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# More authority means less stress, say Stanford and Harvard psychologists

In a study of high-ranking government and military officials, Stanford psychologist James Gross and a Harvard team found that a higher rank was associated with less anxiety and lower levels of a stress hormone.

BY MAX MCCLURE

D. Myles Cullen / Defense Department



The researchers found a direct correlation between rank and stress: The higher the leadership position, the lower the stress.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" is that rare thing – a Shakespearean quote embraced by the world of management. The high-powered but perpetually tense leader is a trope from Wall Street to the Pentagon. The idea of "executive burnout" has inspired a

to the Pentagon. The idea of executive burnout has inspired a cottage industry of stress management directed toward government and corporate leaders.

But the top seat may be more comfortable than leaders have been suggesting. A study from Stanford psychology Professor James Gross and Jennifer Lerner, a professor of public policy and management at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, suggests that leadership positions are, in fact, associated with *lower* levels of stress.

The paper appeared Monday, Sept. 24, in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

## Stress metrics

"We live as social beings in a stratified society," Gross said. "It's our relative status in a group that disproportionately influences our happiness and well-being."

Specifically, a growing literature suggests that more power is associated with less stress. The Whitehall studies of health in the British civil service showed that higher governmental rank was strongly correlated with lower mortality rates. Stanford biology professor Robert Sapolsky's measurements of the stress hormone cortisol in baboons showed lower levels of the hormone in high-ranking troop members.

The new Stanford-Harvard study looked at both cortisol measurements and self-reported anxiety levels within a rarely studied group: high-ranking government and military officials enrolled in a Harvard executive leadership program.

Although evaluating stress is itself complex – cortisol levels and reported anxiety are not necessarily correlated – the researchers found that high-ranking leaders were less stressed according to both measures. The strength of the relationship was directly related to rank: the higher the position, the lower the stress.

## In control

To tease out the specifics of these results, the researchers asked, as Gross put it, "What exactly about a job makes it a leadership role?"

The critical element seems to be a sense of control. The connection between power and tranquility was dependent on the total number of subordinates a leader had and on the degree of authority or autonomy a job conferred.

It's possible, in other words, that the feeling of being in charge of one's own life more than makes up for the greater amount of responsibility that accompanies higher rungs on the social ladder.

The present study is correlational, meaning it is unable to say whether leadership leads to low stress levels, or whether people who are predisposed to feel little stress are more likely to be leaders. But Gross and Lerner view the study as an initial look at a topic that has relevance to anyone who lives in our inherently hierarchical modern society.

"By looking at real leaders, people who really have a lot of real-world responsibility, we can learn a lot about stress and health in general," Gross said.

## MEDIA CONTACT

James Gross, Psychology: (650) 723-1281, [gross@stanford.edu](mailto:gross@stanford.edu)

Max McClure, Stanford News Service: (650) 725-6737,  
[maxmc@stanford.edu](mailto:maxmc@stanford.edu)