

'Morning people' self-sabotage less at night, night owls' less at sunrise

August 30 2016



Study participants reported more stress before an exam at their "peak" hours based upon circadian rhythm. Credit: jessica_seewer/Indiana University

A study by psychological researchers at Indiana University shows that people are more likely to undermine their performance at stressful tasks

when they're operating at "peak capacity" based on their preferred time of the day.

The seemingly counterintuitive results, recently reported in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, are based on an investigation into the connection between people's circadian rhythm and risk of "self-handicapping," or self-sabotage. But rather than trying to protect against possible failure more at "off-peak" times, the study found, people actually engage in this behavior more at their peak times.

In other words, "morning people," who reported greater alertness at sunrise, self-handicapped more in the morning, and "night owls," who reported greater alertness at sunset, self-handicapped more in the evening.

Self-handicapping is defined by psychologists as when an individual seeks to protect their ego against potential failure in advance by creating circumstances—real or imagined—that harm their ability to carry out a stressful task. A classic example is failing to study or staying out too late the night before an important test or job interview.

The behavior also extends to mere claims of debilitating circumstances, such as imagined illness, fatigue or stress. Other studies have linked self-handicapping to other self-destructive behaviors, such as aggression, overeating and drug or alcohol addiction.

The study also found that people chronically prone to making excuses reported the same stress levels at "off-peak" hours as peers who do not engage in this behavior. Only at peak hours did these individuals report higher levels of stress as an excuse for poor performance.

"What this study tells us is that self-handicapping requires thought and planning," said Ed Hirt, professor in the IU Bloomington College of Arts

and Sciences' Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences and an author on the study. "People who are feeling uncertain about themselves and start to fear that they might fail are more likely to identify potential excuses and self-handicap when they're at their peak than when they're not."

"When an individual's positive self-views are threatened, they may lash out against the source of the threat, compare themselves to others worse off than themselves, or engage in self-destructive actions, such as substance abuse," added Julie Eyink, a graduate student in Hirt's lab and lead author on the study. "Unfortunately, it's not uncommon to get caught in a negative spiral, in which self-handicapping leads to lower self-esteem and higher failure beliefs, which prompt more self-handicapping."

To conduct the study, IU researchers administered intelligent tests to 237 students (98 men and 139 women), half of whom were told that stress had been found to affect performance on the test and half of whom were told that stress should not affect the result.

The tests were randomly administered at 8 a.m. or 8 p.m. to volunteers who had been previously categorized as "night people" or "morning people" based upon a survey shown to accurately predict circadian rhythm. Study participants were also assessed for their tendency to self-sabotage through questions about their stress levels prior to the exam.

The tests and morning or night preference assessments were given two weeks apart, and participants were unaware that circadian rhythm would be a factor in the study. The individuals who administered the tests were unaware who had been labeled "morning people" or "night owls."

The results were that people who scored higher in terms of risk for self-sabotage reported greater stress levels at hours of peak performance.

A high or low tendency to self-sabotage did not make a difference at off-peak hours, however. Both groups reported the same [stress levels](#) at these times.

"The results seem counterintuitive, but what they really show is clear evidence that self-handicapping is a resource demanding strategy," said Eyink. "Only people who had their peak cognitive resources were able to engage in self-handicapping."

Based solely on the study, she said people who want to avoid self-sabotage might conclude they should engage in stressful tasks at off-peak times. But she also warns that such a strategy would require carrying out tasks at a time when a person lacks all the cognitive tools required to achieve top performance.

"Ultimately," she said, "I would advise that working to avoid self-handicapping—through actions such as healthful practices, seeking help or counseling—is the best strategy."

More information: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2016.07.010](#)

Provided by Indiana University

Citation: 'Morning people' self-sabotage less at night, night owls' less at sunrise (2016, August 30) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-morning-people-self-sabotage-night-owls.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
