

How the Afterglow of Victory Boosts Future Performance

When we perform well together, we feel less tense with each other, and when we feel less tense with each other, we perform better.

Imagine you are about to undergo an operation meant to remove a cancerous tumour. It is a complicated surgery that requires two surgeons working as a pair. In what frame of mind would you rather they be as they scrub and prepare to work with one another? Relaxed? Alert? Excited?

As it turns out, when it comes to emotions, the main component of the working relationship between your two surgeons that can impact the outcome of your surgery – and negatively so – is whether they feel tense working with each other. And what could help them feel less tense? In a self-reinforcing way, it would be if they have performed exceptionally well together at least once in the past.

This is what **Tiziana Casciaro**, **Hendrik Wilhelm**, **Michael Wittland** and I found in research we recently **published** in *Academy of Management Discoveries*. Of all the forms of relational affect we considered – how relaxed, excited, alert, nervous or tense surgeons can feel when working with each other – we found that only relational tension predicted joint task performance. Although exploratory in nature, these results can be generalised to a host of other professional situations in which people collaborate.

How we make each other feel

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Considerable research has focused on how emotions affect individual performance. To give just one example: **Feeling authentic** help us gain status in the office. Another important stream of research has examined the role of emotions at the group or organisational level. For instance, what happens when **trust deserts the workplace** or when **fear pervades upper management ranks** (spoiler alert: It nearly killed Nokia).

But emotions felt in the course of a close working collaboration can be different. Academically speaking, they remain relatively unexplored, despite how common this context is: Think of cockpit crews, police officers, entertainment duos, start-up founders, researchers or even chefs and sous-chefs.

We partnered with a hospital in Germany that gave us access to detailed data on 1,790 gastrointestinal tumour-removal surgeries performed by doctors working in pairs. Importantly, all twenty-odd surgeons agreed to fill in questionnaires to share how they felt when working with individual colleagues. They did that at their leisure over a two-month period, which gave us data on 1,315 pre-surgery surgeries and 475 post-surgery surgeries. Since surgeons don't choose whom they pair with for any given operation, our dataset was effectively randomised, in this case by hospital management.

Medical literature shows that, for the same level of complexity, a surgery performed more quickly is a better one, as it reduces the patient's risk of a wide range of complications. Shorter surgeries also mean that a surgeon is able to operate (and thus help) more patients within the same timeframe. Lastly, they improve hospital efficiency. So, after normalising our data to make the different types of operations comparable, we used surgery duration as a proxy for team performance.

The critical importance of tension

We weren't sure what we would find. In the early stages of our research, in talks on this topic we asked the specialised scholars in attendance to predict what would influence surgical performance. The majority predicted that positive forms of affect would yield a (positive) influence.

However, our main finding from the data is that only tension matters enough to be significant with our sample size. If at least one of the two surgeons forming a pair feels tense when working with the other, it reduces the overall performance of the team. Positive types of affect don't translate into better performance.

After we ran our analysis, we conducted interviews with the surgeons. In terms of what could affect their performance, the factor that they most often mentioned – unprompted – was tension.

While it may be surprising that a positive relational affect didn't have more of an impact, it is worth noting that prior studies have shown that a **positive mood impairs working memory**. Clearly, this could be detrimental to the error-free execution of complex tasks, like flying an aircraft ... or performing a surgery.

How to reduce tension

Past **research** shows that when we evaluate an experience, we do not average the sum of the emotions we felt as it happened. Instead, we average two specific moments: how we felt at the peak of the experience and when it ended. The peak is defined as the best moment of a pleasurable experience or the worst moment of a painful experience.

For instance, in a study, participants plunged their hands in ice-cold water twice. The first time, they did so for 60 seconds. The second time, the unpleasant task lasted an extra 30 seconds, during which the water temperature was increased by a tiny margin. Some 69 percent of the subjects preferred the longer trial – even though it involved more discomfort as a whole – as they experienced a bit less pain at the tail end of it.

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In our case, the most recent experience was not a reliable data point for us because of the two-month variation in the timing of our data collection. But we did look at peak experience, both positive and negative. Based on the pre-survey surgery data, we found that when two surgeons had shared at least one surgery that went extremely well, they reported reduced tension between them when filling out the questionnaire.

Nothing else, including past low points in joint performance, came close in terms of predicting the emotional tone of the relationship, whether positively or negatively. Past successes counted a lot more than past failures. Interestingly, in the interviews at the end of the study, surgeons never raised events or factors outside of the operating room as sources of tension with their colleagues during surgery.

Overall, our findings are consistent with the literature on **psychological safety**. When people can work without being tense and without the fear of being judged, they perform better. As our own subjects work in a field characterised by a low margin for error, tension might play an outsize role, but we believe that the critical link between tension and performance holds in many other work contexts.

Celebrating successes to create the memory of a peak experience

In practical terms, managers may want to identify the teams (or dyads) that have had previous successes and continue pairing them up, where possible.

One scenario that can increase tension is when a very senior worker is paired with a junior one. When this situation can't be avoided, it may help the junior to view it as a trade-off: While stressful, it is a golden opportunity to learn more and improve one's skills.

In many settings, success is much more subjective than the speed at which a surgery can be performed. In such case, it may be helpful to emphasise wins – in whatever form they come – and celebrate them, to create the memory of a peak experience. After all, having experienced success together shows that we can do it again.

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