

Managing Stress

Counselling Service Tip Sheet



What is stress?

Stress is the term we use to describe our emotional, physical and psychological response to (external) demands. Stress can be helpful or unhelpful: Helpful stress is part of everyday living. Some stress gives us the energy to engage in the challenges of life that are meaningful and offset boredom. Unhelpful stress is not beneficial

- the balance is tipped. If stress is too low, you may become bored and unmotivated. If stress is too high, you might find yourself panicking. And if stress goes on for too long, you could burnout. Ongoing stress can lead to a depleted immune system, making you prone to disease, cell damage, infections and organ shut down.

The Performance - Arousal Curve

As stress (arousal) increases, so does your performance. So some stress is good for your performance, but once that stress becomes too much, your performance will actually start to decrease again. Medium levels of stress will actually help you achieve your highest level of performance.

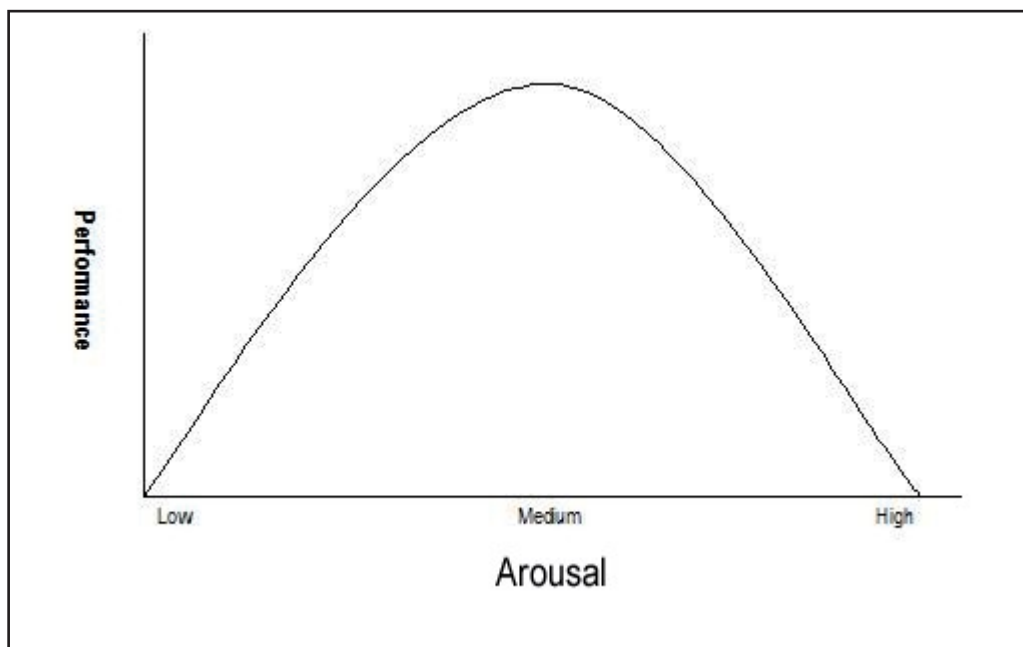


Figure 1. The Performance - Arousal Curve

How do you know when you are overstressed?

The signs of overstress can be physical, emotional, thinking or behavioural.

Physical signs of overstress:

- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Gastrointestinal/heart/immune problems
- Sleep and eating disturbances
- High blood pressure
- Sweating/shaking

Emotional signs of overstress:

- Irritability and being easily frustrated
- Crying
- Feeling anxious or panicky
- Feeling numb or having little emotional reaction
- Depression
- Feeling overwhelmed, constantly apprehensive or fearing the worst will happen.

Thinking signs of overstress:

- "I can't"
- "I'm not good enough"
- "I'm giving it up"
- "I'm such an idiot!"
- Cognitive signs such as lack of concentration, slowed decision-

making or difficulties with short-term memory

Behavioural signs of overstress:

- Disruptive eating patterns
- Increased alcohol, smoking or drug use
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Compulsive behaviours, e.g. shopping, comfort eating, gambling
- Difficulty communicating
- Procrastination
- Difficulty relaxing or "winding down"

Healthy ways to reduce stress

Physical

Exercise/activity, massage, relaxation, meditation or Yoga

Emotional

Connect with family, friends, counsellor

Thinking

Self reflect via journaling.

'Reality check' your thoughts - What am I saying to myself about this situation? How true is it? Is it helpful to think this way? Where will it get me? What else can I think instead?

Behavioural

Examine your lifestyle and stressors/

triggers (people, activities)

Learn to:

- Say "no" to unrealistic demands on your time.
- Be assertive about your own needs.
- Set priorities and manage time realistically.

References

More information is available from:

- Counselling Tip Sheet: Balancing Life and University
- Counselling Tip Sheet: Tips for Successful Time Management
- Counselling Tip Sheet: Avoiding Burnout

Acknowledgements

Editors: Mel Johnston and Nichola Webb

Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.

ECU Counselling Service

Reception: Mount Lawley: Building 8, Room 109

Joondalup: Building 34, Room 245

Telephone 9370 6706

Email: counselling@ecu.edu.au

CRICOS IPC 00279B