

I suppose the target panic (what I understand as target panic) did not crop up in isolation. I went through a period of rapid improvement that ended in a collapse. I picked up some bad habits that led to my suddenly poor performance, and that that seems to have led to a discouraging cycle of unrealistic unmet expectations.

What I interpret as target panic was only part of my problems, but it became clear that target panic was an important part of the mix. The word "panic" is a funny word here because it didn't really describe the feeling. It was more like going stiff. When I would draw to anchor and start aiming, my body would stop. I couldn't get my string hand fully back to anchor, and I couldn't lift the bow to get the arrow on target. The end result was an un-aimed, usually low, shot with a floating anchor. It was like I could see the target, or point the bow, but not both.

Pulling back to anchor didn't seem like a strength issue. Without an arrow in the bow I felt like I could draw the bow without problems. I even did strength exercises with the bow to build up my strength; I felt like I had plenty of reserve to hold the string. But put an arrow in the bow, and I felt like I had less control. My hand just wouldn't get all the way back, and the string would remain floating in front of my nose. If I finally did get the string to pull back a little further (but still not far enough) the arrow would loose out of my control.

I also was unable to aim. With the arrow loaded and drawn (as far as I could) I just couldn't lift the bow to get the arrow on point. My arm just locked up, like the signals from my brain weren't getting there. When I tried a little harder to get the bow up to the aim point, the arrow would just fire on its own, invariably low. (Simply blank-baling without changing anything else seemed to make this worse.)

I still have traces of these feelings, but I now feel like I have it mostly under control. There were 3 or 4 things I did, pretty much all at once, to tackle the issue. First, I got lighter limbs. Second, I reworked my anchor, and third I got a clicker. I also managed to borrow an Astra shot trainer for a session, and I believe that helped as well.

The lighter (and oh by the way apparently much higher quality) limbs took some of the pressure off. I dropped down from 34# to 30#, with arrows to match. That didn't fix any habits, but made the next steps a little easier, I think.

I then worked on the worst bad habit, the floating anchor. I just stayed away from the archery range for a while and chose and practiced a new anchor. Instead of the previous, presumably correct anchor of bringing the string to the tip of my nose, I chose an anchor farther back along the side of my nose with my top finger touching the corner of my mouth. This is deeper and tighter against my face, and also simply different enough from what I did previously that I could avoid the muscle-memory of my broken anchor. So maybe a month of just drawing to anchor and blank-bale shooting, no more than 5 yards. This didn't do anything about the "can't lift the bow onto my aim point", but at least my draw and anchor was better. Trips to the archery range remained discouraging, though.

The next thing was clicker training. (I'm still in the midst of this.) My intent here was to eliminate the habit of collapsing while aiming, but it had an almost miraculous effect on the aiming itself. While shooting with the clicker, I had no problem whatsoever placing the arrow head solidly on my aim point. Somehow the clicker reconnected the brain signals to my bow arm and I was able to aim easily. The arrow also stopped releasing on its own, so that probably is a big part of why it works. I did this for a few weeks, no farther than 10 yards, at first blank bail, but mostly with a hunter target (a single bright spot to focus on).

The above, all together, took more than 3 months. I'm now still shooting with the clicker, but starting to wean myself off it. I think I will always warm up with the clicker, and use it for tuning. I can still feel the arrow has a bit of a mind of its own when I'm shooting without it, so occasional clicker training should keep things at bay.

Looking back, I think what triggered this episode was some actual form problems. These problems got in the way of improvement, and that in turn led to a form of performance anxiety that then seemed to go underground and show up as what I heard other people describe as target panic. Then, it took on a life of its own, feeding back on itself, overwhelming attempts to fix the form problems.

I think the recovery (so far) came from admitting that I suck, that it's my own damn fault, and that I can fix it. The things that helped the most for me were probably the new anchor and the clicker training. Both of these seemed to work around muscle memory which was under the control of the target panic, but they also fixed real problems. I have also avoided being aware of my score during shoots that I attended during this period, and this seems to have taken a little pressure off. And I did a lot of this retraining at the "bunny" targets (5, 10, 15 yards) until things felt much better.