain thoughts going through your head?
3. Where you feeling pressure from inside yourself or from someone else?
4. What is your favorite way to reduce stress?
5. How do you talk to yourself when you make mistakes?
6. What do you say to a friend when they make a mistake?
7. What sort of music do you listen to when you want to relax?
8. Who is someone you can talk to when you feel pressure?
9. Do you think some pressure is good for people? Why or why not?
10. How do you help others who are under pressure?
11. What are some bad or unhealthy ways to feel less pressure?



**Click here** to download our Pressure Conversation Starters for a way you and your family can talk about handling pressure whenever it hits. Share how you are dealing with pressure on social media, using **#OnOurSleevesJax** and **#OnOurSleeves**.

Don't forget to share how you're using *On Our Sleeves* resources! Hit the reply button to tell us your *On Our Sleeves* story.

Sincerely,  
Wolfson Children's Hospital

The mission of *On Our Sleeves* is to provide every community in America access to free, evidence-informed educational resources necessary for breaking stigmas about child mental health and educating families and advocates. For more information, visit [OnOurSleeves.org](https://www.onoursleeves.org).

To access educational resources and revisit the mission of *On Our Sleeves*, visit [wolfsonchildrens.com/onoursleeves](https://www.wolfsonchildrens.com/onoursleeves).

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