



Endgame by Jonathan Dahl
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The Right Dose of Stress

Are you stressed out? I know, it's a rhetorical question. Of course you are! For a year and a half, we've been living in a pandemic, unsure about our health, reading about escalating death rates, then trying to do our jobs in a business world where nothing is definite. Not where your "office" will be. Not whether you'll need a mask. Your boss can't set a budget or a strategic plan with any real certainty—and, come to think of it, can't tell you whether you'll even have a job next year. And in case your own experience hasn't been as draining, survey after survey continues to tell us how much stress levels are rising for the vast majority of workers, and how business leaders need to take note—and act.

The problem, of course, is that stress is one of those things that's hard to manage, both personally and at work, and it's even harder to understand. We know stress puts us on edge, keeps us awake at night, and reduces productivity at work. Long term, it can also lead to everything from depression to heart disease to ulcers and a litany of more serious issues. But as bad as that is, a new report from the Korn Ferry Institute, our firm's research arm, says leaders can still apply pressure in a helpful way.

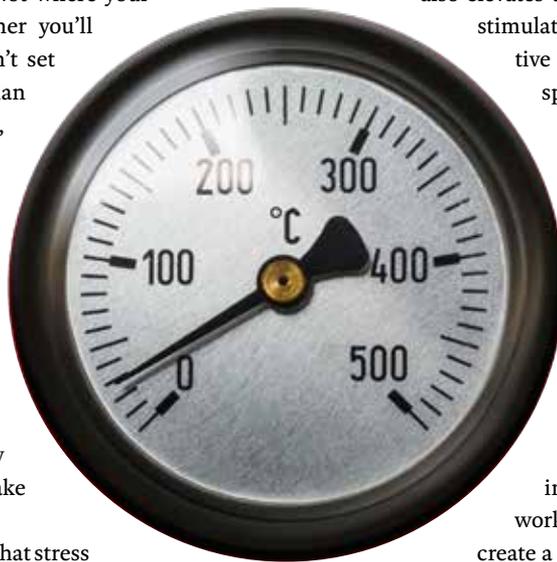
As the paper, *Stress: From Tolerable to Toxic*, argues, the right dose of stressors may actually elevate one's

interest in a job. "At a certain threshold, stress can be very motivating," says Amelia Haynes, an associate researcher and the author of the report. Give someone a deadline on a project, for example, and that may increase the person's stress. Yet deadline pressure also elevates the importance of the project, stimulating some people in more positive ways. In this so-called sweet spot of stress, people will excel instead of procrastinate.

The work is finding that right dose for each and every person. Some of us—well, OK, maybe all of us—think we want more autonomy in our work: get the boss out of our hair. Then we discover that when managers step away, the stress over making the right decisions, over working with colleagues well, can create a lot of pressure. Feeling micro-managed is another big stressor, but a diligent manager who checks in frequently on assignments might ease some people's tension.

The Korn Ferry Institute report suggests that our own experience can show us the tipping point between too little and too much stress. "It's really

about knowing the people you are working with and enacting what works for them," says Haynes. I submit that's no easy task, but it becomes easier the more we understand this emotional state that is a part of everyone. Surely, it's a lot less stressful. ▀



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