KORN FERRY™

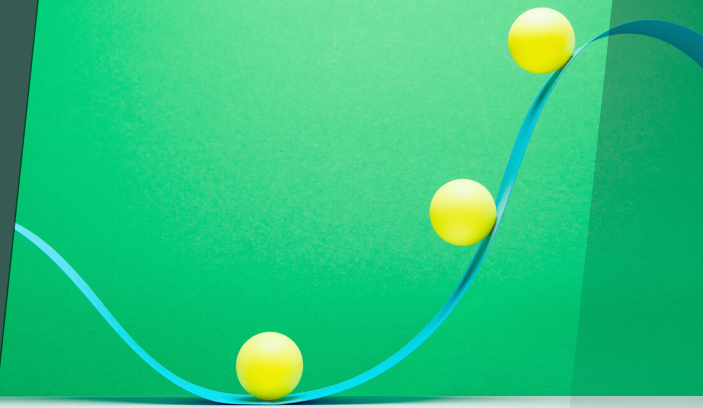# STRESS: FROM TOLERABLE TO TOXIC

How people and organizations can work together to find the sweet spot of stress.

Stress is defined as a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. But stress hardly needs an introduction. We see it, we feel it, and we know it—in our sleep, our appetites, our work.

If stress could speak for itself, though, it might argue that it has been the victim of a character assassination; villainization by oversimplification. In fact, it would argue, the right amount of stress challenges us to be better.

Stress gets a bad rap—for many good reasons. The consequences can be pervasive and pernicious; you might even notice, as you read this, that you are gritting your teeth and clenching your shoulders. But stress is not always a bad thing, nor is it always about our "feelings."

By understanding the spectrum of stress, and how our bodies bear the burden of the extremes, we consider the ways that people and organizations can work together to find the sweet spot.

From tolerable to toxic.

According to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, there is a certain amount of stress that has positive effects on performance. A mild to moderate amount of short-term stress can drive motivation and arousal, giving you the energy to get things done. We get a little kick of stress when we need it to help us perform at our best. Then, after getting that stress-related adrenaline boost, we can return to baseline.

Stress that is either higher or lower than this sweet spot, however, results in steadily decreasing performance. The relationship between stress and performance is like the classic bell curve: when this stress becomes frequent or chronic, it goes

Figure 1
The Yerkes-Dodson Law: How anxiety affects performance.
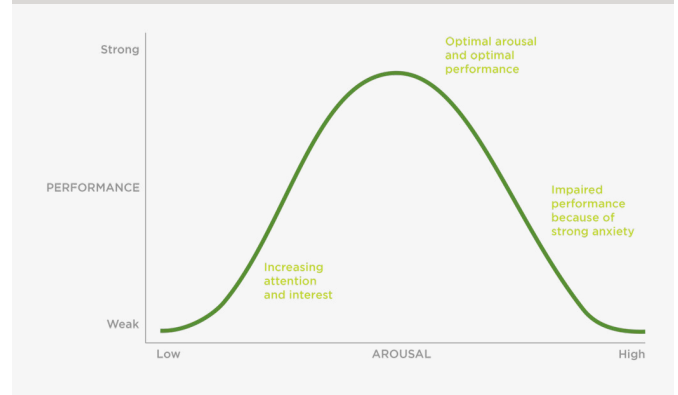
from tolerable (and in some cases, motivating) to toxic. In learning and development terms, it's the idea of "zone of proximal development"—the Goldilock's principle of just the *right* amount of stress and stretch to promote learning. The "just right" point is relative—different depending on skill and experience. And learners who stretch too far too fast will find it to be counterproductive.

As research shows, spending too much time in such a high arousal state not only impacts our minds, but our brains and bodies, as well. Recent US headlines about wellness and the workplace suggest our stress levels have passed the point of optimization. In fact, according to one recent Gallup report, American professionals are some of the most stressed workers in the world.

Stress has many different origins.

Allostatic load helps explain this relationship between the stress we experience at work and the way our bodies bear those burdens. Allostatic load refers to the physical and psychological wear and tear that builds up as we are exposed to chronic or repeated stress. Over time, our baseline response to that stress increases. Our brains and bodies become so accustomed to a state of activation that eventually, even when a stressor goes away, we do not return to baseline levels.

Stress at work can come in many shapes and sizes. Competing deadlines from different stakeholders can make us feel like we're in a lose-lose battle. Insufficient resources can make us feel backed into a corner of tough choices—choices that, sometimes, put people's jobs at stake. Lack of support from peers and superiors can make the workplace feel incredibly isolating.

Workplace stress affects our daily lives in multiple ways, from absenteeism, loss of productivity and employee turnover to rising healthcare, insurance, legal, and disability expenses. And the costs are astronomical: in the United States alone, effects of workplace stress may account for 8% of our national spending on healthcare, up to $190 billion, a 2015 analysis shows. A more recent analysis estimates this number might be closer to $300 billion, and rising (Mohney, 2018).

Our workplace experiences can be significant contributors in the shift from tolerable stress to toxic stress. One study from Germany cited low decision latitude, low social support at work, and high job demands as three workplace factors with the strongest relationships with allostatic load. People reporting low social support at work, low decision latitude, and high job demands had higher levels of cortisol (also known as the stress hormone), higher blood pressure, and higher plasma levels of C-reactive protein and tumor necrosis factor alpha—two biomarkers of inflammation. Increased allostatic load has been linked to coronary heart disease (Gillespie et al., 2019), autonomic nervous system function, and perhaps even age-related COVID-19 mortality (Goldstein, 2020).

In addition to these usual workplace stress culprits, researchers have identified five domains of social experience that boost our bodies' production of cortisol, adrenaline, and epinephrine, thus increasing feelings of stress, mistrust, hostility, and even disgust (Rock, 2008).

Do you suffer from allostatic overload?

Have you experienced two or more of the following symptoms in the last six months?

- Insomnia
- Lack of energy
- Dizziness
- Generalized anxiety
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Demoralization
- Inability to function in social or work settings
- Feeling overwhelmed by the demands of day-to-day life

If so, then you may be suffering from **allostatic overload.** If you read the overview for *allostatic overload*—the point at which tolerable stress becomes toxic stress—you might find its definition feels uncomfortably familiar, either describing your own experience or the experiences of the people around you. Allostatic overload occurs when stress becomes too taxing for our bodies, leading to one of more of these symptoms within 6 months of an initial stressor.

David Rock's SCARF Model identifies these five domains as:

- **Status:** how we perceive our social standing relative to others.

- **Certainty:** perceptions of being able to predict future events and outcomes.

- **Autonomy:** perceptions of control over ourselves and others.

- **Relatedness:** the sense of safety or belongingness with a particular social group.

- **Fairness:** perceptions that exchanges between individuals are conducted fairly.

KORN FERRY

Research shows that threats to these social experiences register in our brains and bodies like physical danger; we process social safety like a life-or-death matter. What makes the neurological parallels between social threats and physical threats so pernicious is that the experience of social pain comes back when remembered later, while the experience of physical pain does not. Therefore, even individual instances of threatened status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness can increase allostatic load; repeated instances almost certainly will.

Know your enemy

- **Social pain:** the painful experience of actual or potential psychological distance from other people or groups (Eisenberger and Lieberman, 2005).

- **Social threat:** the concern people have in situations in which the positive image of their ingroup is threatened by the activation of negative group stereotypes, or by the devaluation or stigmatization of the ingroup (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

- **Social/psychological safety:** the ability to show and be yourself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career (Kahn 1990).
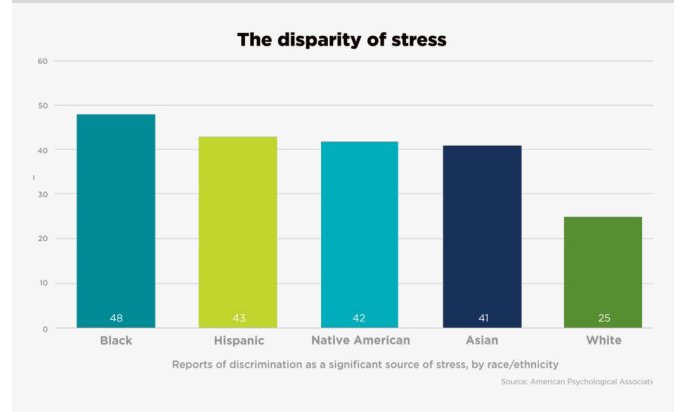
Stress isn't the same for everyone.

People from all walks of life experience stress—at different times, at different degrees of severity, and for different reasons. However, research from the American Psychological Association (APA) shows that populations experience varying degrees of stress differentially due to a range of factors. People making between $25,000 and $35,000 per year have higher average stress levels than people making over $75,000 per year, possibly because they have to make more resource trade-offs than high-income earners. People whose highest degree is a high school diploma have higher average stress levels than people with advanced degrees because they have fewer available job opportunities as the market trends toward requiring advanced degrees.

The disparity is not just economical. In 2020, one third of adults cited discrimination as a significant source of stress, according to the APA—a notable increase from the 25% in 2019. This stress, too, is unequally distributed across the population: 48% of Black Americans reported discrimination as a significant source of stress compared with 25% of white Americans.

Figure 2
One third of Americans report discrimination as a significant of source, but this stress impacts populations quite differently.

The disparity of stress

Black	Hispanic	Native American	Asian	White
48	43	42	41	25

Reports of discrimination as a significant source of stress, by race/ethnicity

Source: American Psychological Association

Certainly, organizations are not responsible for resolving all your stresses—nor would they be capable of doing so. However, you cannot check your life at the office (or home office) door, especially when the work-life boundary has become so blurred. Leaders will benefit from having a whole-person perspective when they consider the people who make the business. They can take reasonable action to be sure the workplace does not unnecessarily add to the stress burden.

Everyone has a part to play in solving the problem.

There are many ways leaders and organizations can reduce allostatic overload in the workplace. Perceptions of status can be elevated by giving employees opportunities to grow and develop, as well as giving positive feedback and public recognition. Uncertainty can be reduced by building business plans, organization charts, and strategy decks, as well as breaking complex tasks down into small, achievable parts. Micromanaging can reduce perceived autonomy, while subtle indicators of autonomy, such as providing a choice of options, can go a long way in increasing it. Perceptions of relatedness can be increased through incorporating bonding and socialization

We can combat toxic stress through small, achievable strategies. And only when we find our way back to that **sweet spot of stress**, we will see our performance improve.
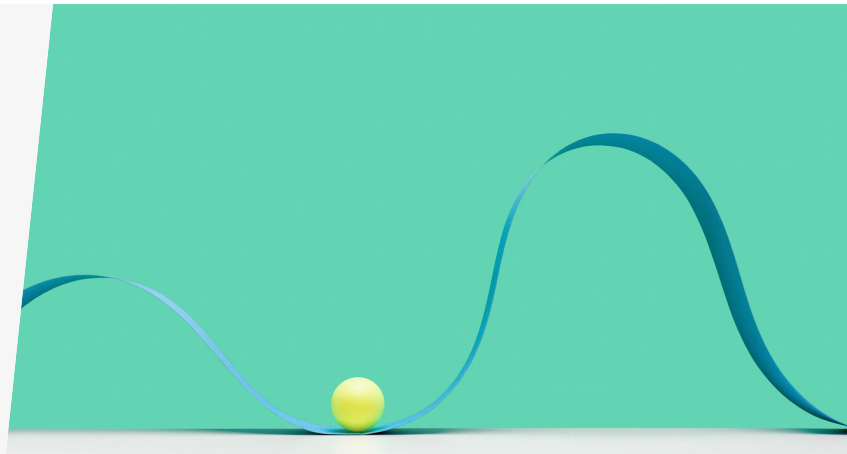
time into work life, as well as supporting a culture that permits people to be open in sharing personal details about themselves. Increasing transparency and establishing clear guidelines are processes and practices that support perceptions of fairness.

In his book *Leaders Eat Last* (2014), Simon Sinek draws on our evolutionary history to explain the ways in which psychological safety, in contrast to the kinds of environments that drive allostatic overload, can mean the difference between organizations that thrive and those that merely survive, or even fail. Organizations need to establish a company-wide "circle of safety," a culture where people are—and feel—free of danger from each other and from within the organization, which in turn enables them to protect the wider organization from external threats. Circles of safety are cultures that promote a clear set of values and beliefs based on trust, relatedness, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Strong leaders—those who protect their people, reward honest and good behavior, and promote sustainable development—work to extend the circle of safety to all members of an organization. Weak leaders—those who breed cultures of self-preservation and short-termism—keep the circle of safety small.

The circle of safety is preserved by serotonin and oxytocin, considered the "selfless chemicals" of the brain. The production of serotonin ensures that members look out for those below them and work to do right by those who lead them. The production of oxytocin promotes formation of bonds through love and trust. Together, a steady flow of these neurotransmitters serves as an indication that a person is not experiencing threats, does not have to act out of self-preservation, and can thus work to maintain and promote group interests.

10 simple strategies to reduce stress

What employees can do:

- *Find small ways to be in control of your day.* This will help boost your feelings of autonomy and certainty.

- *Use rituals or implementation intentions.* This well help reduce the experience of cognitive load.

- *Connect to your purpose.* This will support resilience and work engagement.

- *Make one close friend.* Having a best friend at work reduces stress and boosts engagement.

What leaders can do:

- *Increase transparency around decision making processes.* This will boost employee perceptions of fairness.

- *Define expectations clearly.* This will boost employee perceptions of certainty.

- *Provide positive feedback and the level of support needed.* This will boost employee perceptions of status and autonomy.

- *Practice compassion.* Compassion helps foster feelings of warmth, care, concern, reward, and affiliation.

What organizations can do:

- *Create cultures of authenticity and openness.* Environments that foster emotional openness will result in more emotionally aware and available employees.

- *Make space for connection.* Research reveals organizations that encourage "water cooler"-style conversations show increased productivity over organizations that do not.
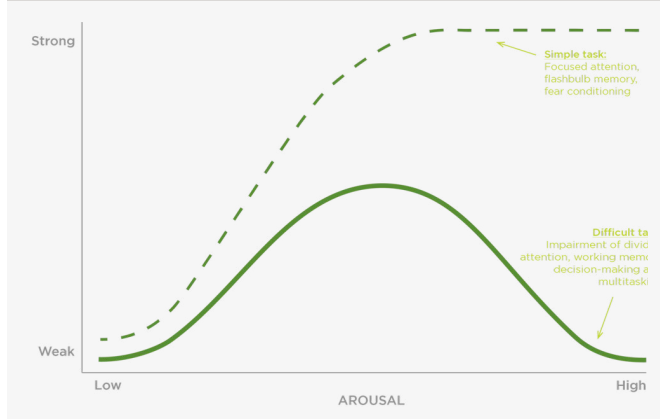
KORN FERRY™

Striking the balance

Hitting the sweet spot of stress—just enough but not too much—is no simple task. Research shows that finding the right balance is likely both person-specific and task-specific. Some people may just perform better under stress than others. Some people may crest the "optimal stress" curve before others.

Skill level is also an important factor that can affect performance under stress. If something is new to us, it may provide enough challenge without additional external stressors. But if we have been performing a task for a while, it may become monotonous and routine; some external stress, then, may provide the motivation that sparks your interest again.

Task complexity may be another factor that affects task performance. A difficult task may require lower levels of stress and arousal to promote concentration, whereas a simple task that requires persistence and stamina may benefit from some external pressure in order to sustain motivation.

Figure 3
In light of these findings, researchers have suggested that the Yerkes-Dodson curve may actually look more like this.

Using simple yet empirically supported strategies to minimize social and environmental triggers of threat responses seems like an obvious benefit. However, threat reduction may present a double-edged sword. Korn Ferry promotes experience-based leadership development, hinging on the understanding that conquering adversity and emerging stronger creates extraordinary leaders. Korn Ferry's research on women CEOs and Black profit-and-loss leaders illustrate that early formative hardships were often viewed as key

development points rather than setbacks. Fifty percent of Black P&L executives interviewed said they intentionally sought out tough assignments that would challenge them both personally and professionally, embracing the opportunity for growth. Being driven by challenge was also a standout attribute among the women CEOs interviewed. Seeking out new, challenging, growth opportunities was characteristic of 84% of the women interviewed, and a strong or very strong characteristic in 64%. By misinterpreting or overapplying threat reduction strategies, companies could inadvertently find themselves ill-prepared for a disruptive future.

Certainly, this is not to suggest that organizations should deliberately stack the deck against employees in hopes they will emerge transformed. There are other kinds of experiences, even challenging ones, that can foster growth without being an undue hardship. However, we must not confuse reducing unnecessary social and environmental threats with rejecting the critical discomforts that result in transformation and growth. Leaders should strive to set challenging but achievable goals for teams and their members (DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

The Yerkes-Dodson law, our biology, and our own experiences show us there is a tipping point. There is a space between "too much" and "not enough" where stress can make us excellent. Between the pressures of our jobs, the world, and our relationships, we've surpassed that point and lost sight of the balance, a fact that has grave consequences for our physical and mental health.

But there is good news: we can combat toxic stress through small, achievable strategies. A practice as simple as making space for connection can go a long way toward reducing allostatic load—in turn, improving our physical and mental wellbeing. And only when we find our way back to that sweet spot of stress, we will see our performance improve.

By Amelia Haynes

Associate Researcher
Korn Ferry Institute

amelia.haynes@kornferry.com

References

American Psychological Association. (2020). Stress in America 2020: A national mental health crisis. https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report-october

Anderson, C. R. (1976). Coping behaviors as intervening mechanisms in the inverted-U stress-performance relationship. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 61(1), 30. DOI: 10.1037/0021-9010.61.1.30

Bennis, W. G., & Thomas, R. J. (2002). "Crucibles of Leadership." *Harvard Business Review,* 80(9), 39–45. https://hbr.org/2002/09/crucibles-of-leadership

Cable, D. M., Gino, F., & Staats, B. R. (2013). Breaking them in or eliciting their best? Reframing socialization around newcomers' authentic self-expression. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 58(1), 1-36. DOI: 10.1177/0001839213477098

Dahl, C. J., Wilson-Mendenhall, C. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2020). The plasticity of well-being: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(51), 32197-32206. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2014859117

DeRue, D. S., & Wellman, N. (2009). Developing leaders via experience: The role of developmental challenge, learning orientation, and feedback availability. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(4), 859. DOI: 10.1037/a0015317

Egorov, A. I., et. al. (2017). Vegetated land cover near residence is associated with reduced allostatic load and improved biomarkers of neuroendocrine, metabolic and immune functions. *Environmental* Research, 158, 508-521. DOI: 10.1016/j.envres.2017.07.009

Eisenberger, N. I., & Lieberman, M. D. (2005). Why it hurts to be left out: the neurocognitive overlap between physical and social pain. The social outcast: Ostracism, social exclusion, rejection, and bullying, 109-127. *Psychology Press*.

Fava, G. A., McEwen, B. S., Guidi, J., Gostoli, S., Offidani, E., & Sonino, N. (2019). Clinical characterization of allostatic overload. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 108, 94-101.

Gillespie, S. L., et. al. (2019). Allostatic load in the association of depressive symptoms with incident coronary heart disease: The Jackson Heart Study. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 109, 104369. DOI: 10.1016/j.psyneuen.2019.06.020

Gino, F. (2016). "Are you too stressed to be productive? Or not stressed enough." Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2016/04/are-you-too-stressed-to-be-productive-or-not-stressed-enough

Goldstein, D. S. (2020). The extended autonomic system, dyshomeostasis, and COVID-19. *Clinical Autonomic Research*, 1–17. DOI: 10.1007/S10286-020-00714-0

Gould, D., & Krane, V. (1992). The arousal–athletic performance relationship: Current status and future directions. In T. S. Horn (Ed.), Advances in sport psychology (pp. 119-142). *Human Kinetics Publishers*.

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724. DOI: 10.5465/256287

Korn Ferry. (2019). *The Black P&L Leader: Insights and lessons from senior Black P&L leaders in corporate America*. https://www.kornferry.com/content/dam/kornferry/docs/pdfs/korn-ferry_theblack-pl-leader.pdf

Korn Ferry Institute. (2017). *Women CEOs Speak: Strategies for the next generation of female executives and how companies can pave the road.* https://engage.kornferry.com/Global/FileLib/Women_CEOs_speak/KFI_Rockefeller_Study_Women_CEOs_Speak.pdf

Lomas, T., Medina, J. C., Ivtzan, I., Rupprecht, S., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. J. (2019). Mindfulness-based interventions in the workplace: An inclusive systematic review and meta-analysis of their impact upon wellbeing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology,* 14(5), 625-640. DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2018.1519588

Mohney, G. (2018). "Stress costs US $300 billion every year." Healthline. https://www.healthline.com/health-news/stress-health-costs

The New York Times. (2021). "Working less is a matter of life and death." https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/29/opinion/work-hours-us-health.html

Pietragelo, A. (2020). "What the Yerkes-Dodson Law Says About Stress and Performance." Healthline. https://www.healthline.com/health/yerkes-dodson-law

Rock, D. (2008). SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1(1), 44–52.

Schaefer, S. M., Boylan, J. M., Van Reekum, C. M., Lapate, R. C., Norris, C. J., Ryff, C. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2013). Purpose in life predicts better emotional recovery from negative stimuli. *PloS One*, 8(11), e80329. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0080329

Schnorpfeil, P., Noll, A., Schulze, R., Ehlert, U., Frey, K., & Fischer, J. E. (2003). Allostatic load and work conditions. *Social Science & Medicin*e, 57(4), 647-656. DOI: 10.1016/s0277-9536(02)00407-0

Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders eat last: Why some teams pull together and others don't*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Steele, C. M., Spencer, S. J., & Aronson, J. (2002). Contending with group image: The psychology of stereotype and social identity threat. In Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 34, pp. 379-440. *Academic* Press. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(02)80009-0

Walsh, M. (2021). "Help." *Briefings*, Issue 48. https://www.kornferry.com/insights/briefings-magazine/issue-48/help

About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.