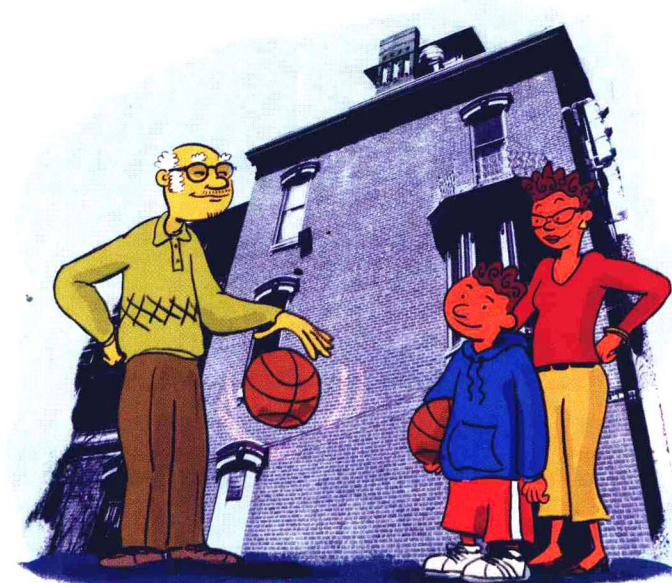


MIND OVER BASKETBALL

by Jane Weierbach
and Elizabeth Phillips-Hershey
illustrated by Charles Beyl



MIND OVER BASKETBALL



written by Jane Weierbach, Ph.D.,
and Elizabeth Phillips-Hershey, Ph.D.

illustrated by Charles Beyl

To Sam, who always plays tight D — *JW*
To Bob, who pays attention to what's happening around him — *EPH*
To all of my fellow gym rats who know the joy of making a good assist — *CB*

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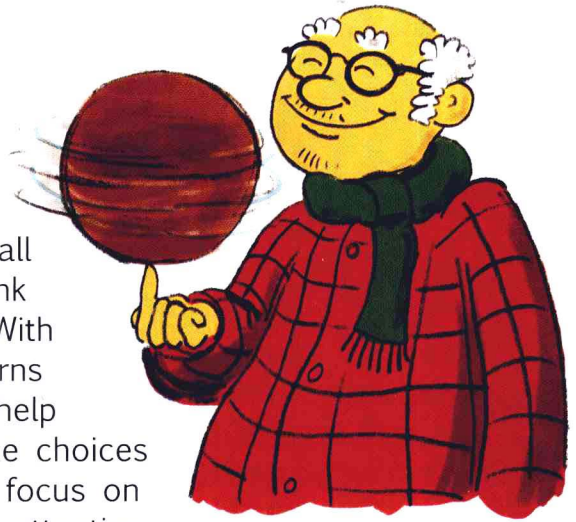


DEAR READER:

This story is about basketball and kids. It's not a "how to play" book, but a "how to handle the pressures" book. The pressures are the ones we all face, on or off the court. What are the pressures in your life? Maybe you're trying to make the team, or you're handling a heavy load of schoolwork. Maybe you're adjusting to important family changes or dealing with kids who act mean. Whatever the challenges, it may help to know you're not alone.

In *Mind Over Basketball*, Tuck is a kid who deals with similar frustrations. His parents are divorced, and he's had to move to a new town. Tuck lives to play basketball, but he's challenged by a bully who tries to keep him off the court and he can't practice for travel team tryouts. He feels hopeless about making the team, until he realizes that his new coach, Walton, has a few things to teach him.

Walton coaches Tuck about how to handle the stresses that have developed in his life. Stress feels like a big, messy ball of stuff inside you. That stuff might be a combination of worries, hurts, anger, and memories of crummy things that have happened. We all feel stress sometimes. When there is too much stress in our lives, our bodies or our minds (usually both) try to let us know. We may get headaches or stomach pains. We might feel tired all the time, or not be able to fall asleep at night. We might feel nervous or overwhelmed. We might have a short fuse and feel angry or frustrated more than we normally would. We might forget important things.



We can never erase all stress, but we can shrink it to a healthier level. With Walton's help, Tuck learns several strategies that help him keep his cool, make choices that work for him, and focus on the things that deserve attention.

Walton also teaches him how to keep his perspective so that little things don't become a bigger deal than they need to be. These are all skills that lower stress. They help us feel calmer, more confident, and more in control of ourselves. And they come in handy no matter what the stress is, no matter what court you're on.

Whether you are reading this book in a group, or with a parent, counselor, or coach, or on your own, you can learn Tuck's stress-busting strategies and use them in your own life. We invite you to **COACH YOURSELF TO HANDLE STRESS** by customizing and practicing the tools in the Coaching Guides between each chapter and by doing the On Your Own exercises at the end of the book. Just like in basketball, a good game plan and practice make the difference when the game begins.

You can do it!

Peace to you,

Jane Weierbach and
Elizabeth Phillips-Hershey

CAN THINGS GET ANY WORSE?

Tuck stepped on to the macadam court at 4th Street and Market. Cars whizzed by. He blew on his fingers and rubbed his hands together. Man, it was cold.

At least no one was here. He needed the practice. It felt good to have the basketball back in his hands. He dribbled the ball a couple of times and shot. It hit the backboard and flipped to the side. He caught it on the bounce and shot again. Miss.



“Hey, Jones, check out the new kid!”

Tuck turned. Two boys about a head taller than Tuck stood at the edge of the court.

“Whatcha doin’ here, loser?” the one in the red jacket asked. “Think you’re gonna play? No way. Not in my house.” He bounced his basketball a couple of times.

Tuck turned back to the net and took a shot. WHACK! A ball hit him on the arm. It stung.

“Hey, cut it out!” he said to the one who must be Jones. “It’s a free country. I can play here.”

The other kid slammed another ball at him. WHACK! “Hey, great!” the kid shouted. “A dodgeball game!”

Jones made a running lunge at Tuck and knocked him flat. He leaned over him with his fist in Tuck’s face. “We said *outta here*. You can’t even shoot!”

Tuck crab-crawled backward and sprang to his feet. Grabbing his basketball, he ran off, trying to hide the tears. He heard them snickering.



He hated this place.

He missed his home, his friends, his dad, and even his mom, who now worked long hours. He'd never be able to make the basketball travel team.

Life had been terrible since his parents split up: new town, new school, and this dump they called home. His dad lived so far away. No more shooting hoops out by the garage with him. SWISH, SWISH...his dad would tell stories about the Lincoln Nuggets, his high school team. SWISH, SWISH...he loved the story about their championship game. Dad had played forward. That's the position Tuck wanted to play, too.

Tuck hugged the ball to his chest. His heart pounded against it as he ran home. He didn't see the old man until he almost knocked him over. "Outta my way," he sobbed and kept running.

The old man watched him run up to the door of his row house. In the man's hands was a basketball.

Once inside, Tuck threw his jacket on the floor.

"My life stinks!" he fumed. "It's nothing but one big air ball." He kicked the door shut. "Some vacation!"



WHAT IS STRESS?

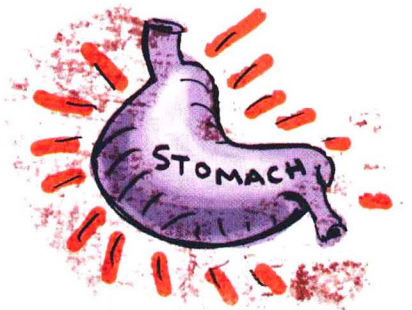
Are loose basketballs bouncing around in your head? Do you feel like life is one big air ball? Do you wonder whether you can deal with one more thing? Maybe life just keeps sending you another disappointment, failure, or pressure to handle. At least that's the way it feels.

We all feel stressed sometimes—sometimes a lot, sometimes a little. Stress is part of life, especially when something changes that you didn't expect. It also happens when you feel like you can't control what's happening to you.

Stress means that there is a big, messy ball of stuff inside you. That stuff might be a combination of worries, hurts, anger, or memories of crummy things that have happened. We can never erase all stress, but we can shrink stress to a healthier level.

When you're stressed out, your body has several ways of letting you know so that you can do something about it. Do you recognize any of these body stress signals?

- Headache
- Stomachache, no appetite, or overeating
- Tight muscles in your shoulders, neck, or jaw
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep



Your mind also has ways of telling you that you're stressed. Do you recognize any of these signals?

- Difficulty focusing on schoolwork, sports, or music lessons

- Forgetting directions or information that people have given you
- Worries about what has already happened or could happen in the future
- Being mad at yourself or criticizing yourself
- “Stuck” thoughts that you can’t get out of your head
- “Cluttered” thoughts about all the stuff you have to do
- Feeling tense and nervous
- Feeling frustrated much of the time
- Feeling overwhelmed

If you have many of the body or mind stress signals in this list, you may be experiencing a large amount of stress. Sometimes you’re not aware of how complicated your life is. Sometimes you don’t notice the signals that your mind and body are giving you.



You can reduce the stress that your mind and body signal. Listen to yourself. Be mindful. Pay attention and notice what’s going on inside you and around you. Take a few minutes to recognize how much you’re trying to handle. Give yourself credit. Be a patient friend to yourself.

In the chapters that follow, Walton teaches Tuck several stress-busting strategies that you too can learn once you begin to notice what your body and mind are telling you. These skills will help you relax, feel more confident and in control, and make decisions with good results. They will help you handle stress in every part of your life, no matter what court you’re playing on.



TAKE A BASKETBALL BREATH

“**H**oney, this is Walton,” said Tuck’s mom. “He’s a friend of your grandpa’s. They used to work together. I invited him to dinner.”

Tuck stared across the dinner table at the old man he’d almost knocked down.

“Fried chicken’s delicious!” Walton said, pointing a drumstick at Tuck. “So you’re a basketball player?”

“Was,” Tuck mumbled as he scooped up a spoonful of mashed potatoes.

“Basketball’s a great sport. My coaches used to say that it’s eighty percent mental and only twenty percent physical.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Tuck said.

Tuck turned to his mom. “Any chance we can go to the movies tomorrow night?”

“Maybe. Check what’s playing and we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

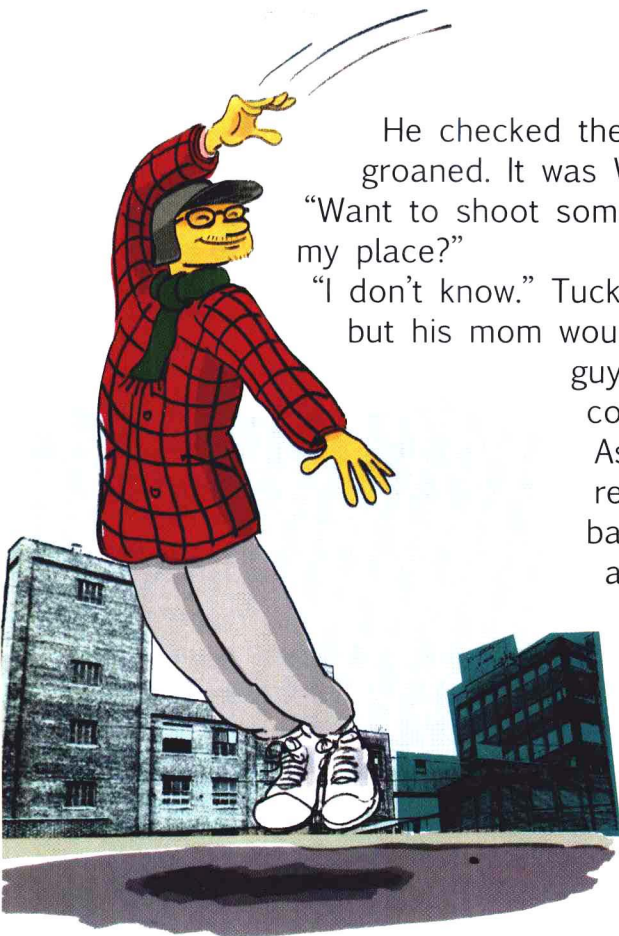
“Okay, I’ll look.” Tuck stood and picked up his dishes. “May I be excused? I think I’ll skip the chocolate cake.”

His mom sighed. “Sure, Tuck. Walton and I are going to visit for a while. I’ll say good night to you before I go to bed.”

Tuck glanced at Walton. “See ya.”

Walton waved. “Good night, Tuck.”

The next morning Tuck had just finished eating his cereal when he heard a knock at the front door.



He checked the peephole and groaned. It was Walton!
“Want to shoot some hoops over at my place?”

“I don’t know.” Tuck wanted to refuse, but his mom would have a fit. This old guy really thought he could play basketball? As Walton waited for a reply, he twirled the basketball on the tip of a finger. The ball spun for the longest time.

“Won’t hurt to give it a try,” Walton said. Tuck shrugged his shoulders and retrieved his jacket and ball.

Tuck walked a couple of paces behind as Walton limped ahead. He wore high tops. At least the old man knew good shoes. I just hope Jones and his friend don’t see me, Tuck thought.

Walton’s basketball hoop was nailed to the back of his house. He’d shoveled the snow away so there was room to shoot. Tuck dribbled and shot. Air ball. Next time he took careful aim. SWISH. He breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to see if Walton was looking.

Walton smiled. “Nice shot.”

Suddenly Walton dribbled the ball, spun, and lifted his arms into the air, his feet barely touching the ground. The ball left his hands in a perfect arc and then hung in the air. SWISH. Two points for the old man.

“Luck,” Tuck said to himself and tried to shoot again. Walton danced magic around him. When he was shooting, there was no limp, only smooth, graceful moves. Tuck realized that Walton must have spent years on a court.



Finally Tuck couldn't contain himself any longer. “How do you do it?”

“I breathe.”

Tuck snorted. “I breathe, too. No, I mean how do you shoot like that?”

“Seriously, I breathe.”

Walton and Tuck shot around a while longer.

“Watch my chest, Tuck. Watch my basketball breath.” Walton opened his jacket. As he breathed in, his chest expanded. When he breathed out, his chest went back to normal size. “I call this a basketball breath. Try it.”

Tuck laughed. “You gotta be kidding.”

“I'm not. Try it a couple of times.”

Tuck looked around. He didn't want anyone to see him doing this. He'd be laughed out of his new school before he'd even walked in the front door. He took a

big breath in and allowed his chest to expand, then he breathed out. In and out, in and out.

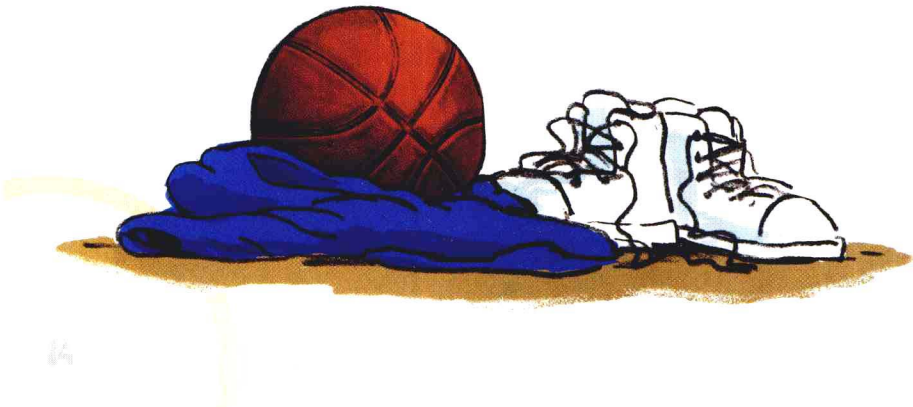
“Here’s how I breathe my way through a shot,” Walton added. “I breathe in as I’m picking up the basketball and lining it up, and I exhale slowly as I shoot the ball. My eyes are always on the basket. I picture the ball dropping through it, not even touching the rim. Try it.”

After a while Walton said, “I’m going inside. I’m cold. Feel free to stay and shoot.” He stomped his feet. “Practice it in your head tonight, too. Picture the ball going through the net as you breathe, over and over again.”

He limped to his backdoor steps and then looked over his shoulder at Tuck. “If you keep practicing it in your head, you’ll be a great shot.”

“Hey, Walton...um, thanks.” Tuck looked at his ball, then back at Walton. “Any chance you’d help me deal with Jones and that other kid? I really need some court time.”

“Tuck, that’s for you to handle. Since Jones’s dad left, he’s been hanging with some rough kids. But come back tomorrow, and I’ll give you a few tips.”



BECOME YOUR OWN COACH

What makes a good coach?

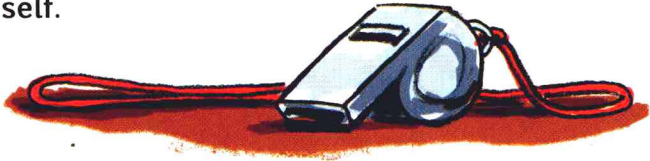
- A coach notices what works and what doesn't.
- A coach encourages players to learn new skills.
- A coach breaks challenges into small steps.
- A coach insists on practice.
- A coach encourages players to do things for themselves—to be their own coach.

As Walton coaches Tuck to breathe his way into a basketball shot, he is all these things. And as Tuck replays Walton's guidance in his head, he gradually learns to coach himself.

You can be your own coach, too.

Whether you're aiming for a spot on the team, a good grade, or breaking an old habit, coaching yourself means you slow down, consider choices, and make a good decision. You notice what works, and you're willing to try new things. When the job looks too big or too hard, you break it down into smaller steps and focus on them one at a time. You keep at it. And you'll get there.

You can even coach yourself to handle stress. Notice the signals in your mind and body, learn the techniques that Walton teaches Tuck for relaxing and centering his mind, and practice them—beginning with the basketball breath and visualization.



THE POWER OF THE BREATH

The breath is one of the most powerful tools we have for reducing tension and stress in both the mind and the body. It works in three ways:

- The breath brings oxygen into the brain and helps the brain focus, pay attention, and think more clearly.
- The breath brings oxygen to the body and helps the muscles relax.
- The breath slows the heart beat and creates calm.

Walton teaches Tuck a type of breath he calls the basketball breath. The basketball breath is a deep breath that helps you relax and focus your mind, no matter what you're working on.

Follow these steps to relax and focus with the basketball breath:

- Place your hand above your waist.
- Slowly take a full breath in through your nose.
- Focus your mind on your breath. Clear your mind of other thoughts as you imagine the air going all the way down to your belly and filling your chest from the bottom up.
- Feel your chest expand.
- Breathe out slowly. Notice that your hand moves as your breath moves.
- Return to your regular breath.

