

The Secret to Peak Performance Under Pressure

The working environment can be a challenging and high-pressure place. Without the correct techniques this pressure can lead to adverse health complaints like stress and burnout. However, when we use the right mechanisms and mindset, times of pressure can help optimise our performance and thrive, helping us to use perseverance and determination to reach our goals.

"A diamond is a chunk of coal that did well under pressure." - Henry Kissinger

Recognize the stress response

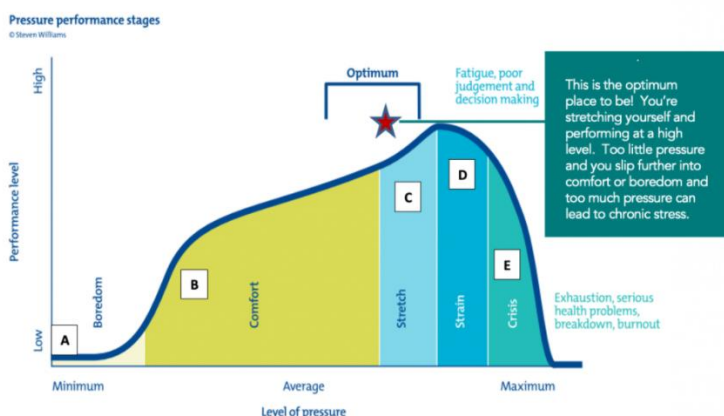
- Stress is the body's physiological changes in **response to a perceived threat**, commonly known as the **'fight or flight'** response
- Although more commonly associated with enabling us to survive, this response **can be triggered by less life-threatening events** that we experience day-to-day
- The more we are exposed to these stressors, the more active our fight or flight response becomes until we are constantly 'preparing for battle' and **chronically stressed**.
- **This means we perceive high pressure situations as negative**


When we recognize a threat, the stress response gets activated to prime us for action. The body is primed to react and releases stress hormones. The body gets prepared to deal with the threat and either fight, or run. After the threat goes away the body takes some time to return to normal. The problem is that the stress response is not designed to be a constant state of being.

Under stress we react to a trigger, rather than choosing how to respond. Our body is primed to instantly fight or flee from the threat. Our body is swamped with hormones which shut down every other system in the body. The priority is dealing with the trigger which is advantageous when faced with a physical threat. It becomes problematic when it is a different kind of trigger, like those we face at work. When we take a moment to breathe and become mindful of our environment, we become in sync with our bodies. This gives us the time and space to think with clarity and objectivity. This allows us to change our physiological state and think calmly how to tackle the situation

How pressure impacts performance

The Yerkes-Dodson Law is a really good way of starting to gain a more proactive approach to mapping where one may be and what needs to be done to make our response to pressure more productive.





At point A there is low pressure and low performance – this is where we are bored. Work is mundane. Performance is at a low level. No pressure placed on us and we stagnate. When pressure begins to increase and our performance improves, we move into the comfort zone. There's a good solid balance between the level of pressure placed upon us and our performance level. The things we are tasked with we are comfortable with and confident of meeting objectives. The pressure placed upon us is manageable. It is good to move into comfort zone temporarily as it allows us to slow down, but this isn't where any magic happens. This isn't an optimal place to be in relation to our performance. What we really need to increase the pressure and step out of our comfort zone for optimal performance. So, this is where we move to the stretch zone and start to thrive. We are highly focused, highly motivated, highly engaged, confident and feel positive, enjoying what we are doing. This red point is where we are thriving and can feel ourselves excelling. It is very easy to see people at this point, their enjoyment and motivation are visibly palpable. They are confident and all this is great. There is an adrenaline high, and we feel good about ourselves and our achievements. But it is also quite addictive because we feel good. And it feels good to feel good about ourselves. So, the problem here is that we try to stay there and keep operating at that same level of pressure. But that is not sustainable. This is where we start to see problems occur.

So, what we want to do is be at the optimal level and then also recognize when we need to apply the brake and step back into the comfort zone and slow down for a bit. We need to have measures in place to temporarily move ourselves back into our comfort zone, to slow down, so that we can then have the energy to push ourselves again when we need to.

But if people don't move out of this peak point and keep operating there, strain starts to emerge. We start to see fatigue because it is tiring to keep operating at that level and because of the impact that stress hormones have upon us. This affects our judgement and decision making and we become quite blinkered. So, we need to start thinking about how to reverse this decline because what is really powerful with this visual is the fact that the further, we move along in the diagram we start to see this steep descent and how rapidly it can occur. If you think of this curve as indicative of someone's journey you see that if they start moving down, they will need to climb back up to get into a healthier zone, and the more they move down, the steeper the descent, and the harder it will be to climb back up. And if we don't, over time, because of the ongoing impact of the stress hormones within our body on a prolonged basis, we start to see problems emerge – serious health problems, breakdowns and burnouts.

Changing the way we perceive stress is important

"People who experienced a lot of stress in the previous year had a 43% increased risk of dying. But only true for the people who believed that stress is harmful for health.

People who experienced a lot of stress but did not view it as harmful were no more likely to die. In fact, they had the lowest risk of dying of anyone in the study, including people who had relatively little stress.

When you change your mind about stress, you can change your body's response to stress."

Kelly McGonigal

Stress means you care and that you are prepared and ready for action. The signs of stress indicate that you are excited and energised. McGonigal's work highlights four main ways we can make stress our friend and an asset when we are under pressure:

1. Recognise your stress response
2. Perceive stress as energy
3. Let stress increase your resilience
4. If you are stressed, reach out

Prevent overwhelm

- Pressure frequently becomes a problem when we feel that there is “too much”
- Hence, the more we increase our capacity to cope with pressure, the more we can perceive pressure in a positive way
- Taking steps to invest in our energy management and understand what helps us to regain our composure increases our capability to navigate unexpected challenges and adversity

Manage your energy

- This is a **marathon not a sprint**
- It is essential you **do not compromise your own wellbeing** when supporting others
- Practice **self-compassion** and manage your **expectations**
- Develop a new **mindful way of living** and take a step-by-step approach to **each day**
- Know what **increases your energy**, and what **drains your energy**. Do more of the former and find ways to do less of the latter
- Pay attention to all types of energy – physical, emotional, spiritual and mental.

The four areas of focus

- **Support:** The quality of your relationships with other people influences how emotionally resilient you can be in the face of an emotional or physical crisis
- **Fuel:** Be aware of what you are putting in your body and make sure you are committed to a nutritious diet
- **Movement:** Physical activity releases endorphins, boosts our mood and helps to use the stress hormones in a healthy way
- **Recharge:** Take the time to relax and breathe and take time out from your busy schedule. Also remember to disconnect from your devices.

Seize the moment

- Remember, if you are feeling pressure, it is because **the moment matters**
- **This is an opportunity for you** to achieve, accomplish, excel and crucially to learn and grow
- Take time before, during and after times of pressure to **reflect on the learning opportunity**, applying an open mind and flexible thinking
- Regularly consider and **appraise your short term and long term goals** and how these align with your wider purpose.

Be fully present

- Anxiety and stress can often lead us to become preoccupied with the outcome instead of **focusing on the task at hand**
- This can lead to distraction, apprehension, worry and panic and prevent us from being **single-minded** in our approach
- This **impairs our concentration** and subsequently our performance
- Preparation for high pressure situations starts with having a **set routine for remaining composed and keeping you in the moment.**

Develop your routine and your sensory toolkit

- Think about your five senses
- What items that you can see, smell, taste, hear and touch make you feel motivated?
- What makes you feel calm?
- Create your own sensory toolkit to be used in the face of high pressure. **Your senses are powerful and can cause a profound shift in your mindset and emotional state.** Next time you are under pressure, what will you focus on to make you feel uplifted or composed?

Envisage success

Do you envisage success or expect failure? Do you visualise the desirable outcome from the situation? There is a strong link between your level of self-confidence and ability to believe in yourself under pressure

Know your strengths

Knowing your individual personal strengths help you stay calm under pressure and maintain a sense of self-belief and self-confidence. It also means you are more likely to have a higher sense of self-acceptance and not be inclined to seek validation and approval from others.

The power of your mindset

- When faced with pressure, your mindset can make all the difference to the outcome
- Your mindset is related to your beliefs about your ability
- It creates a whole mental world for you to live in:
 - **Fixed mindset** – ability cannot change
 - **Growth mindset** – ability can change and grow.

R.I.S.E

Recognise your response

Increase your capacity

Seize the moment

Envisage success