

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Performance And The Yerkes-Dodson Law



Description

The Yerkes-Dodson Law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) is a well-known finding in the psychology literature. In summary, the law suggests that performance increases with mental arousal (stress) but only up to a point. When an individual's level of stress is too low or too high, their performance deteriorates. This relationship between stress and performance is usually depicted as an inverted U-shaped curve.

Egan and colleagues (2014) recommend sharing the Yerkes-Dodson Law with perfectionistic individuals because of their dislike for inefficiency and wasted effort. The law also has important implications for overcoming perfectionistic striving:

- The law suggests that putting too much effort into tasks may be unnecessary (at best) and counterproductive (at worst).
- Perfectionistic striving and the stress associated with it increases the risk of inaccurate and inefficient performance (Ishida, 2005; Stoeber, 2011).
- People with perfectionism might achieve the same (or better) results if they approach activities in a less effortful and pressurized manner.
- Individuals benefit from finding their 'zone of optimal performance', which is likely to lie outside of the boundaries of perfectionistic striving.

The *Performance And The Yerkes-Dodson Law* handout provides an overview of the Yerkes-Dodson Law. It describes the ways in which excessive effort can be unnecessary and unhelpful when working toward goals. The handout also introduces the idea of experimenting with one's 'zone of optimal performance' and approaching tasks more flexibly.

Instructions

Psychologists have conducted a lot of research to find out what makes people perform at their best.

- Can you think of any times where you put too much effort into doing something?
- Can you think of any times where you didn't put enough effort into doing something?
- What are the pros and cons of putting in so much effort into the activities you care about?
- When does striving become unnecessary and unhelpful? How do you know when you've reached that point?
- How could you find out where your zone of optimal performance is? Would you be willing to experiment with how you approach things?

References

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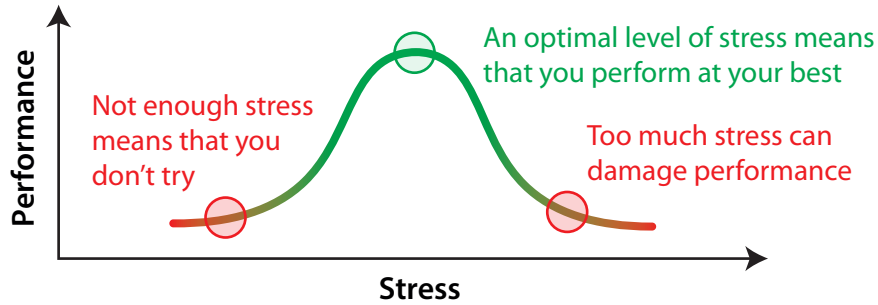
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Performance And The Yerkes-Dodson Law

Do you think that more pressure – and putting in more effort – always improves your performance? Many people think it does, but the reality might surprise you. In the early twentieth century, two psychologists noticed an unusual relationship between pressure, stress and performance. This became a well-known finding called the 'Yerkes-Dodson Law'.

Robert Yerkes and John Dodson found that stress improves performance, but only up to a point: when stress levels are too high or too low, performance suffers. In other words, too much stress can be counterproductive. For this reason, the relationship between stress and performance has an inverted 'U-shaped' curve.



How is the Yerkes-Dodson Law relevant to perfectionism?

Experts in perfectionism suggest that perfectionistic people tend to put more effort into things than they need to, and that often they could often achieve the same results with less effort. If you struggle with perfectionism, you may find that reducing the pressure you put on yourself doesn't affect your performance, but it does help you feel less overwhelmed.



The zone of optimal performance

The Yerkes-Dodson Law also suggests that people have a 'zone of optimal performance' – this is where the amount of pressure is just right and you get the best results from yourself. If you try to work beyond your optimal zone (i.e., you put too much pressure on yourself to perform perfectly), it may actually lead you to perform less well. Research supports this idea: people with perfectionism often put so much effort into things that they become less efficient than people who aren't perfectionistic.



You might be wondering where your zone of optimal performance is. This is something you'll need to discover for yourself. One approach might involve reducing the pressure you put on yourself in the areas of your life where you have very high standards. You may find that you can put in a little less effort and still perform well.

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