

Do We Perform Better Under Pressure?

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Exploring Unexpected Complications and Hidden Value Judgments in a Common Question

By Alfie Kohn

Someone recently wrote to ask me whether it was true that pressure makes people more productive. Might stress actually be good for us? Notwithstanding the cliché about how diamonds are made, such a sweeping generalization is hard to take seriously – and it doesn't help much to add a qualification such as "People are more productive under *moderate* pressure." Which people? Productive in what sense? What kind of pressure?

Let's break this down:

- * There are substantial individual differences in how human beings react to a given situation, so we should be very careful about claiming that x (or even a limited amount of x) is likely to be beneficial for everyone.

- * The "Yerkes-Dodson Law," which has been floating around psychology for more than a century, holds that there is an

ideal level of arousal for performing a given task. If the task is complex, there's often an inverted-U relationship, meaning that a medium level is better than either too little or too much. Most of us tend to fare best when a task is neither so simple as to be boring nor so hard as to produce anxiety. Of course there are different ways that a task can be experienced as "hard." [1] But the key point is that this fact about arousal (physiological activation) doesn't allow us to conclude that stress – something quite different, which typically connotes *distress* – is valuable at any level. [2]

* Our reaction probably will depend not only on the amount and type of pressure but also on the context in which it occurs. For example, did we choose to do whatever it is we're doing? Any given challenge is more likely to be experienced as stressful – and unproductive – if it was imposed on us.

* Even once we've specified the sort of pressure involved, we still must explain what we mean by "productivity" or "performance." What spurs us to be more alert might have no effect, or even a negative effect, on, say, creativity. Also, what period of time are we talking about? Lab studies on arousal and stress almost always focus on short-term task performance. Even if raising the stakes caused people to do better at something today, the accumulated stress over many days might well backfire before long.

* To talk about input and output, stimulus and response, is to ignore the human being who stands in between, who constructs meaning around what he or she encounters, who arrives on the scene with expectations, goals, fears, a distinctive point of view. Thus, pressure might spur people to jump higher or memorize more facts for awhile. But is the point to avoid failure or to achieve success? Those are two very different things. Failure-avoidance is what we'd expect in response to pressure, such as during a competition – and that's much less likely to prove constructive over time, particularly if open-ended thinking is required. [3]

* Finally, what about the effect of stress on psychological (and even physical) health? Is achievement a result of genuinely enjoying what we're doing or of a desperate need to prove ourselves? Pressuring people – or, even more insidiously, leading people to pressure themselves – may buy success at school or work at the cost of a substantially lower quality of life.

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But let's dig a bit deeper into the "stress is good for you" position. Some people make this claim less out of an interest in eliciting better performance than out of a conviction that kids need to be prepared to deal with hardship. This is one facet of a model of teaching and parenting that I've described as BGUTI (Better Get Used To It). As far as I can tell, no evidence supports the hypothesis that today's pressure, or exposure to unpleasantness, helps children cope with difficulties they'll face tomorrow. Moreover, this strategy, like calls to teach kids "grit" or a "growth mindset," is all about adjusting the individual rather than addressing the systemic factors that created the problem (for example, the unhealthy stress) for everyone. Palliative measures are inherently conservative. And this one doesn't even really palliate.

Dubious though it may be, "Pressure them now to toughen them up for later" is at least an empirical claim, based on a belief that it will pay dividends eventually. But this belief may conceal a purely ideological endorsement of *being* tough: a preference for people who are stoic and uncomplaining, who can suck it up.

This is why my eyes reflexively narrow when someone insists that stress can be beneficial: I've encountered too many people who seemed to be talking about what's true but were actually taking a stand that's impervious to evidence – in this case, a determination to make sure that kids don't have

things too easy. You can hear this in phrases such as “It’s time they learned that...” – the implication being that children should be introduced to frustration and unhappiness without delay.

The flip side of this sensibility is anger. Witness the sneering contempt for Millennial “snowflakes” and for “helicopter” parents who spare kids deprivation and struggle, who supposedly hover and coddle rather than getting out of the way so children can skin their knees and learn from the pain.

I’ve tried to make sense of this rage, to explore its premises and outcomes, in a book called *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*. But I neglected to consider how gender stereotypes may lurk behind the “stress is good for them” position and the disdain for anyone who can’t handle it. Today’s pejorative terms like “snowflake” aren’t so far removed from yesterday’s insults of boys and men for being wimps or sissies or cry-babies. I’m reminded, too, of a credo beloved by those who aspire to a culture of machismo: “What does not kill me makes me stronger” (which Nietzsche introduced with the phrase “From the military school of life”).[4] It has echoes in Eastern cultures, incidentally: *gambaru* (tough it out) in Japan and *chi ku* (“eating bitterness”) in China.

It is also, I cannot resist pointing out, a sensibility displayed by Donald Trump, who habitually confuses cruelty with strength and seems to regard collaborative problem-solving or any acknowledgment of error (let alone apology) as unforgivable weakness. By default, other individuals and nations are considered adversaries to be bested: The point is to triumph over others and humiliate them. No wonder “military leaders have long held a special allure for Trump.”

This man’s compulsive competitiveness is not just a symptom of his personal pathology but, as I’ve argued elsewhere, a reflection of our culture’s addiction to winning. Similarly, his defensive posturing – the taunting, boasting, preening,

threatening, and bullying to establish his superiority over others – is an almost comically exaggerated version of a more pervasive masculine stereotype that's part of our socialization.[5] Trump's right-wing followers in particular have gleefully adopted the "snowflake" insult, but all too common in America is a habit of venerating those who are manly enough to prosper under pressure as opposed to those who succumb to the suffering. No excuses! Failure is not an option! No pain, no gain!

The psychological premises here are thoroughly misconceived and the values are appalling. Just because you think that people, especially young people, *ought* to be able to tolerate and even benefit from stress (or failure) doesn't mean they will. And just because you think this confers advantages – regarding their future resilience or current performance – doesn't mean that's true.

NOTES

1. It's challenging to keep doing something tedious for a long time, particularly without making mistakes, but that's "hard" in a different way than a task for which one lacks the requisite skill or information. Plus, we experience something that's physically taxing differently from something that's mentally taxing – and our reaction to either is likely to vary depending on how much our self-image is invested in being successful.

2. My own experience bears out this difference between arousal and anxiety. When I perform in front of an audience, I'm at my best when I'm focused – energized rather than relaxed to the point of lethargy. But that moderate level of arousal doesn't entail any degree of anxiety, which feels entirely unconstructive.

3. I briefly reviewed this distinction in an essay called "The Failure of Failure." In fact, many researchers have spent their careers playing out its implications. In that essay, I mentioned Kurt Lewin in the 1930s and David McClelland in the 1950s, but I might have added John Atkinson in the 1970s (who wrote, "The tendency to avoid failure...functions to oppose and dampen the tendency to undertake achievement-

oriented activities”) and Andrew Elliott (beginning in the 1990s). For more on how this push to avoid failure accounts for the remarkably consistent counterproductive effects of competition, see chapter 3 of my book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*.

4. The aphorism is really rather silly when you stop to think about it. As Christopher Hitchens once pointed out, “There are all too many things that could kill you, don’t kill you, and then leave you considerably weaker.” Nietzsche’s slogan was popularized in late-20th-century America by the movie *Conan the Barbarian*, directed by war enthusiast and self-described “right-wing extremist” John Milius, and also by Watergate burglar-in-chief G. Gordon Liddy.

5. ADDENDUM: Two weeks after my essay was posted, this interesting op-ed by Carol Cohn appeared in the *New York Times*. It argued that Trump’s recent boast of having a bigger “Nuclear Button” than Kim Jong-un’s ought to be understood not just as “a trivial, if embarrassing, sideshow” but as a symptom of how widespread stereotypes and insecurities about masculinity “distort the ways we think about international politics” and the deadly arms race.

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