

# Stressed? Your relationship with your boss may be playing a role

November 8 2018, by Matthew Slater And Martin J Turner

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Credit: Gustavo Fring from Pexels

Everybody knows how horrible it is to be stressed out at work. Sadly, across the world, employees are being subjected to increasing work demands and, as a result, [work stress is on the rise](#). As we try to

understand the root of the problem, we often end up blaming our boss.

But is that really fair? Our new study, [published in the \*Leadership Quarterly\*](#), suggests that your relationship with your boss does influence how you respond to stress.

Given that it's National Stress Awareness Day, let's start with the basics. Stress [isn't always bad for us](#). Research shows that when people feel they have sufficient psychological resources to meet demands – such as high self confidence – stress can be helpful. Psychologists call this a "[challenge](#) state." When people feel they do not have sufficient psychological resources, on the other hand, stress can be unhelpful. This is called a "threat state."

So, it's not as simple as low stress is good and high stress is bad. Our approach explores whether individuals experience stress as a challenge (helpful) or a threat (unhelpful) – irrespective of the level of stress. This is really important, because challenge responses [are associated with greater health](#) and superior performance, while threat responses are associated with poorer health and [inferior performance](#). This is because our bodies react differently in a challenge vs. threat state. In a challenge state, our physiological responses are more efficient – for example, blood flow to brain and muscles is enhanced.

The physical differences between challenge and threat states allow us to objectively measure whether someone is challenged or threatened by a particular stressor. This can be done by monitoring cardiovascular responses such as blood pressure. In our new study, we did just that to investigate whether a psychological connection with a leader influenced how people coped with stress.

## Leadership and stress

The idea of a psychological connection with a leader may seem strange. Surely leadership is about the traits and special qualities of "the boss." Contemporary thinking on leadership [suggests not](#). At its core, leadership is a collective activity that involves the followers' relationship with a group or organisation and their leader. If you feel a strong sense of connection with your boss, chances are that you will be more committed, expend more effort and have a better working relationship with them. It's much less about the "me" of the leader, and much more about the "we" of a group.

But how do you know if you have a strong or weak psychological connection with your boss? Ultimately, you're more likely to feel a strong psychological connection if you think your leader represents the group's interests (rather than just their own), develops shared values and goals, and instils a sense of togetherness in the organisation.

We had a hunch that there may be stress benefits of having a strong psychological connection with a leader ahead of a pressurised task. In our study, we assigned 83 participants to one of three experimental conditions: strong, weak and neutral [psychological connection](#) between leader and follower. The participants were all university students and they were told the task – a competition (cognitive test) between the participants' university and a local, rival university – was real. We selected an individual to act as the leader. In one case, he was the professor of the same university (strong connection); in another, a professor of the rival university (weak connection). We also had him act as a professor without specific affiliation (neutral).

First we used a questionnaire to ask participants how they felt about the upcoming stress task. We found that feeling a strong connection with the leader produced a challenge state. Participants felt more confident. They were also more mobilised to put in effort and performed better on a cognitive task under pressure.

Next, with a new group of participants, we actually assessed challenge and threat responses physically via changes in cardiovascular responses from rest (including measures of blood pressure). We found that the extent to which participants felt connected to the leader influenced these measures. People who felt little connection with their leader were significantly more likely to experience a threat state – bad for performance, and bad for health.

This has far reaching implications for stress in the general working population. While leaders tend to be from the same organisation as their employees, we can still feel like they care about us more or less. The fact that we chose a leader from a rival university in our experiment represents an extreme version of a leader who doesn't represent the interests of their employees.

Leaders are well placed to develop strong psychological connections with their staff. They can turn to their team to create shared values and a shared vision. In this way, the [boss](#) can be seen as "one of us," which can help to manage the [stress](#) of employees.

For those of us who aren't leaders, it may be good to know that feeling stressed isn't just about how "strong" we are – factors including social relationships play a part, too. And only by identifying these factors can we develop the right tools to improve the experience of working life for all.

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