

# Study assesses how we perceive other people's stress levels in the workplace

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Credit: Tel Aviv University

A new Tel Aviv University study finds that people often project their own experiences with stress onto their colleagues and employees, causing miscommunication and, often, missed opportunities.

"This study is the first to show that our own psychological mindset determines how we judge other peoples' responses to [stress](#)—specifically, whether we perceive stress as positive or negative," said principal investigator Prof. Sharon Toker of TAU's Coller School of Management.

The research was published online in the *Journal of Experimental Social*

*Psychology.*

## **The positives and negatives of stress**

"This research informs the way managers assess their employees' ability to take on different workloads. It may also inform our relationships with our spouses—or with our children," Prof. Toker says. "For example, a typical 'tiger mom' is sure that stress is a good thing. She may simply not see how burned out her child may be."

Experiments conducted by Prof. Toker and researchers Prof. Daniel Heller and Nili Ben-Avi, also of TAU's Coller School of Management, found that a person's individual stress mindset colors the way he or she will perceive a colleague or employee's health, work productivity and degree of burnout.

"If a manager perceives that a certain employee doesn't suffer from stress, that manager will be more likely to consider the employee worthy of promotion," Prof. Toker says. "But because the manager believes that stress is a positive quality that leads to self-sufficiency, the manager will also be less likely to offer assistance if the employee needs it," Prof. Toker says.

Prof. Toker and her colleagues recruited 377 American employees for an online "stress-at-work" questionnaire. Participants were asked to read a description of "Ben," a fictitious [employee](#) who works long hours, has a managerial position and needs to multitask. The employees then rated his burnout levels and completed a stress mindset questionnaire about Ben.

"The more participants saw stress as positive and enhancing, the more they perceived Ben as experiencing less burnout and consequently rated him as more worthy of being promoted," Prof. Toker says.

## Changing minds

The researchers also wanted to see whether they could change people's perceptions of stress and consequently change the way they perceive other peoples' stress. They conducted a series of further experiments among 600 employed Israelis and Americans to determine whether their stress mindset can be cultivated or changed.

The researchers randomly assigned the employees to "enhancing" or "debilitating" stress mindset groups of 120-350 people. Using a technique called "priming"—prompting participants to think of the word "stress" in either positive or negative terms—the participants were asked to write about past stress experiences in either a "positive/enhancing" or "negative/debilitating" way. They were then asked to read a description of Ben's workload and assess Ben's burnout, rate of productivity and psychosomatic symptoms.

Participants were also asked whether Ben should be promoted and whether they would be willing to help him with his workload.

"Study participants who were primed to have a positive/enhancing stress mindset rated Ben as suffering less from stress-related symptoms and were consequently more likely to recommend Ben for promotion. They were also less likely to offer him help," Prof. Heller says. "But those primed to feel as though stress was debilitating/negative felt that Ben was more burned out and consequently less fit to be promoted."

"Your stress [mindset](#) will affect your judgement of other people's stress responses," Ben-Avi concludes. "But we have shown that even if stress affects you positively, it can distort the way you see your colleagues, your employees, your spouses, even your own children. We should be very careful about assessing other people's [stress levels](#)."

**More information:** Nili Ben-Avi et al, "If stress is good for me, it's probably good for you too": Stress mindset and judgment of others' strain, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2017.09.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.09.002)

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