

Stress, Resilience and Performance

Stress is NOT an illness or a disease ... and yet it is given as the reason for nearly half of the working days lost in the U.K due to ill health.

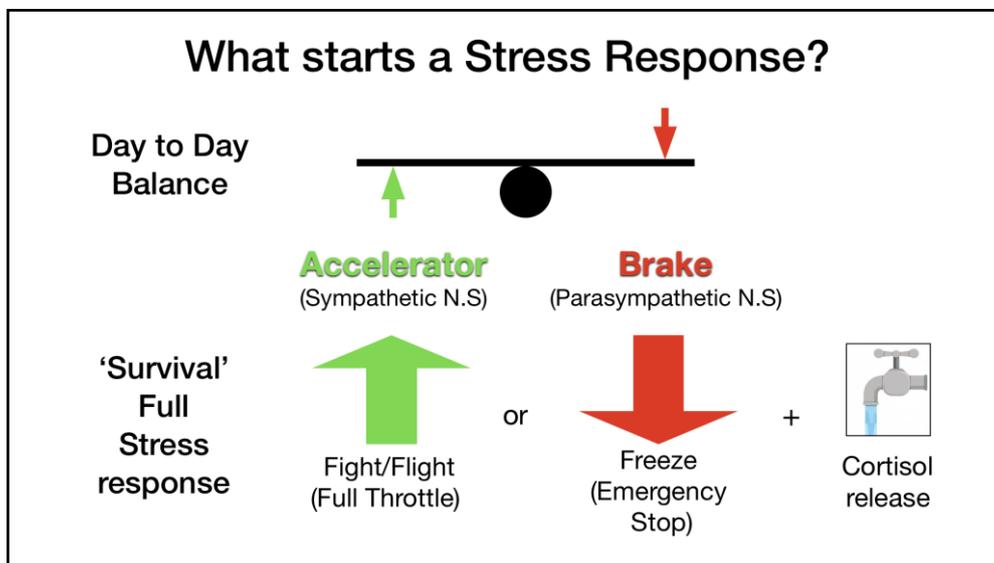
None of us can avoid stress completely, because we experience some of it nearly all of the time ... whenever we need to respond to ANY kind of extra demand. That might range from be just simply getting out of bed, through to dealing with a real threat or emergency.

Some stress is actually good for our performance, helping us to focus / switch-on / achieve more. The problems come when we sense that things are too much / too frequent / or go on for too long, that's when performance drops and our health suffers.

Understanding more about stress can allow us to become more Resilient, able to use our Stress Response as a resource not a threat, helping us to Perform better.

Some basics about your Stress Response

When we sense that we **can** cope with pressures or the demands of physical or mental tasks, part of our nervous system automatically adjusts our body systems to deal with any challenges and then returns us quickly to a calm state, able to 'rest and digest'.



The Autonomic Nervous system takes care of that, with one part (Sympathetic) increasing what's needed for action and another (Parasympathetic) slowing things back down, similar to safely accelerating or braking when you're driving.

But if you sense threat or danger, or if pressure becomes too much and you **can't** cope, something more extreme happens.

Then the 'Accelerator' is automatically pushed flat to the floor to give you extra resources to fight back or get away (Fight /Flight), or the brake gets applied hard for an emergency stop (Freeze). All of that happens instantly, along with the release of a hormone called Cortisol. This is what is described as a Stress Response.

So what does it feel like?

Many people don't relate the changes that they regularly feel within their mind and body to having a Stress response. Maybe some of them will be familiar to you?

A full blown Stress Response is perfect for 'survival', but how about Modern Life?

We only have occasional emergencies ... but we often react to combinations of 'minor' problems in the same way ...and we rarely rest and recover properly ...leading to us experience an almost constant Stress response without realising it. That's when we really start to suffer from Stress!

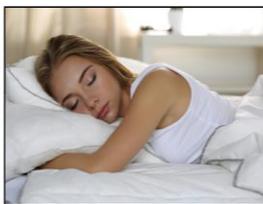


Over time, that sort of Stress will definitely lead to a drop in performance and can also cause a multitude of physical and mental health problems.

Where does Resilience fit in?

You can never avoid Stress completely, so don't try to! Instead, deal with it better by increasing your Resilience, the ability to **Adapt** in pressure situations, **Learn** from them, and **Grow** so that you respond better next time. A Resilient person doesn't carry on being stressed, they **Bounce Back**, maintaining their sense of wellbeing and moving on with life.

Unfortunately many people choose unhelpful strategies to help them cope with Stress (Smoking and Drinking more, withdrawing / avoiding social contacts), but being informed and making the sort of Positive Life Style changes shown below, can go a long way towards making you a more Resilient person and helping you to avoid the unpleasant long term effects of Stress.



Better Sleep



Better Diet



More Activity / Exercise



Being Social



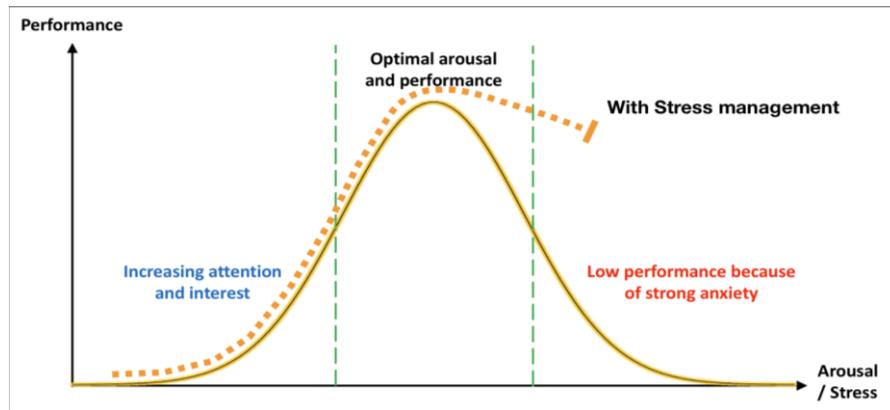
Being Organised



Relaxing your Mind and Body

So what effect does Stress have on Performance?

The general relationship can be seen in the diagram below.



Too little OR too much stress will reduce performance, but the relationship can be changed or influenced by a number of different factors:

The degree of stress/arousal

Too little > no motivation, boredom

Too much > anxiety, burnout

The Type of Task

A regular or easy task needs more arousal to increase performance

A new or difficult task needs less arousal for peak performance

Generally, more arousal reduces performance on a mental task, but can increase performance on a physical task

Time Pressure

Short but adequate time > improved performance

Deadline too tight > reduced performance

Too much time > reduced performance

Perception

Arousal/stress soars if a task is perceived as being unmanageable, uncontrollable or overwhelming

'Influencers' will also affect an individual's performance

- Skill level (training)
- Self Confidence
- Type of Task
- Complexity of the task
- Personality (introvert/extrovert, internal or external locus of control)

Stress Management techniques and Resilience have been shown to increase maximum performance AND prevent the sudden crash into anxiety and burnout, but there is a limit if the level of stress continues to build!