

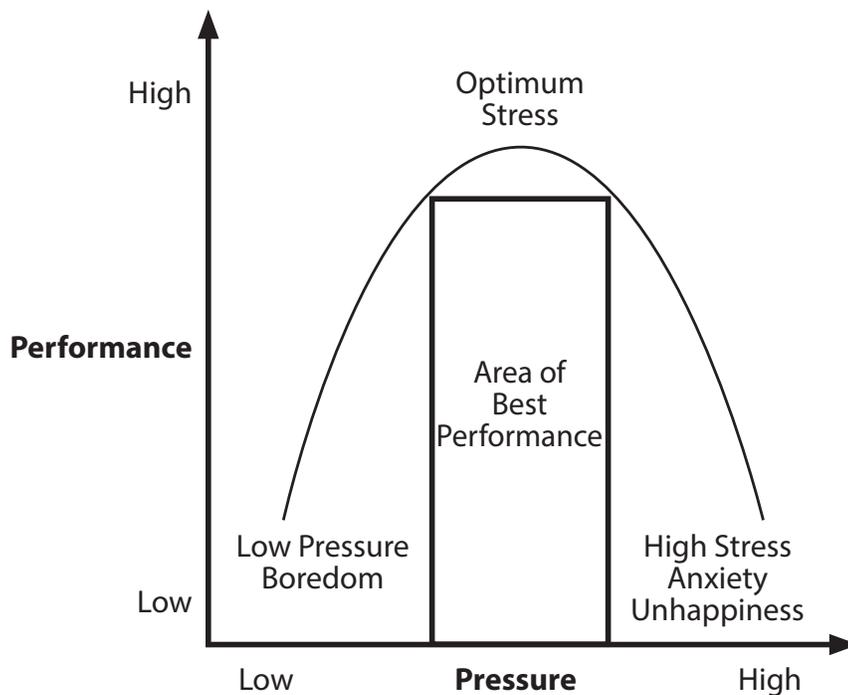
MANAGING STRESS: BALANCING SCHOOL, WORK, FAMILY, AND OTHER DEMANDS

Ken Browner, Psy.D.
Psychologist
Lakeland Community College

Understanding The Role of Stress

Stress is an unavoidable experience in life, and in fact stress is not a bad thing in and of itself. One definition of stress, taken from the field of physics, is "...pressure, pull, or other force exerted on one thing by another," (dictionary.com). To be alive is to be subject to forces. We are subject to forces and demands in the natural course of doing the things that are important to us, such as pursuing meaningful work, being a part of a family and a community, and striving toward achievements and goals.

Some of the earliest psychological research focused on the impact of stress. The following graph shows the relationship of stress (pressure) to performance as an "upside-down U."



The Inverted-U relationship between pressure and performance.

It has been shown that the presence of stress actually improves people's performance, up to a point. If you think about it, that makes sense. If you were in a state of complete relaxation with no demands and worries, you might be in a good state to enjoy a nice day at the beach. However, you wouldn't get much done. That would probably be just great if it was the right time and place, such as if you're on vacation. That situation might be represented by the point at the far left on the graph above. It's nice for all of us to spend some time there, but in your day to day life, during a typical semester, it may not be desirable to spend all or most of your time there. In a work or school environment, too little pressure can lead to boredom and stagnation.

Pay particular attention to the curve at the top of the upside-down U. I'll refer to that as the stress curve, and when I talk about "staying ahead of the curve," I mean that your goal will be to stay on the left side, somewhere near the top of the curve. That's where you are able to manage the stress without reaching the point where things take a turn downward for the worse. Imagine having a deadline for a project. If there is absolutely no stress or pressure, your performance is likely to be low or nonexistent. If the project is not due for many months, you may experience no stress related to it, and you may get nothing done. As the deadline approaches, your motivation to work on it will increase, you will start getting some of the work done, and you will experience some stress related to the project (although the experience of stress at that point may not be negative or distressing). This is where you are on the left side of the upside-down U. If the deadline gets very close and you are worried that you won't get the project done, your stress level will increase a lot. At some point, the stress may become so great that your performance suffers, especially if you have additional projects, deadlines or demands that are pressing. Maybe you'll have a hard time concentrating, or you'll be rushed to the point that the quality of your work suffers. At that point, you have passed the peak of the upside-down U, somewhere on the downward slope on the right side of the stress curve. So, you see, your goal shouldn't necessarily be to eliminate stress in your life. The trick is to manage the stress and stay near the top of the upside-down U or on the left side. Stress management is all about keeping from getting past the tipping point where the stress is so great or is affecting you to the point that it is overwhelming and is affecting you negatively, in terms of your performance and emotional well-being.

When stress becomes a problem:

People respond to very high levels of stress differently. Some common responses include having difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, overeating or skipping meals, feeling irritable and on edge, getting sick or feeling run down, having difficulty concentrating or remembering things, and feeling depressed, anxious or overwhelmed.

Some people have a greater tolerance for pressures and demands and thrive when a higher level of stress is present. Still, just about everybody has times when stress becomes difficult to manage. This can happen when you just have so many demands and pressures that it is hard to manage them all. It can happen when one particular event, such as missing a week of class due to an illness, throws you off balance and presents a set of pressures that you weren't prepared to handle. It can also happen when you don't possess adequate strategies for coping with stress, regardless of how high the level of stress is.

Coping Skills and Strategies: Staying "Ahead of the Curve"

Everyone has some strategies or methods that they naturally use to cope with stress on a day-to-day basis, often without thinking about it. These will vary from person to person, and they usually fall into a few different categories.

Your coping strategies may involve activities that you find relaxing or enjoyable such as spending time with friends or family, listening to music or playing an instrument, cooking a meal, or watching your favorite TV show. It can be hard to feel like there is time to engage in these activities when you are feeling a lot of stress. However, taking even short breaks to do these things can make a difference and can help you get back "ahead of the curve."

Your coping strategies may be activities that help you feel like you are taking action to solve problems or address the situation. These may include making a to-do list, talking with a friend or supervisor about the challenges you are facing, finding ways to cut back on nonessential commitments, cleaning up and organizing your desk or your study space, or praying or attending religious services.

Your coping strategies may consist of activities that involve taking care of yourself physically, such as eating healthy meals, exercising, taking a hot bath, taking a nap, stretching or doing yoga, or getting a good night's sleep.

Some people also use coping strategies that are unhealthy or self-destructive, such as drinking, using drugs, working nonstop without breaks, or isolating themselves from friends and family. These generally make the problem worse and eventually lead to more stress.

3. Things I may not have tried before, but that might be worth trying now:

a. Strategies for taking short breaks to relax and enjoy:

b. Strategies for taking action to solve problems or address my situation:

c. Strategies for taking care of myself physically:

d. Other strategies:
