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How does Stress Affect Performance?

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The relationship between stress and performance has been portrayed by the stress response curve created by Nixon P. in 1979. In addition, pressure, an important stressor, has also a crucial influence on an individual's response to stress.

One of the most noticeable effects of stress in one's life is the changes in his performance. While we can easily recognize the consequences of normal or excessive amounts of stress through mere observation, it's best to learn about the scientific relationship between stress and performance.

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Quiz Time!

Quiz:
Psychology 101 Part 2

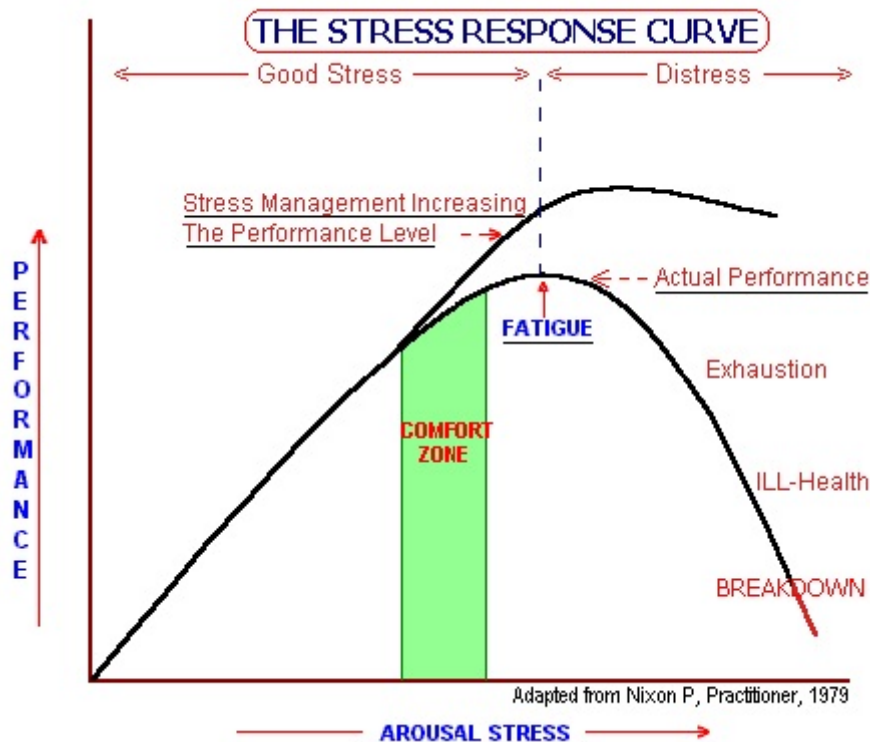
Quiz:
Psychology 101 Part 2

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The Stress Response Curve

To better understand the effects of stress to performance, Nixon, P. (1979) created the following graph of the stress performance curve explaining how stress affects performance in theoretical terms.



(Image from lesstress.net [1])

Figure 1: The Stress Response Curve

The curve shows that as the level of stress increases, the performance level also increases, to the point of eustress, or healthy tension. Near the point of fatigue, an identified area called the Comfort Zone indicates the range of stress levels that we can absolutely manage and facilitates good performance levels.

As stress begins to be perceived as overwhelming or excessive, the person reaches a fatigue point wherein the performance levels starts to decline. The ultimate end of overwhelming stress, called burnout, can be exhaustion, ill-health or breakdown.

Positive Effects

As shown by the graph, performance levels increase when stress management is effective. Stressors such as pressure and demands can facilitate better stress response and thus, higher levels of performance. For instance, a basketball player tries to run faster, shoot a three-point shot and succeeds in it because of the pressure he has obtained from the audience, the close scores and the tough opponents.

Another example is the short but adequate deadline given to an employee, which motivates and encourages her to work actively and efficiently on the project assigned to her. Yet another instance is an approaching major examination which leads a college student to double time on studying and reviewing of lessons.

Negative Effects

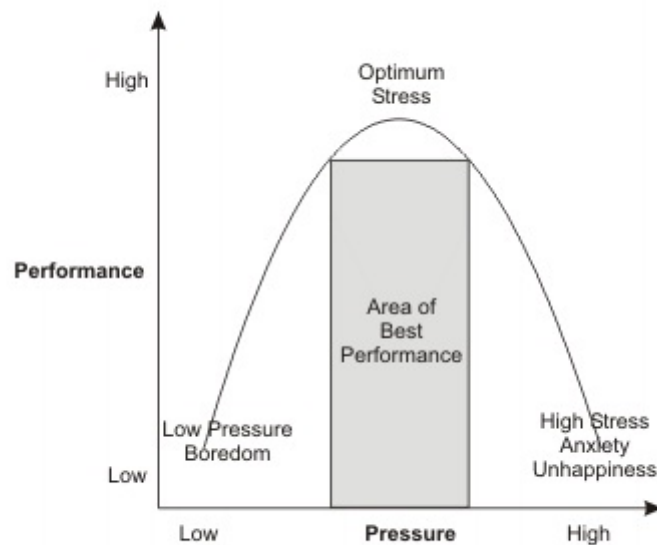
When stress is perceived as uncontrollable or unmanageable, the person begins to

experience a gradual to drastic decrease in performance levels, causing a decline in productivity and enthusiasm to respond to the stress.

For instance, a very tight deadline is given to an office employee who has to take care of her four children at home and a sick mother at the hospital. This overwhelming mix of situations, if not managed carefully and totally, will result to a poor performance at work, bad relationships with other members of the family, ill health, and burnout.

Pressure and Performance

Pressure, one of the significant life stressors, affects performance, as shown by the “Inverted-U” [2] graph below, which was created by Robert Yerkes and John Dodson in 1908.



The Inverted-U relationship between pressure and performance

(Image from [mindtools.com](https://www.mindtools.com) [3])

Figure 2: The Inverted-U Model or the Yerkes-Dodson Law

Looking at the left side of the graph, you will notice that low pressure or low levels of stress results to a person's stress response as “boredom” or unchallenging. Even if the task is of great importance, in the absence of an appropriate level of pressure, attention and concentration to perform the task are significantly low.

On the other hand, extreme levels of pressure doesn't mean high performance levels; rather, it's the same as the result from low pressure – low performance levels due to “unhappiness” or negative feelings due to overwhelming stress [4].

However, there's a region called the “area of best performance”. In this region, moderate pressure resulting to optimum stress or stress that is totally manageable leads to the highest level of performance.

Source URL: <https://explorable.com/how-does-stress-affect-performance>

Links

[1] <http://www.lesstress.net/stress-affect-performance.htm>

[2] <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/inverted-u.htm>

[3] <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/UnderstandStress/StressPerformance.htm>

[4] <https://explorable.com/warning-signs-of-burnout>