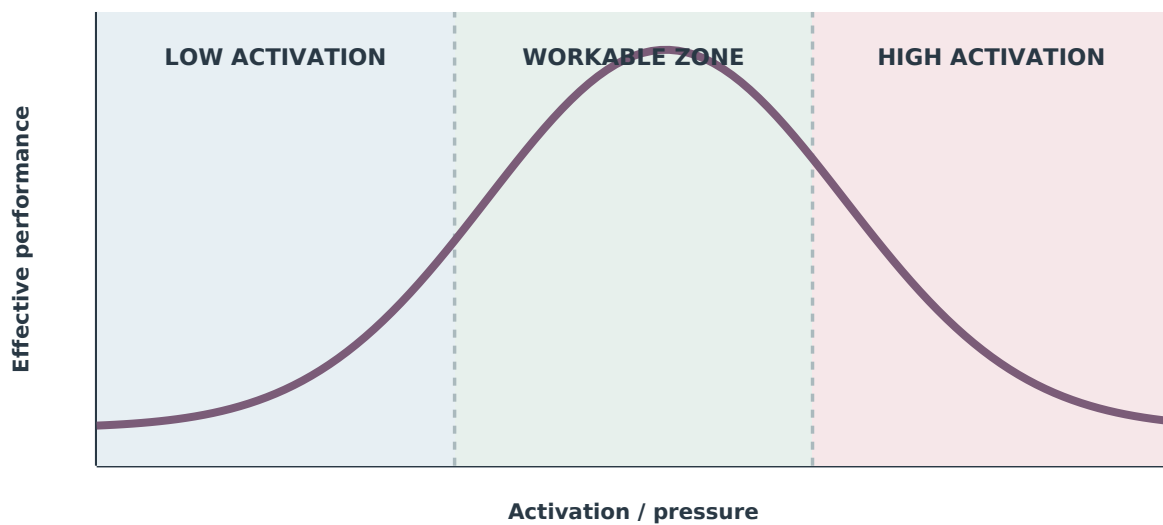


Stress and Performance

Using the Yerkes-Dodson principle as a flexible conversation tool

Stress is not simply helpful or harmful. A manageable amount of activation can sometimes support energy, attention and motivation. Too little may leave us disengaged; too much can narrow attention, disrupt memory and make complex thinking harder. This relationship is often represented by an inverted-U curve.

The stress-performance curve



Low activation

Starting may feel difficult. Attention wanders, the task feels unrewarding and there may be too little urgency to organise action.

Workable activation

There may be enough energy to begin, enough focus to stay engaged and enough flexibility to correct mistakes without panic.

High activation

Working memory, perspective and decision-making may become less reliable. Speed can replace accuracy and recovery takes longer.

A useful model - not a rule about you

The classic curve is a simplified model, not a personal measurement. The original research was not a study of everyday human stress, and later work shows that task difficulty, familiarity, sleep, health, sensory load, neurodivergence, trauma, meaning and available support can all shift the pattern. A complex or unfamiliar task may need a calmer state than a simple, well-practised one.

Finding your workable zone

Use your own patterns rather than trying to match a perfect curve

Choose one real task

Choose one current task, such as writing, presenting, studying, attending an appointment or completing admin. Your workable level may differ for every task.

The task I am thinking about

Too little activation

What do you notice in your body, thoughts and behaviour?

My workable zone

What tells you that you are engaged but still flexible?

Too much activation

What are your early signs of overload or rushing?

Adjust the conditions

If activation is too low

Add a clear first step, a short timer, movement, brighter light, music, accountability, novelty or a meaningful reason to begin.

If activation is too high

Reduce sensory load, divide the task, slow the pace, remove non-essential decisions, rehearse, ask for support or create recovery time.

One experiment I will try
