

Providing a conducive atmosphere during oral examination leads to better performance, finds research

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During an oral examination, those who tend to perceive the situation as a challenge rather than a threat are less stressed and perform better.

This has been demonstrated by Dr. Nina Minkley from Biology Education at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany, Marco Schickel and Professor Tobias Ringeisen from the Berlin School of Economics and Law in a study involving more than 100 participants. They advise examiners to help reduce stress by providing, for example, information about the conditions of the examination and creating a friendly atmosphere. They reported their findings in the journal *Contemporary Educational Psychology* on 6 March 2023.

Challenge and threat are independent of each other

Many people are familiar with a fear of examinations, very few would not at least be a little nervous before an oral [presentation](#). The research team took a closer look at the physical and mental reactions before and during this kind of presentation. To do this, they asked 123 participants to talk about their suitability for their dream job in front of an examiner, who reacted neutrally. Before and after this presentation, [saliva samples](#) were taken from the people undergoing the test and the concentration of the stress hormone cortisol was determined.

They also asked the participants questions, which provided information about whether they perceived the situation as threatening or challenging. The adjectives "confident," "hopeful" and "optimistic" represented a [challenge](#), while "worried," "anxious" and "fearful" represented a [threat](#).

"The [perception](#) of threat and the cortisol concentration increased during the presentation, while the perception of challenge decreased. Challenge and threat thus show opposite courses and can occur independently of each other," reports Nina Minkley.

"Decreasing cortisol and reduced threat are associated with improved presentation performance." In particular, the perception of self-efficacy reduced the release of [cortisol](#) and led to the participants view the

situation as a challenge rather than as a threat.

Possibilities for examiners

"This knowledge is particularly interesting as it highlights possible ways to reduce stress during oral examinations," says Nina Minkley. "For example, examiners could inform the examinees about the conditions and requirements of the presentation situation in advance in order to keep the initial perception of threat as low as possible."

In addition, examiners could create a friendly and supportive atmosphere right at the beginning when those giving the presentations enter the room, respond more emotionally and give behavior-based feedback.

More information: Marco Schickel et al, Performance during presentations: A question of challenge and threat responses?, *Contemporary Educational Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2023.102168](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2023.102168)

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