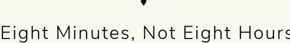
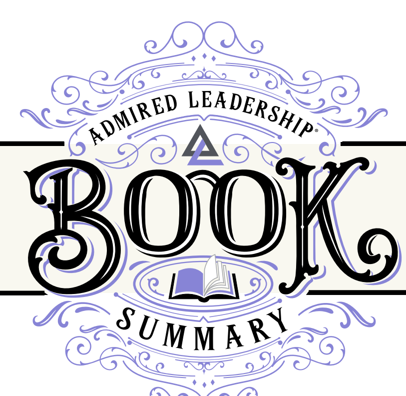

Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



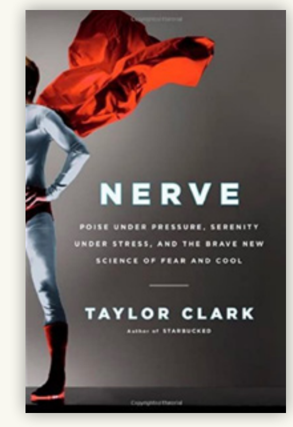
September 2022

Nerve

Poise Under Pressure, Serenity Under Stress, and the Brave New Science of Fear and Cool

BOOK AUTHORS: **TAYLOR CLARK**

Published 2011



Why do some people crumple up or choke in high-pressure situations while others dominate and excel? In his uplifting book Nerve, writer Taylor Clark explains the psychology behind how we handle fear. Then, he tells a series of real-life stories about people from all walks of life – including elite musicians, athletes, first responders, leaders, game show contestants, astronauts, and soldiers. These people successfully confronted everything from crippling stage fright to everyday phobias to life-or-death situations. The accounts repeatedly show that often those who seem to be the strongest and ablest are not people who are fearless from the start, but, instead, people who manage to confront, train, and use their fear to overcome and win. Clark leaves us with straightforward, practical, and sometimes surprising advice for moving past fear to confidence and success.

Key Quote

"The vast majority of what goes into handling fear, pressure, and stress with poise is directly under our control – it's the result of the path we walk through life. Do we avoid the things that scare us, or do we make a practice of seeking out and experiencing our fear?" (p. 281). — *Taylor Clark*

Key Points

The power of experience: Expert firefighters know how to react to a situation they've never seen before without being conscious that they are even making decisions. One veteran explains in the book, "What ten or fifteen years of experience buys you is that you build up a large repertoire of patterns, and even though you're not likely to see a situation that exactly matches one of your patterns, it'll be close enough most of the time. That's how experience expresses itself" (p. 118).

The power of calm: One emergency surgery department in Baltimore is so good that the murder rate in Baltimore is falling even as violent crime rises, because the team saves so many patients. The doctor leading the team attributes their efficacy to his ability to stay calm under pressure. The doctor has such a low level of anxiety that he is probably close to psychopathic, but it seems his calmness rubs off on team members, whom all create a calm climate that keeps people from panicking and making unnecessary mistakes (p. 93)

The power of choice: In WWII, fighter pilots reported higher job satisfaction than bomber pilots, even though they were much, much more likely to be killed. The autonomous nature of dog fighting provided the illusion of control. Bomber pilots had to stick to a specific route – they had less control – and were also killed in much lower numbers. But the illusion of choice and control in a situation (as with the fighter pilots) can make a person feel less anxious (p. 101).

The power of humor: Humor helps you adjust to a stressful situation because it rewires your brain to think of the stressor differently, as something that should be mocked rather than feared. Interviews of former POWs surprisingly revealed how humor helped them survive in bleak situations. In a particularly inspirational portion of the book, Taylor describes how former POWs would risk torture or isolation for a good joke. One story is told of the pranks and imaginary debates ***in the interrogation room*** staged by a POW in Vietnam named Colonel Gerald Venanzi, whose antics put him in solitary confinement but also bucked himself and his fellow prisoners up – and set his captors back on their heels (pp. 124-125).

The power of pressure: “Choking” happens when you become so conscious of your movements that you lose the muscle memory of experienced performance (whether the task is physical or intellectual), making an expert perform like a beginner. When the distraction of pressure enters in and divides your attention between the task and the fear, you lose the ease of performing the task. If you are a beginner, there is not much expertise to lose, but “the smarter you are, it turns out, the more susceptible you become to choking under pressure in mental tasks” (p. 148).

The accounts repeatedly show that often those who seem to be the strongest and ablest are not people who are fearless from the start, but, instead, people who manage to confront, train, and use their fear to overcome and win.

Training while under pressure is the best way to avoid choking when it matters. One winning contestant on the trivia game show ***Grand Slam*** trained by forcing himself to practice in a nerve-wracking way, recalling trivia facts loudly in public. He spent time reciting the names of presidents backward and calculating square roots in public places such as train stations and department stores, to the bemusement of onlookers. His goal was to desensitize himself from performing and being embarrassed in front of others. He went on to win the show handily, even being labeled “a machine” by the other contestant for his ability to keep focused and cool under pressure (p. 157).

Taylor also tells the story of a gifted cellist so overcome by stage fright that she turned down several scholarships to prestigious music conservatories. She overcame her crippling fear by confronting her anxiety in a lower-stakes situation – she started busking for money on the subway for strangers (p. 185). Her stage fright was mitigated, and she was able to perform again.

The power of discomfort as a distraction: “As the longtime Canadian Olympic basketball coach Jack Donohue memorably put it, ‘It’s not a case of getting rid of the butterflies. It’s a question of getting them to fly in formation” (p. 190). Pain or discomfort (such as one common example of advice for speakers: “grip the podium so forcefully that it’s painful”) can serve as a way to distract you from nerves, and some performers use this trick to distract them from anxiety and remove or mitigate stage fright.

The power of focusing outward: The easiest way to derail an expert is to ask them to look inward – to ***focus*** on what they would otherwise do naturally without thinking about it. In the heat of the game or event, inward attention – like focusing on your swing, your catch, your finger positions, etc. – “instantly turns experts into novices” (p. 207). Trying to “control a highly rehearsed skill” in the moment undermines your performance. Applying more vigor to “**effort-based** tasks like sprinting or weightlifting can boost performance” (p. 208). But skill-based tasks will be harmed.

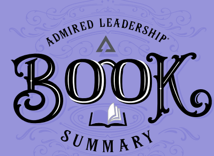
One veteran explains in the book, “What ten or fifteen years of experience buys you is that you build up a large repertoire of patterns, and even though you’re not likely to see a situation that exactly matches one of your patterns, it’ll be close enough most of the time. That’s how experience expresses itself”

The power of practice: A study found that no professional NBA players played better under pressure than they did at practice. It turns out that being “clutch” doesn’t mean that you perform better under pressure, just that you don’t choke (p. 218). You have to practice – you cannot say, “I will perform better on the day.” According to one combat expert, “In combat, you do not rise to the occasion – you sink to the level of your training” (p. 251).

The power of working *with* fear in life-or-death situations: In Korea, a soldier named Hector Cafferata shot between 36 and 100 enemies through a long night of assault when he was surrounded and seeking to defend himself and other wounded Marines. He said he didn’t give up because “I always felt that if you wanted my ass, you better bring your lunch” (p. 230). He added, “If I didn’t shoot them, they’d shoot me” (p. 232).

Astronaut Gordon Cooper survived because of the way he reacted under extreme pressure when his spacecraft met multiple system malfunctions. When asked if he felt fear or panic, he said, “I felt my options were rapidly decreasing” (p. 271). In a high-stress moment, he was ***focused on what was still possible to do next.***

Clark, Taylor (2011). ***Nerve:*** Poise Under Pressure, Serenity Under Stress, and the Brave New Science of Fear and Cool. New York: Little, Brown, and Company.



The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders

We work hard to stay abreast of the current writings on leadership, especially those books our clients are reading or have been recommended to read. As a benefit to our clients and to facilitate our own learning, the Admired Leadership team has long maintained a tradition of summarizing the newest books of interest to leaders. Better to read a summary for eight minutes before investing eight hours in the entire book. After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.