

ENHANCING RESILIENCE RESOURCE SERIES

How to deal with stress

STUDENT RESOURCE

What is resilience?

Resilience is important for your emotional, psychological and social wellbeing and for your ability to learn and perform. More specifically, resilience is positively associated with good mental health, happiness, optimism, coping with stress, persistence in the face of challenges, successful completion of a degree, career decision making and career adaptability. Resilience can be developed.

The role of stress

Stress occurs when you perceive that the demands placed on you exceed your ability to cope. Stress has both negative and positive consequences. While the negative consequences of stress are often discussed, the positive consequence should also be considered. Stress affects the prefrontal cortex which is involved in the regulation and execution of thought, emotions and behaviours such as judgement, flexibility and attention.

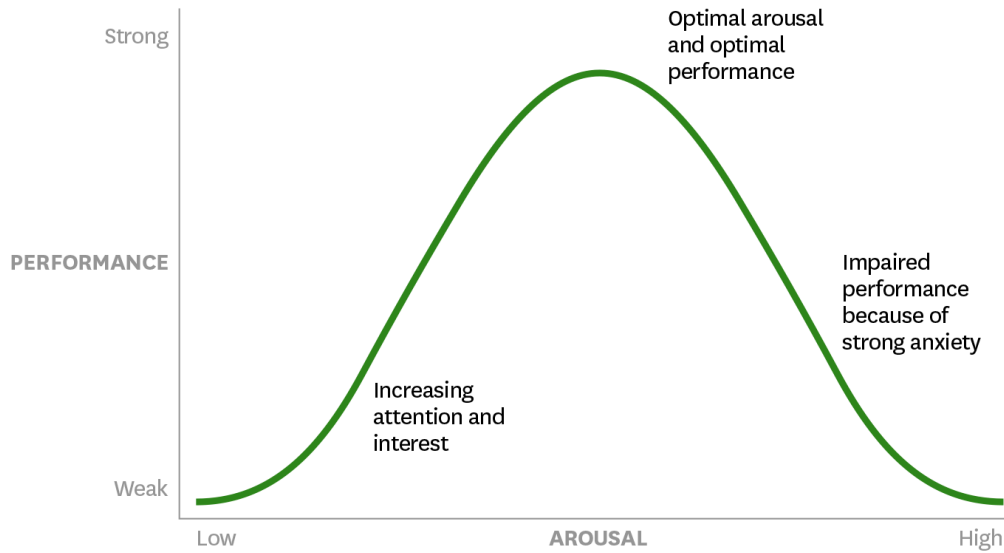
Furthermore, the prefrontal cortex inhibits interference from distracting internal and external stimuli thus enabling focus and concentration. The Yerkes – Dodson Law (1908, cited by Gino, 2016), depicted to the right, shows how students who experience too much stress or arousal can perform poorly on tasks: for example, misreading exam questions or having trouble recalling information. In contrast, insufficient stress leads to students being unchallenged, bored and lacking motivation.

The complexity and familiarity of a task must also be considered. This is because different activities require different levels of arousal for optimal performance. Difficult and/or unfamiliar tasks require lower levels of arousal for you to concentrate, while activities requiring persistence may require higher levels of arousal to keep you motivated. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that to optimise your learning and performance, some, but not too much, stress, is needed.



The Yerkes-Dodson Law

How anxiety affects performance.



Source: Francesca Gino. (2016, April 14). Are you too stressed to be productive? Or not stressed enough? Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2016/04/are-you-too-stressed-to-be-productive-or-not-stressed-enough>

Resilience Activity: How do you deal with stress?

1. Reflecting back over the past two or three months, think of a time when you felt that you were really stressed and that you were not coping. How did you deal with stress? Make some notes on this below.

2. Which of the following words best describes your typical response to stress?

- Give up – you succumb to the stressful situation and often feel defeated.
- Put up – you struggle with the stressful situation but you put up with it; stress has a negative impact on your sense of well-being.
- Bounce up – you fully recover from the stressful situation.
- Step up – you do whatever it takes to meet the challenge and grow to an even higher level of functioning and well-being than you experienced previously (we call this thriving).

3. How could I better deal with stress in the future?

Based on research, the American Psychological Association recommends five strategies to cope with excessive stress. Which of the following could you try?

- 1. Take a break from the stressor, even for just for 20 minutes (e.g. listen to music, talk to a friend).
- 2. Do some exercise as this has positive effects on both your mind and body.
- 3. Smile and laugh to help relieve tension.
- 4. Get social support such as speaking to a friend you trust.
- 5. Meditate to relax and focus your mind and body, or just focus on deep breathing.

Another useful strategy is to reframe stress from a positive perspective. For example, when feeling nervous in a new situation, instead of thinking “I’m stressed”, think to yourself “I’m feeling excited”, or “I’m excited about this new challenge”.

This resource was developed by Margo Brewer (Curtin University) and Dawn Bennett (Bond University)