

Feedback can have a negative impact on performance, research shows

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People who give positive encouragement and constructive criticism could be wasting their breath according to the latest research from a psychology expert at Queen Mary, University of London.

The study, published in the journal *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, found that when people received either positive or negative feedback about their performance on complex decision-making tasks, it made their decision making worse.

Study author Dr Magda Osman explained: "The kind of task people had to perform was difficult and demanding. So, when people received positive or [negative feedback](#), it overloaded them with too much information and distracted them from making a good decision.

"We found that people's performance got worse when they had to make sense of the feedback they were given while also performing the main task.

"The role of feedback is overemphasised. People typically think that any form of feedback should improve performance in many tasks, and the more frequently it is given the better performance will be.

"However what needs to be considered is how complex the task is in the first place, because this will determine how much feedback will actually interfere with rather than facilitate performance."

The study involved about 100 people who were given the task of choosing how best to either predict or control the state of [health](#) of a baby, revealing that feedback can play a negative role in a particularly complex decision-making scenario.

However Dr Osman said this type of finding can be generalised and applied to a variety of other complex situations.

"The introduction of [smart energy](#) meters into the home to monitor the amount of energy you're consuming seems like a nice 'green' idea to help you consume less energy, but the complexity of the feedback people receive may not necessarily help them to reduce their [energy consumption](#)," she said.

"If the energy meter keeps changing and people are unable to track what [appliances](#) are on, how could they possibly learn how to lower their energy consumption?

"People are already being bombarded with high levels of complex information with the influx of new technology into our lives and the increasing reliance on information from the smorgasbord of apps we have at our fingertips. It is bound to take its toll on our ability to make good choices in difficult decision-making situations."

Dr Osman warns that people in management positions need to be aware of the type of feedback they are providing to their staff.

"We have shown that feedback really doesn't help people who are making complex decisions. People in management positions need to give their staff more time to analyse and evaluate things in detail when dealing with difficult situations so they can come up with solutions without any distractions in order to get the best out of them."

Dr Osman added that her findings disagree with Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman who writes in his popular book 'Thinking, Fast and Slow' that feedback is good, and is also at odds with the authors Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein whose book 'Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness' was named Best Book of the Year by The Economist.

"My work shows that feedback alone is not enough to ensure success in decision making. I may not be popular for my research into the role of feedback in complex decision-making tasks but I hope it will make some people think twice about whether they could potentially hinder people's performance with the [feedback](#) they provide," she said.

Provided by Queen Mary, University of London

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