

GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING

DISTRESS, EUSTRESS, AND TRUST



When someone experiences a distressful event, one area of the brain sends a distress signal to another that operates like the body's command center. From here, signals are sent to spike the rates of heart, pulse, and blood pressure. Extra oxygen is sent to the brain to increase alertness. This system is so fast that the signals produce physical changes even before the brain's visual centers have had a chance to fully process what is happening. In this condition the ability to feel empathy is inhibited.

Moderate stress, also known as eustress, however, increases the release of oxytocin (and empathy). It is natural to seek out others to resolve a challenge at such times. We think that might account for the "adrenaline high" we've each experienced when working on a tricky problem in a group.

Women carry more oxytocin than men. In studies conducted by Nowack and Zak (2017), women, on average, produced more oxytocin. This may help explain findings from other studies in which women, in general, were found to be more socially sensitive than men (Woolley et al., 2010). Testosterone inhibits oxytocin. Men carry five to ten times more testosterone than women. High-testosterone males were less generous, perhaps not yielding the floor, or hearing the ideas of others before their own. High-testosterone males demanded more of others. How might this information inform teamwork and assist in strengthening interpersonal trust?