



PA Media: Science

People are quick to believe the worst when they are stressed – study

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People are quicker to jump to the worst conclusion when they are stressed, new research suggests.

A new study indicates that when under stress people reach undesirable conclusions based on weaker evidence than when they are relaxed.

The findings suggest that stress can make people more likely to conclude the worst scenario is true.

Senior author Professor Tali Sharot, UCL Psychology and Language Sciences and Max Planck UCL Centre for Computational Psychiatry and Ageing Research, said: "Many of the most significant choices you will make, from financial decisions to medical and professional ones, will happen while you feel stressed.

"Often these decisions require you to first gather information and weigh the evidence.

"For example, you may consult multiple physicians before deciding on a best course of medical treatment.

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weigh each piece of evidence that supports undesirable conclusions more than when they are relaxed.

“In contrast, how they weigh evidence that supports desirable conclusions is not affected by stress.

“As a result, people are more likely to conclude the worst is true when they are stressed.”

The small study saw 91 volunteers play a categorisation game, in which they could gather as much evidence as they wanted to decide whether they were in a desirable environment (associated with rewards) or an undesirable environment (associated with losses).

The participants were incentivised for accuracy.

Before playing the game, 40 of them were told they had to give a public speech, which would be judged by a panel of experts, prompting them to feel stressed and anxious.

UCL researchers found that under stress, the volunteers needed weaker evidence to reach the conclusion of being in the undesirable environment.

But the stress did not change the strength of the evidence needed to reach the conclusion they were in the desirable environment, the study found.

Lead author, PhD student Laura Globig, UCL Psychology & Language Sciences and Max Planck UCL Centre for Computational Psychiatry and Ageing Research, said: “We usually think of stressful situations as a hindrance to our decision-making process.

“But the pattern of learning we have uncovered may counterintuitively be adaptive, because negative beliefs may drive people to be extra cautious when in threatening environments.”

The study, published in the Journal of Neuroscience, was funded by Wellcome, and involved researchers at UCL, the University of Tübingen, the Max Planck

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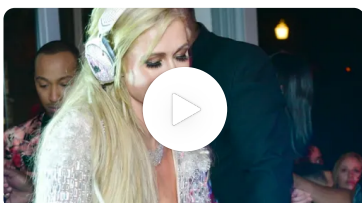


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