

# Stress and Coping

# STRESS: REACTING TO THREAT AND CHALLENGE

Whether it is a paper or an exam deadline, a family problem, or even the ongoing threat of a terrorist attack, life is full of circumstances and events known as stressors that produce threats to our well-being. Even pleasant events — such as planning a party or beginning a sought-after job — can produce stress, although negative events result in greater detrimental consequences than positive ones do.

All of us face stress in our lives. Some psychologists believe that daily life actually involves a series of repeated sequences of perceiving a threat, considering ways to cope with it, and ultimately adapting to the threat with greater or lesser success. Adaptation is often minor and occurs without our awareness, it requires a major effort when stress is more severe or long lasting. Ultimately, our attempts to overcome stress may produce biological and psychological responses that result in health problems

# THE NATURE OF STRESSORS: MY STRESS IS YOUR PLEASURE

Stress is a very personal thing. Certain kinds of events, such as the death of a loved one or participation in military combat, are universally stressful, other situations may or may not be stressful to a specific person. Consider, for instance, bungee jumping. Some people would find jumping off a bridge while attached to a slender rubber tether extremely stressful. However, there are individuals who see such an activity as challenging and fun filled. Whether bungee jumping is stressful depends in part, then, on a person's perception of the activity.

For people to consider an event stressful, they must perceive it as threatening or challenging and must lack all the resources to deal with it effectively. Consequently, the same event may at some times be stressful and at other times provoke no stressful reaction at all. A person's interpretation of events plays an important role in the determination of what is stressful.

# CATEGORIZING STRESSORS

- **Cataclysmic events** are strong stressors that occur suddenly and typically affect many people simultaneously. Disasters such as tornadoes and plane crashes as well as terrorist attacks are examples of cataclysmic events that can affect hundreds or thousands of people simultaneously. Cataclysmic events involving natural disasters may produce less stress in the long run than events that initially are not as devastating. One reason is that natural disasters have a clear resolution.
- **Personal stressors** include major life events such as the death of a parent or spouse, the loss of one's job, a major personal failure, or even something positive such as getting married. Typically, personal stressors produce an immediate major reaction that soon tapers off. For example, stress arising from the death of a loved one tends to be greatest just after the time of death, but people begin to feel less stress and are better able to cope with the loss after the passage of time.



# CATEGORIZING STRESSORS

Some victims of major catastrophes and severe personal stressors experience posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, in which a person has experienced a significantly stressful event that has long-lasting effects that may include re-experiencing the event in vivid flashbacks or dreams.

- **Background stressors** or more informally, daily hassles, are the third major category of stressors. Exemplified by standing in a long line at a bank and getting stuck in a traffic jam, daily hassles are the minor irritations of life that we all face time and time again. Another type of background stressor is a long-term, chronic problem, such as experiencing dissatisfaction with school or a job, being in an unhappy relationship, or living in crowded quarters without privacy. By themselves, daily hassles do not require much coping or even a response on the individual's part, although they certainly produce unpleasant emotions and moods.

# CATEGORIZING STRESSORS

the **number of daily hassles** people face is associated with psychological symptoms and health problems such as flu, sore throat, and backaches. The flip side of hassles is **uplifts**, the minor positive events that make us feel good—even if only temporarily. Uplifts range from relating well to a companion to finding one's surroundings pleasing. What is especially intriguing about uplifts is that they are associated with people's psychological health in just the opposite way that hassles are: The greater the number of uplifts we experience, the fewer the psychological symptoms we report later

# Most common everyday hassles and uplifts

Daily Hassles		Daily Uplifts	
1	Concerns about weight	1	Relating well to spouse or partner
2	Health of a family member	2	Relating well to friends
3	Rising price of common goods	3	Completing a task
4	Home maintenance	4	Feeling healthy
5	Too many things to do	5	Getting enough sleep
6	Misplacing or losing things	6	Eating out
7	Outside home maintenance	7	Meeting your responsibilities
8	Property, investment or taxes	8	Visiting, phoning or writing to someone
9	Crime	9	Spending time with the family
10	Physical appearance	10	Finding your home a pleasant environment

# THE HIGH COST OF STRESS

Stress can produce both biological and psychological consequences. Exposure to stressors generates a rise in hormone secretions by the adrenal glands, an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, and changes in how well the skin conducts electrical impulses. Continued exposure to stress results in a decline in the body's overall level of biological functioning because of the constant secretion of stress-related hormones.

Over time, stressful reactions can promote deterioration of body tissues such as blood vessels and the heart. Ultimately, we become more susceptible to disease as our ability to fight off infection is lowered. Stress can produce or worsen physical problems. Specifically, **psychophysiological disorders** are medical problems that are influenced by an interaction of psychological, emotional, and physical difficulties. Common psychophysiological disorders include high blood pressure, headaches, backaches, skin rashes, indigestion, fatigue, and constipation. Stress has even been linked to the common cold.



# THE HIGH COST OF STRESS

On a psychological level, high levels of stress prevent people from adequately coping with life. Their view of the environment can become clouded (for example, a minor criticism made by a friend is blown out of proportion). Moreover, at the highest levels of stress, emotional responses may be so extreme that people are unable to act at all. People under a lot of stress also become less able to deal with new stressors.

# COPING WITH STRESS

Efforts to control, reduce, or learn to tolerate the threats that lead to stress are known as **coping**. Coping with stress fall into two main categories :

- **Emotion-focused coping**. In emotion-focused coping, people try to manage their emotions in the face of stress by seeking to change the way they feel about or perceive a problem. Such as accepting sympathy from others and looking at the bright side of a situation.
- **Problem-focused coping**. Problem-focused coping attempts to modify the stressful problem or source of stress. Problem-focused strategies lead to changes in behavior or to the development of a plan of action to deal with stress. Starting a study group to improve poor classroom performance is an example of problem-focused coping. For example, taking a day off from caring for a relative with a serious, chronic illness to go a health club or spa can bring significant relief from stress.

People often employ both strategies simultaneously to deal with stress.

# COPING WITH STRESS

- **Defense mechanisms** are unconscious strategies that people use to reduce anxiety by concealing the source from themselves and others. Defense mechanisms permit people to avoid stress by acting as if the stress were not even there.
- **Emotional insulation** in which a person stops experiencing any emotions at all and thereby remains unaffected and unmoved by both positive and negative experiences.

The problem with defense mechanisms is that they merely hide the problem and do not deal with reality.

# LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Have you ever faced an intolerable situation that you just couldn't resolve, and you finally simply gave up and accepted things the way they were? This example illustrates one of the possible consequences of being in an environment in which control over a situation is not possible—a state that produces learned helplessness.

**Learned helplessness** occurs when people conclude that unpleasant stimuli cannot be controlled.

They develop a view of the world that becomes so ingrained that they stop trying to remedy the unpleasant circumstances even if they actually can exert some influence on the situation. For example, students who decide they are simply “no good in math” may not work very hard in math classes because they believe that no matter how hard they try, they'll never succeed. Their learned helplessness virtually ensures that they won't do well in math classes.



# LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Victims of learned helplessness have concluded that there is no link between the responses they make and the outcomes that occur. People experience more physical symptoms and depression when they perceive that they have little or no control than they do when they feel a sense of control over a situation

# COPING STYLES: HARDINESS

Among those who cope with stress most successfully are people who are equipped with hardiness, a personality trait characterized by a sense of commitment, the perception of problems as challenges, and a sense of control. Specifically, the three components of hardiness operate in different ways:

- **Commitment.** People with a strong level of commitment tend to throw themselves into whatever they are doing. They have a sense that their activities are important and meaningful.
- **Challenge.** Hardy people believe that change, rather than stability, is the standard condition of life. To them, the anticipation of change is something positive, rather than being seen as a threat.
- **Control.** a sense of control, the perception that people can influence the events in their lives.

Hardy individuals approach stress optimistically and take direct action to learn about and deal with stressors; they thereby change stressful events into less threatening ones. As a consequence, hardiness acts as a defense against stress-related illness

# COPING STYLES: RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to withstand, overcome, and actually thrive after profound adversity. Resilient people are generally optimistic, good-natured, and have good social skills.

They are usually independent, and they have a sense of control over their own destiny—even if fate has dealt them a devastating blow. In short, they work with what they have and make the best of whatever situation they find themselves in.

# SOCIAL SUPPORT: TURNING TO OTHERS

Researchers have found that the knowledge that we are part of a mutual network of caring, interested others, enables us to experience lower levels of stress and better cope with the stress we do undergo. The social and emotional support people provide each other helps in dealing with stress in several ways. For instance, such support demonstrates that a person is an important and valued member of a social network. Similarly, other people can provide information and advice about appropriate ways of dealing with stress.

Finally, people who are part of a social support network can provide actual goods and services to help others in stressful situations. Findings that attendance at religious services (as well as spirituality in general) provides health-related benefits also illustrate the importance of social support. For example, healthy people who regularly attend religious services live longer than those who do not attend regularly.



# WELL-BEING AND HAPPINESS

What makes for a good life? Psychologists are investigating **subjective well-being**, people's sense of their happiness and satisfaction with their lives.

Research on the subject of well-being shows that happy people share several characteristics:

- **Happy people have high self-esteem.** People who are happy like themselves. People who are happy see themselves as more intelligent and better able to get along with others than the average person is. In fact, they may hold positive illusions in which they hold moderately inflated views of themselves, believing that they are good, competent, and desirable.
- **Happy people have a firm sense of control.** They feel more in control of events in their lives, unlike those who feel they are the pawns (hostages) of others and who experience learned helplessness.

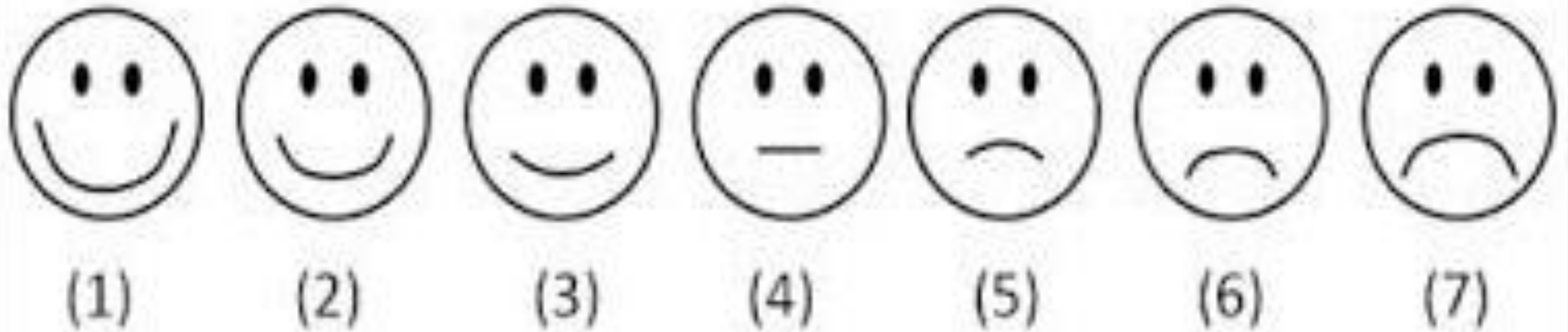
# WELL-BEING AND HAPPINESS

- **Happy individuals are optimistic.** Their optimism permits them to persevere at tasks and ultimately to achieve more. In addition, their health is better
- **Men and women generally are made happy by the same sorts of activities—but not always.** Most of the time, adult men and women achieve the same level of happiness from the same things, such as hanging out with friends. But there are some differences:
- **Happy people like to be around other people.** They tend to be extroverted and have a supportive network of close relationships.

Perhaps most important, most people are at least moderately happy most of the time.

# Faces Scale

“Which face comes closest to expressing how you feel about your life as a whole?”



# Faces Scale



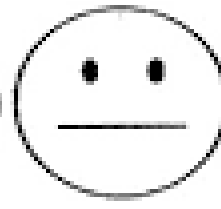
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Bad



Really  
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Bad



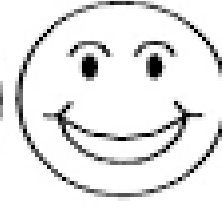
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Maybe  
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Good



Really  
Good



Super  
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