

# General Psychology

## Notes - Health, Stress & Coping

These are general notes designed to assist students who are regularly attending class and reading assigned material: they are supplemental rather than exhaustive and reflect general concepts.

### I. Health Psychology

- A. Studies how psychological influences affect physical health and response to illness.
- B. In U.S. - leading causes of death have become chronic illnesses
  - 1. Cancer, heart disease influenced by psychological, lifestyle, and environmental factors
  - 2. Approximately 1/2 of all U.S. deaths are attributed to preventable lifestyle behaviors
- C. Tries to teach people how their behavior and decision making affects their health

### II. Understanding Stress

- A. **Stress** - the process of adapting to changes (physical and psychological) demand of you
- B. **Stressors** - events and situations in which you must react
  - 1. **Psychological** - positive or negative life events, which you believe you must adjust
    - a. **Catastrophic Events** - shocking and life - threatening
    - b. **Life Changes and Strains** - especially negative (divorce, unemployment, illness)
    - c. **Chronic Stressors** - experience over a long period of time (discrimination)
    - d. **Daily Hassles** - minor irritations, pressures, and annoyances cumulatively
  - 2. **Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)** measures stressors according to the degree to which they require a change (good or bad) on one's life. **LCU - Life Change Units** - assigned to events such as divorce, death, pregnancy, losing a job, and getting married.
  - 3. **Life Experiences Survey (LES)** designed to ask subjects to rate their perception of stress.
- C. **Stress Reactions** - physical, psychological, and behavioral responses used to meet demands
  - 1. **Physical Stress Responses - General Adaptation Syndrome** (Hans Selye)
    - a. **Alarm Stage** - immediate, fight or flight response to mobilize body for action (increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, digestion slows down, etc.)
    - b. **Resistance Stage** - change of initial alarm subsides and a new wave of "adaptive energy" helps combat the stressor (endorphins & corticosteroids released)
    - c. **Exhaustion Stage** - resources/biochemical are depleted. Physical wear and tear takes its toll, producing diseases of adaptation, such as heart disease, arthritis, and colds.
  - 2. **Emotional Stress Responses** - include fear, anger, irritability, and anxiety
  - 3. **Cognitive Stress Responses** - poor concentration, distorted thinking, and forgetfulness
    - a. **Ruminative Thinking** - recurring intrusion of thoughts about stressful events
    - b. **Catastrophizing** - overemphasizing possible negative consequences
    - c. Increased tendency to rely on mental sets and functional fixedness
  - d. Stress impairs effective decision - making
  - 4. **Behavioral Stress Responses** - changes in how people look, act, or talk - facial

expressions, perspiration, shaky voice, muscle spasms, jumpiness, disheveled appearance

5. **Burnout** (dysfunctional, apathetic, impulsive, and mistake - prone) & **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder/PSTD** (anxiety, irritability, poor concentration, sexual problems, flashbacks, paranoia, hypervigilance, psychomotor agitation, and blunted affect) linked to poor psychological adaptation to stressors

D. **Mediating Factors** - circumstances and personal characteristics that affect stress reactions

1. **Cognitive Appraisal** - events interpreted as stressful because you perceive self as lacking the resources to cope with the stressor effectively. Shapes the quality and intensity of response.
2. **Predictability** - knowing when to expect the stressor lessens the impact of the stressor
3. **Internal Locus of Control** lessens the impact of the stressor
4. **Social Support Network** - helps to manage the effects of stress. Helps people feel calm, optimistic, in control, and willing to try new coping methods (not alone)
5. Personality - influences response to stress
  - a. **Hardiness** associated with positive response to stress
    - \* internal locus of **control** - "captain of my ship, master of my fate"
    - \* **commitment** - to family, work, and society
    - \* perceive **change** as an opportunity for growth and transformation
  - b. **Disease Prone Personalities**
    - \* **type A** - time urgency, competitive, fast - paced, driven over - achiever. **Cynical Hostility** (suspiciousness, resentment, frequent anger, antagonism, and distrust of others) crucial factor associated with heart disease.
    - \* **type C** - cancer prone personality - repressor (hold everything in)
    - \* **type E** - "everything to everyone" - variety of health complications
  - c. **Dispositional Optimism** - especially strong stress - buffer

III. The Physiology and Psychology of Health and Illness

A. Stress, the Immune System, and Illness

1. **Psychoneuroimmunology** - studies how psychological and physiological processes interact in the body's defense against disease
2. **White Blood Cells (leukocytes)** - make up the immune system and circulate individually throughout the body. These cells are formed in and released from the bone marrow. Recognize foreign cells and start an immune response.
  - a. **B - Cells** produce **antibodies**, protein that can circulate widely and target foreign invaders, toxins, and other substances.
  - b. **T - Cells** detect, bind to, and destroy entire cells.
  - c. **Natural Killer (NK) Cells** destroy cells, especially important in destroying cancer.
3. Immune system directly affect by stress.
  - a. More likely to develop infectious diseases & experience activation of a latent virus.
  - b. Stress often suppresses immune system (NK cells are less active when people take exams, during periods of grief, and while readjusting after a divorce)
  - c. Stress can accelerate the deterioration of HIV+/AIDS patient's immune system
  - d. Expressing pent-up emotions & discussing stressors enhances immune functioning  
**"Confession Good for the Soul Study"** - 3 groups of college students studied  
Group A - Wrote in a journal about stressors, feeling, and coping  
Group B - Wrote about trivial things (weather, attire, and TV shows.  
Group C - Did not write about anything

Results: Group A had fewer illnesses and higher white blood cell count

4. Risking your life: Health-Endangering behaviors

- a. Smoking is the single most preventable cause of death in the United States
  - \* Second - hand smoke suffer lung cancer and other respiratory diseases
- b. Alcohol Abuse - liver damage and irreversible brain damage (dementia)
- c. Unsafe/unprotected sex
- d. Poor nutrition
- e. Sleep disturbances
- f. Combination of any of these factors weakens the immune system

IV. Coping with Stress

A. Developing a Plan of Action

- 1. Identify the problem/stressor and the physical, behavioral, and psychological effects
- 2. Identify possible strategies that can be used to address the problem(s) - BRAINSTORM
- 3. Choose strategies
- 4. Take action/implement plan
- 5. Evaluate effectiveness
- 6. Modify plan if necessary

B. Coping Strategies

- 1. **Cognitive Coping Strategies** - rethinking the problem
  - a. **Cognitive Restructuring** - modify or change distorted thinking patterns and irrational beliefs
  - b. **Social Comparison** - identify someone that is worse off than you
  - c. **Reappraisal** - what is positive about present challenge
  - d. **Humor** - identify absurd or lighter side of challenge. Laugh at yourself. Actually improves immune functioning and increases endorphin level
  - e. **Self - Efficacy** - belief that you can master/cope with any challenge
- 2. **Emotional Focused Coping Strategies**
  - a. Ventilate feelings in a constructive way
    - \* Talk to a friend, counselor, minister
    - \* Write in a journal or write letters (do not mail)
    - \* Crying - tears are the river to your soul
    - \* Physical Exercise - running, punching a "bop" bag or pillow (do not hit a wall)
    - \* Screaming in a remote or private area
  - b. Seek/create a social support system
- 3. **Behavioral Coping Strategies**
  - a. Time-Management
    - \* Keep a daily planner
    - \* Make a "to do" list for each day
    - \* Prioritize your responsibilities
    - \* Cross off responsibilities when accomplished (provides reinforcement)
    - \* Complete one task at a time
    - \* Make use of down - time (waiting for class to start, sitting in DR's office)
    - \* Delegate responsibility
    - \* Just say no! Recognize your limitations
    - \* Maintain organization

b. **Behavior Modification**

- \* Target behavior (example: Study more often)
- \* Identify plan and reinforcers for success and punishers for failure  
(Study Psychology 20 minutes 3 x a day 5 days a week)  
(Reinforcer/Punisher - Watch favorite TV show or go out with friend.)
- \* Make a contract with self and support system (if needed)
- \* Initiate the plan
- \* Evaluate success and modify if necessary

c. **Physical Coping Strategies**

- \* Exercise
- \* Rest and appropriate nutrition
- \* Progressive relaxation
- \* Medication
- \* **Biofeedback** - learn to control your autonomic responses
- \* Prescription Medication of other coping strategies are not successful

\*\*\*\*Problem-focused coping enhances self-esteem and self-efficacy\*\*\*\*