Yerkes-Dodson Law

Anxiety: Finding the Level of Stress That Helps You

The Yerkes-Dodson law is the idea that some stress can help you perform, while too little or too much makes things harder. It is named after psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, who published a study on mice in 1908. Later writers turned their findings into the familiar upside-down U curve of stress and performance. The curve is a simplification, and researchers still debate how well it fits real people. It is still a useful way to notice when anxiety has gone past the point where it helps, and to bring your stress back toward the middle.

1 The stress and performance curve

Too little stress Low end of the curve	You feel flat, bored, or unmotivated, and it is easy to put things off.
Helpful stress Top of the curve	You feel alert, focused, and ready. You might have some butterflies, but they help you get going.
Too much stress Past the peak	You feel anxious, tense, or overwhelmed. Your thoughts race, you make more mistakes, or your mind goes blank.

Why does this work? *Stress gets your body ready to act: your heart beats faster and your attention sharpens. Past a certain point, the same reaction crowds out clear thinking. That point is different for each person and each task. In the 1908 study, mice learned hard tasks best with a mild shock.*

2 Where are you right now?

My stress level today

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

No stress at all *Overwhelmed*

Signs that I am in my helpful zone:

Example: I feel alert, and the work is moving along.

Signs that I have gone past it:

Example: I keep rereading the same line, and my chest feels tight.

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Map your week

List a few tasks or events coming up. Rate your stress about each one from 0 to 10, decide where it sits on the curve, and write one move that could bring it toward the middle.

Task or event	Stress (0-10)	Where on the curve?	One move toward the middle
Job interview on Friday	*8*	*Too much*	*Practice my answers out loud twice, then stop for the night.*
Filing my taxes	*2*	*Too little*	*Ask a friend to check in on Sunday, and start with 20 minutes.*

4 Your toolkit

Write what helps you move back toward the middle from each side. Try a few ideas and keep the ones that work for you.

When stress is too high: what calms me

When stress is too low: what gets me going

Calming ideas: slow breathing with a long exhale, a short walk, or breaking the task into one small step. Energizing ideas: a deadline, a timer, a change of scene, or telling someone your plan.

What did you learn about when stress helps you and when it gets in the way?

If your anxiety sits in the too-much zone most days, or keeps you from things that matter to you, talk with a doctor or therapist.

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