

STRESS

Are You Too Stressed to Be Productive? Or Not Stressed Enough?

by Francesca Gino

APRIL 14, 2016

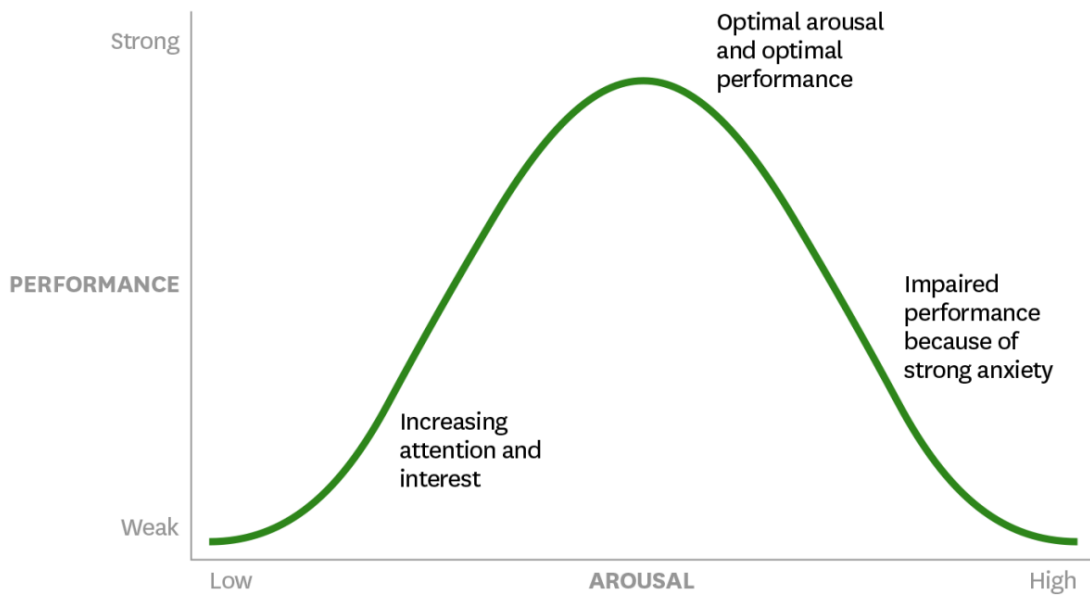


If you're like me, you often ask yourself how you can get more work done in a day. How can you best boost your productivity? I always assumed that if I could just reduce any stress I was facing, my productivity would rise. But my intuition was, in fact, wrong. It's true that stress can be a health risk, and that we're often encouraged to avoid it if we want to live happy, productive, and long lives. But research suggests that some stress can actually be beneficial to performance.

Take a look at the picture below. According to what is known as "The Yerkes-Dodson law," performance increases with physiological or mental arousal (stress) but only up to a point. When the level of stress becomes too high, performance decreases.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law

How anxiety affects performance.



SOURCE ROBERT M. YERKES AND JOHN D. DODSON

© HBR.ORG

There's more: The shape of the curve varies based on the complexity and familiarity of the task. Different tasks require different levels of arousal for optimal performance, research has found. For example, difficult or unfamiliar tasks require lower levels of arousal to facilitate concentration; by contrast, you may better perform tasks demanding stamina or persistence with higher levels of arousal to induce and increase motivation.

Given this relationship between stress and performance, it's probably beneficial to understand how much stress you are currently experiencing at work. If you are curious, take the following test (which is adapted from the commonly used Perceived Stress Scale, created by Sheldon Cohen, Tom Kamarck, and Robin Mermelstein).

Perceived Stress Scale

Click "Continue" to take the test.

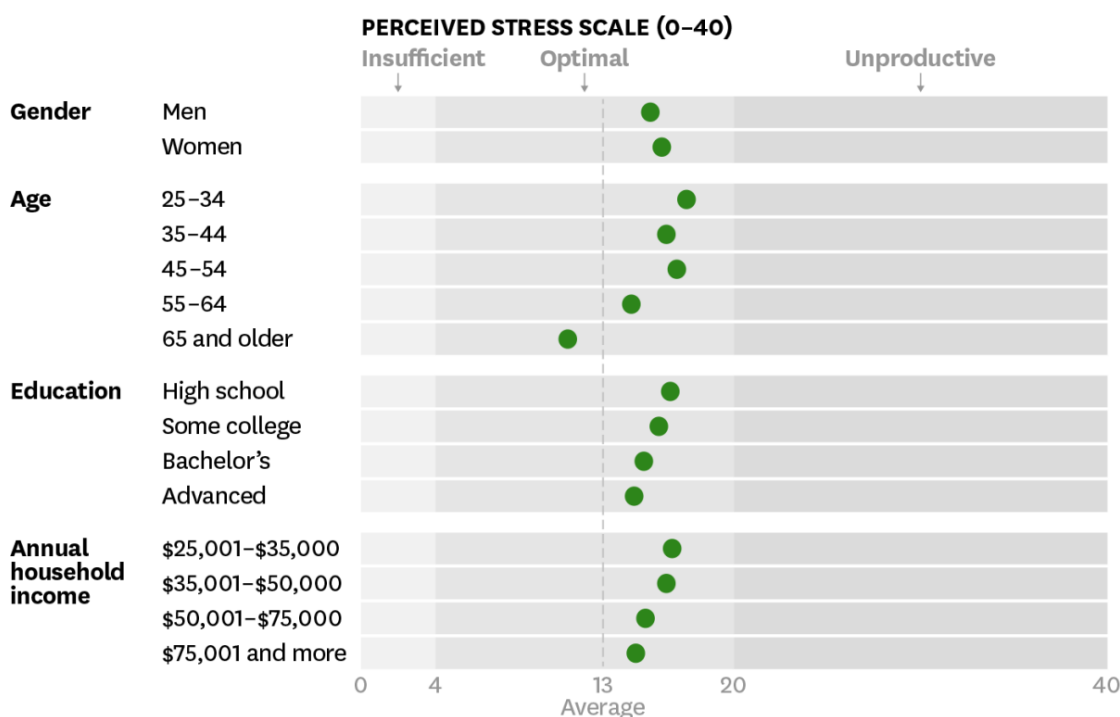
CONTINUE

Higher scores, as you might guess, correspond to higher levels of stress. Based on my use of this test in executive education classrooms and in research conducted with other groups, scores around 13 are considered average. Usually, scores in this range indicate that your attention and interest are at the proper level, allowing you to be productive at work. Referring to the Yerkes-Dodson law, such scores generally correspond to an optimal level of arousal and thus performance.

But if your score is much higher or much lower, you're likely experiencing stress in a way that is detrimental to productivity. In particular, scores of 20 or more are generally considered to indicate an unproductive level of stress. But even scores that indicate low levels of stress—commonly, scores of 4 or lower—could be problematic since they signal an insufficient level of arousal to keep you engaged in your work. If this is the case, try to find healthy ways of raising your stress by taking on more challenging tasks or responsibilities. Increasing stress may feel counterintuitive, but remember that, according to the research, increasing arousal also corresponds to increasing attention and interest (up to a point).

For comparison, here are some average scores from research conducted using this scale:

Average Stress Levels by Gender, Age, Education, and Income



SOURCE SHELDON COHEN AND DENISE JANICKI-DEVERTS

© HBR.ORG

If your score approaches or exceeds 20, here are some strategies that may help you reduce stress to a more productive level:

Increase your control. One simple solution to lowering stress is to find more ways to increase your control over the work you do. People tend to believe that high-level positions bring a lot of stress, but research suggests just the opposite: Leaders with higher levels of responsibility experience lower stress levels than those with less on their shoulders. This is because leaders have more control over their activities. Independent of where you sit in the organizational hierarchy, you may have ways to increase your sense of control—namely, by focusing on aspects of your work where you can make choices (for example, choosing one project over another or simply choosing the order in which you answer e-mails).

Find more opportunities to be authentic. Evidence suggests that people often experience feelings of inauthenticity at work. That is, they conform to the opinions of colleagues rather than voicing their own, and they go with others' flow rather than setting their own agenda. This, my research suggests, has important implications for your stress level and performance. When people behave in inauthentic ways, they experience higher levels of anxiety than when they are simply themselves. So, try to find ways to express who you are at work, such as offering to share your unique talents or decorating your office to reflect who you are.

Use rituals. Basketball superstar Michael Jordan wore his North Carolina shorts underneath his Chicago Bulls shorts at every game; Curtis Martin of the New York Jets reads Psalm 91 before every game; and Wade Boggs, as third baseman for the Boston Red Sox, ate chicken before each game and took batting practice at exactly 5:17 p.m., fielded exactly 117 ground balls, and ran sprints at precisely 7:17 p.m. These rituals may sound strange, but they can actually improve performance.

In one recent experiment, people asked to hit a golf ball into a hole received either a so-called “lucky” golf ball or an ordinary golf ball. In another experiment, participants performing a motor dexterity task (placing 36 small balls in 36 holes by tilting the plastic cube containing them) were either asked to simply start the game or heard the researcher say they would cross their fingers for them. The superstitious rituals enhanced people's confidence in their abilities, motivated greater effort – and improved subsequent performance.

Similarly, research in sports psychology demonstrates the performance benefits of pre-performance routines, from improving attention and execution to increasing emotional stability and confidence. And recently, my colleagues and I have found that when people engage in rituals before undertaking high-stakes tasks, they feel less anxious and stressed about the task and end up performing better as a result.

A moderate amount of stress may put you in the right mindset to tackle your work. But if you are feeling overwhelmed, I hope you'll try out some of these strategies to not only improve your productivity but also to increase your happiness.



Francesca Gino is a professor at Harvard Business School, a faculty affiliate of the Behavioral Insights Group at Harvard Kennedy School, and the author of *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013). She cochairs an HBS executive education program on applying behavioral economics to organizational problems. Twitter: @francescagino.

This article is about **STRESS**

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: [PRODUCTIVITY](#) | [MANAGING YOURSELF](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

11 COMMENTS

Isis Cardoza 2 months ago

I got a 14 thats good huh? i was like DAM!