

Stress or Distress? Part I

- Article, By DR Joe Ng, GASACT National Co-Chair, Senior WA Representative

As anaesthetic trainees, we are part of a goal-orientated environment. There is significant pressure in our work life - to meet the expectations and needs of our individual patients, to move through our operating list, to contribute to our departments, and to achieve excellence in our chosen vocation. All this without mention of exams, health, financial or family issues!

This pressure is sometimes perceived as “stress”. When it is all too much, we become “distressed”. Intuitively, we know if we are having a “stressful” day. But what is stress? Is stress always bad? Is there a right amount of stress?

What is stress?

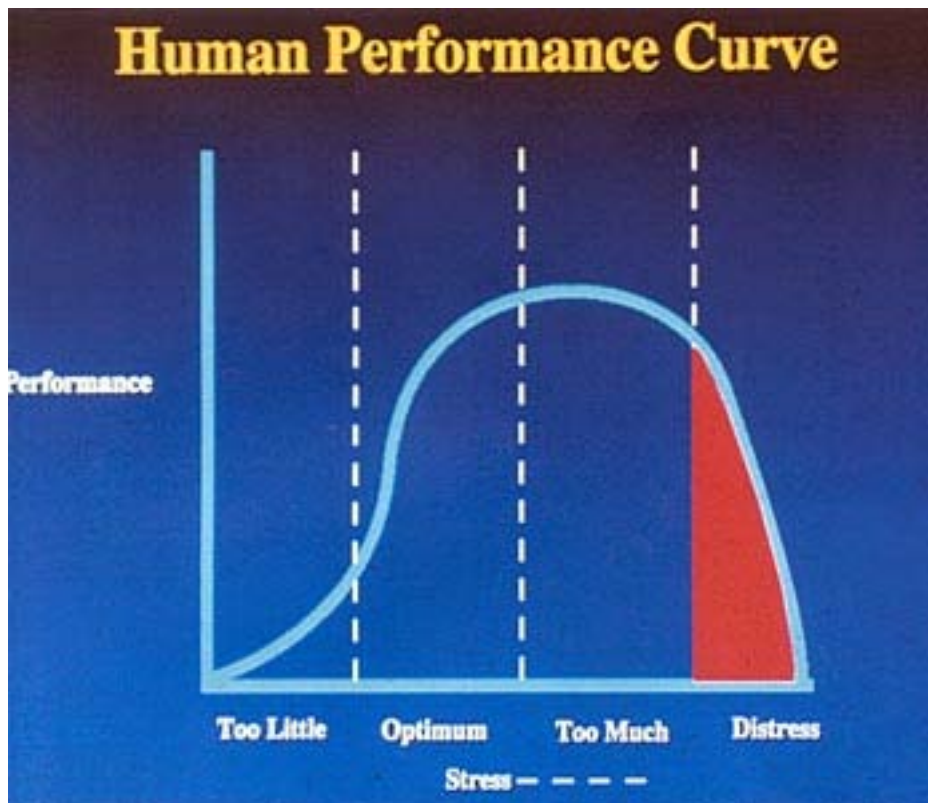
The term “stress” was first coined by Hans Selye in 1936, and was also the title of his *magnum opus*, published in 1950. Born in 1907, he was a Canadian endocrinologist of Austro-Hungarian origin, a 5th generation physician, and a prolific author of some 1,700(!) research papers.

Selye struggled with the exact definition of stress during his career. In parallel with our daily enemy, pain, it has proved difficult to define. Here is what he had to say:

Stress... is a subjective sensation associated with varied symptoms that differ for each of us. In addition, stress is not always a synonym for distress. Situations like a steep roller coaster ride that cause fear and anxiety for some can prove highly pleasurable for others. Winning a race or election may be more stressful than losing but this is good stress.

Increased stress increases productivity – up to a point, after which things rapidly deteriorate, and that level also differs for each of us. It’s much like the stress or tension on a violin string. Not enough produces a dull raspy sound and too much an irritating screech or snaps the string – but just the correct degree of stress creates a beautiful tone. Similarly, we all have to find the right amount of stress that permits us to make pleasant music in our daily lives.

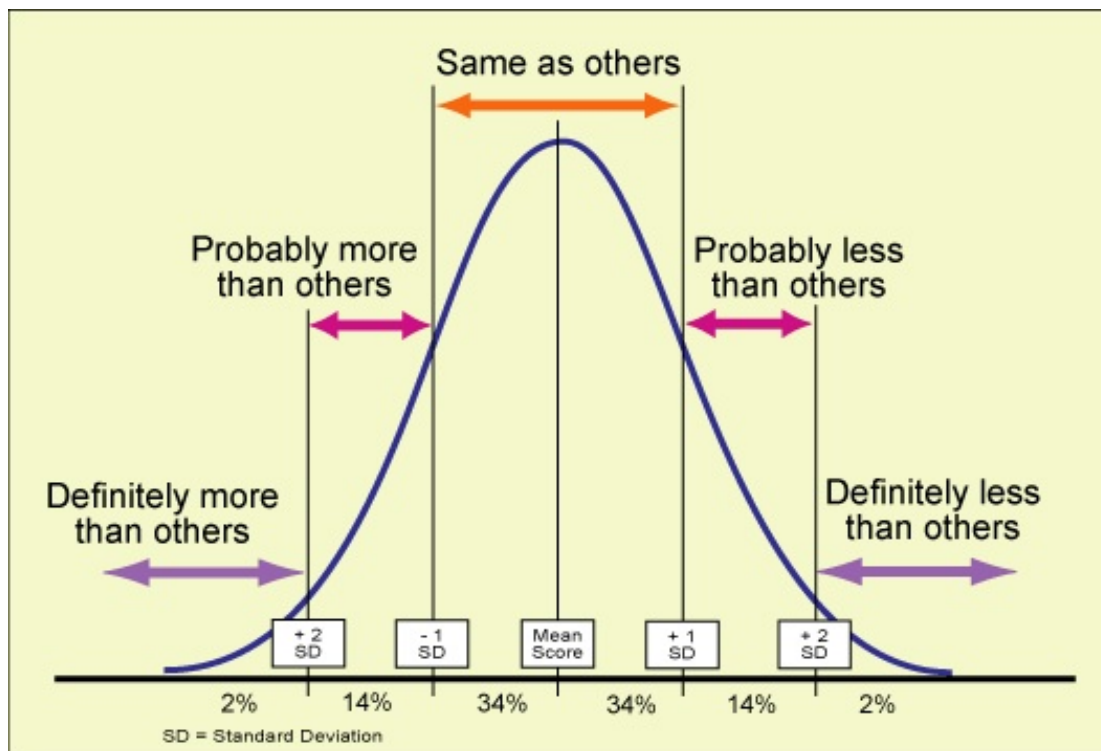
The violin string analogy has been integrated into our contemporary understanding of the “Human Performance Curve”. It would appear that we cannot avoid stress in our daily practice, nor is it desirable to; indeed, Selye famously proposed that “without stress, there is no life”.



So how do we function at the right level of stress? Where are we on the “Human Performance Curve”? It starts with assessing your own situation.

Assessing your stress level

Undertake a regular review of your own stress levels. Make a comparison with your colleagues, mentors, family and friends. Assuming that perceived stress is normally distributed, where would you put yourself on the following curve? How are you faring for (i) today, (ii) this week, and (iii) for the year?



Then ask yourself the following questions:

(i) The next time you are at work:

- Are you currently fatigued?
- Have you been task overloaded during a particular case?
- Have you experienced excessive production pressure during a list?
- Have you had adequate breaks for the day?

(ii) The next time you finish your working week:

- Are you working excessive hours?
- Have you had adequate sleep for the week?
- What have you done this week that you enjoy?
- What is the quality of contact I have made with non-colleagues this week?

(iii) The next time you look at your diary for the year:

- What have you achieved non-professionally this year-to-date?
- Have you set realistic personal and professional goals for the rest of the year?
- Have I developed and maintained friendships outside of work?

- What would you describe as your interests?

As we ask the hard questions, hopefully we can develop insight into our own circumstances!
In Part II of this series we will look at signs of distress, and strategies to deal with excessive stress.

[Images courtesy of Google Images]