

When Stretch Turns to Stress

We have long suspected that stress weighs us down. For decades, scientists have explored the workings of the mind and body to connect stress with a range of evils from poor immunity to learning difficulties. Years of research are now indicating that minimising stress has distinct advantages for workplace performance.

There are three main 'zones' in which we operate on a daily basis. These are the Comfort Zone, the Learning Zone and the Panic Zone.

The **comfort zone** represents low feelings of stress accompanied with low performance. In the comfort zone we feel secure and in control, experiencing no significant tests or challenges. Opportunities for personal growth in this zone are at a minimum. We produce only low levels of stress hormones like cortisol in the comfort zone.

The **learning zone** describes an area of moderate stress coupled with high performance. In the learning zone, we are embracing the type of challenge that requires us to stretch our abilities. The learning zone allows us to show ourselves exactly what we are able to achieve with motivation and commitment. This is an exciting zone where stress hormones, such as cortisol and noradrenalin, along with catecholamines, are elevated slightly, just enough to provide us with positive feelings of enthusiasm and energy.

There is a delicate balance between feeling energised and excited by a challenge, and feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand. There is a tipping point from the learning zone where the challenge begins to exceed our ability. For instance, a person still learning to fly a light plane would feel quite panicked by the thought of having to land a commercial airliner during a mid flight emergency. The **panic zone** describes an area of high stress and low performance. As panic increases,

mental performance steadily decreases clouding our ability to think clearly.

In the panic zone, our brain secretes very high levels of cortisol, noradrenalin and catecholamines. At these extremely elevated levels our heart will race, our blood pressure will increase and we will experience a fight or flight type of response.

In the workplace, extended time in the panic zone, such as knowing for a year that a vital budget is not able to be achieved or enduring ongoing conflict with authority figures, will expose workers to extremely high levels of stress hormones. Over time, this will negatively impact on performance.

Certain stress hormones, including cortisol and noradrenalin, have been shown to reduce the function of neurons in the brain which convert messages from the short term memory into long term understanding. In other words, the capacity to learn and excel is significantly diminished. Over time, this will impact negatively on motivation, innovation, creativity, strategic thinking and the ability to problem solve.

On top of this, elevated stress hormones stimulate an area of the brain responsible for our instantaneous subconscious thought processes. This further complicates the life of the person under pressure by placing greater than normal focus on their emotions. When we are overwhelmed by these stress hormones, our thoughts can 'run away from us', resulting in

desperate thought processes which in turn, can lead to out of character behaviour.

The good news is that the damage to the neurons responsible for complex understanding can recover. Overstimulation of our emotional receptors can also be reduced. Once the stressor is reduced or removed, and the person has regained their lost confidence, they can go on to function at very high performance levels in the future.

This awareness has enormous implications for everyone from school aged children and their parents, to professionals in the workplace and their employers. Understanding the impact of stress on performance, and knowing how to convert long term high stress environments into environments of excitement, stretch and challenge, will allow for maximum performance and maximum success. 💡

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e: info@successfulminds.com.au
w: www.successfulminds.com.au