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Stress & Performance: How much is just right?

By Tanja Gardner

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WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Experts in the stress management field have traditionally found it difficult to pinpoint how much stress is optimum. A very recent study, carried out by the University of Ohio, showed the relationship really depended on your definition of performance. In this study, subjects' ability to recall simple facts seemed to improve as their stress increased, while their ability to think flexibly and apply those facts to new situations deteriorated.

This is interesting for those of us who learned back in basic stress management theory that the relationship between stress and performance always followed an inverted 'U'-shaped curve. The top of this curve is our optimal stress level. Insufficient stress will leave us feeling bored, tired and lethargic. The closer our stress levels to that 'optimal stress' point, the more excited and enthused we become about our work and our lives. Once we get beyond that optimum level, however, things start going downhill fairly quickly. All manner of negative stress responses kick in, and our performance starts to decline.

Unfortunately, useful as both the new research and the old concept are in terms of general understanding, they're equally frustrating for those of us who are looking for practical ways to optimise our performance. Even if experts could agree on the relationship between stress and performance, it still wouldn't tell us where our own optimal levels stress lay, because stress responses are so individual.

FOCUSSING ON THE EFFECTS

If we want a practical guide to optimising our performance, it's probably more useful to step away from the research and redirect our focus. In the same way as we've been taught to 'know a tree by its fruit', perhaps the most practical way we discover our optimal stress is to look at the effects. We know that a limited level of stress can have positive effects on our performance, including:

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- Motivation to start new projects
- Motivation to finish them on time
- Motivation to produce higher quality work
- The feeling that comes with conceptualising tasks as challenges that can be met

At the same time, we also have well documented cases of too much stress leading to:

- Lack of concentration
- Procrastination and demotivation
- Anxiety and/or insomnia
- Emotional overreacting (irritability or tearfulness)

If we focus on these effects, we can identify our optimum stress level by looking at our current

performance and motivation levels. It's not always easy to be objective. Sometimes asking for a second opinion from a friend or colleague can help. Other times a little time spent reflecting - journaling or just thinking it through alone – may be all that's needed.

Either way, it's important to look at what stressors are present, and where performance and motivation levels are. It can also be helpful to look at whether there have been any noticeable shifts in either recently, and what events or changes were taking place at the same time (whether or not they felt like stressors at the time)

Once we have a feel for what stressors we've been facing, and how we're really performing, we're in a better position to understand the relationship between stress and performance in our lives. And once we understand that, ensuring the right level of stress for optimum performance becomes a matter of details.

Optimum Life's Tanja Gardner is a Stress Management Coach and Personal Trainer whose articles on holistic health, relaxation and spirituality have appeared in various media since 1999. Optimum Life is dedicated to providing fitness and stress management services to help clients all over the world achieve their optimum lives. For more information please visit check out

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Stress Management Is A Learned Technique!

Stress Performance: How much is just right?

By Ashish Jain

Here I will begin with something that happened many many years ago. It was when I attended my college in 1994 in Princeton.

When I saw him for the first time in the Class Room, I was a bit surprised. How could this sort of a human being who is typical of his Eastern reigns, be our "Stress Management" Professor? His stiff face seemed incapable of generating any smile! Lines appeared on his forehead, even before he was making efforts to start his career in our College with his first lecture on "Stress Management." I was a bit anxious and eager to enjoy his maiden performance!

I thought he would start with a big platitude on the subject of stress and how to manage it and all that! By quoting definitions and mentioning the names of famous psychologists.

He didn't do that.

It was very interesting how he propagated the subject of stress management for 21 century youth. I am reproducing his one-shot lecture on stress management. It helped me and it might help you as well.

"First off, I will give you example of my grandma— how she manages the stress! Curry for the night is her worry for the morning...and look, how nicely she carries the burden of stress and its management. She manages stress in her typical style, every day! You go by her words, think that she is stressed! But how crafty she is, in the domestic front!"

Stress management is a technique. It is winning over any tough situation, with the charm of your personality and deft handling of the situation. It is about meeting the challenges. Convert defeat into a victory!

Causes of stress may be many; for its management, no hard and fast rules can be prescribed. You have to deal with the stress, as per the demands of time and situation.

The reasons for stress may be:

1. Danger 2. Threat 3. Good or bad news 4. Illness 5. Perceptible changes in one's identification with the self 6. Any other strong external or internal stimuli

How to manage the stress? Before you think about managing the stress, you need to understand the bottom line of your stress. Its root cause! Its real cause! Only then you can think about the management of stress. For public consumption, you can project any cause, but you know what is really wrong with you. There are several ancillary tools to assist you in stress management.

These hints can help you in stress management:

1. Organize yourself in a methodical manner. 2. Develop a confidence, that you possess grit for conflict resolution. 3. Let your approach be positive. 4. Auto-suggestion— Talk to yourself. 5. Do pranayama (breathing exercises) and meditation. 6. Do light exercises regularly. 7. Do not over-exert.

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8. Keep a diet control. What you eat and how you eat is important!

In the end, what matters in stress management, is your strong will power. Have a will to outgrow the stress, and grow your will!

Ashish Jain writes about a number of different topics. For more information on stress management visit

<http://www.aboutstressmanagement.com>

and also visit the articles page:

<http://www.www.aboutstressmanagement.com/index.html>

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