2.3   The stimulation performance curve, a sort of inverted 'U' shape that is characteristic of many psychological dimensions. If we are inadequately stimulated, we are bored and lose interest in our task. Over-stimulation means that we simply cannot concentrate. Our maximal performance comes somewhere in between

of stimulation we require varies – some people simply like the quiet life, while others prefer more action – but even then our needs change as our moods change and indeed as we age. It is of course impossible to produce an environment that all would feel ideal. However, there does seem to be a sort of inverted U-shaped curve of performance against arousal (Fig. 2.3). Take reading this book, for instance. If you are too sleepy, you really will not take much in; if you are too hyped up and distracted by other events, you are equally unlikely to get much out of it. Where we need to be on this curve depends upon our situation. Listening to a lecture requires a high level of attention and concentration, while relaxed chatting with a friend does not. There is clear evidence that over-stimulation from the environment can result in a form of stress that in turn disturbs the focus of attention and inhibits the carrying out of plans (Wohlwill 1974). One of the reasons that meeting new people is rather stressful is that you feel obliged to pay them polite attention, and because you do not know them well you need to concentrate hard on this. With an old friend not only do you know the sort of things they might say or be interested in, but also they will forgive you if your mind wanders away on the odd occasion!

There are certainly places we go to expecting them to provide large amounts of stimulation. The fairground, particularly at night, with its contrast of light and dark, the noise and hustle and bustle and the smells of food, is a prime example. We demand that such an environment should divert us – there is no need for internal mental activity here; that is just the point! Such a place is meant to drive away our