



## FACT SHEET

# Pressure, stress and resilience

The terms 'pressure' and 'stress' are often used interchangeably, which can be quite unhelpful when trying to understand our responses in certain situations.

**Pressure is actually positive – we need a certain level of pressure to motivate and challenge us and to provide a sense of purpose. If you think about times when you feel at your best and most fulfilled in any aspect of your life, it generally won't be when you haven't been under any pressure at all – it's more likely to have been when you took on something difficult, rose to the challenge and gained a sense of accomplishment.**

However, feelings of stress can occur when pressure becomes unmanageable, and exceeds our ability to cope with it. We all

have different pressure thresholds – what's deemed to be too much pressure by one person may actually be challenging and motivating to the next. Individual pressure thresholds will be determined over time by a number of factors - such as our personality, past experiences, preferences, coping strategies, support networks and so on.

We will all have a different 'tipping point' at which pressure becomes stress. Building resilience enables us to push that point a bit further, by developing the resources and capability to withstand more pressure before it turns into stress.

There's a clear and proven relationship between pressure and performance. Generally, when we experience the right amount of pressure, we feel at our best and do our best work. If we perceive we are under too much or too little pressure, then performance, along with our wellbeing, can suffer.



## Pressure-performance curve



Source: Robertson Cooper Ltd (Based on the Yerkes-Dodson curve, 1908)

## Performance-focused wellbeing

The pressure-performance curve above illustrates the relationship between pressure, performance, stress and wellbeing. According to this model:

- > Peak performance and mental wellbeing is achieved when people experience a level of pressure they are able to cope with. They are sufficiently motivated to work hard, but are not so overloaded that they begin to struggle. This is where people can enter a state of 'flow' – the enjoyable and highly productive state in which they do their best work.

### Burn out

- > When pressure exceeds an individual's ability to cope, stress occurs. Wellbeing and performance will be negatively affected. People may feel they are likely to 'burn out' and experience ongoing physical and mental health problems

### Rust out

- > If someone does not experience enough pressure, they can become bored and demotivated. They might experience a lack of engagement and 'rust out.'

Resilience is what enables an individual to 'bounce back' promptly from periods on either side of the curve to the optimal mental wellbeing zone.



## As an individual you can use this in different ways

- > Think about where you are on the curve now - and try to analyse why
- > Map your place on the curve as you progress through the week - see if there are key times or activities which leave you in 'Rust out' or 'Burn out'
- > Note down when you feel you are in the 'Performance focused' wellbeing zone. Try to identify why and replicate this

## As a manager

- > Use this to prompt a discussion about pressure and stress
- > Remember that people will respond differently to demands - everyone has a different ability to cope
- > Comparing your team's response for different time periods or projects can help you to balance the workload more effectively