

The Psychology of Stress

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will introduce the concept of stress, its definition, and some of the ways stress affects our psychological health. We will explore stress in three parts:

1. Health Psychology

Stress is a process where an individual perceives and responds to events appraised as overwhelming or threatening to one's well-being. The scientific study of how stress and emotional factors impact health and well-being is called **health psychology**, a field devoted to studying the general impact of psychological factors on health. While there are circumstances in which stress can be good, we know that stress can have serious negative consequences on the body.

Stressors can be chronic (long term) or acute (short term), and can include traumatic events, significant life changes, daily hassles, and situations in which people are frequently exposed to challenging and unpleasant events. Many potential stressors include events or situations that require us to make changes in our lives, such as a divorce or moving to a new residence.



TERM TO KNOW

Health Psychology

A field of scientific study devoted to the general impact of psychological factors on health.

2. Stress

The term **stress** as it relates to the human condition first emerged in scientific literature in the 1930s, but it did not enter the popular vernacular until the 1970s. Today, we often use the term loosely in describing a variety of unpleasant feeling states; for example, we often say we are stressed out when we feel frustrated, angry, conflicted, overwhelmed, or fatigued. Despite the widespread use of the term, stress is a fairly vague concept that is difficult to define with precision.

Researchers have had a difficult time agreeing on an acceptable definition of stress. Some have described stress as a demanding or threatening event or situation (e.g., a high-stress job, overcrowding, and long commutes to work). These ideas about stress are known as stimulus-based definitions because they characterize stress as a stimulus that causes certain reactions. Stimulus-based definitions of stress are problematic, however, because they fail to recognize that people differ in how they view and react to

challenging life events and situations. For example, a conscientious student who has studied diligently all semester would likely experience less stress during final exams week than would a less responsible, unprepared student. Indeed, how you grow your **self and social awareness skill** may also play a role in how you react to events.

Others have explained stress in ways that emphasize the physiological responses that occur when faced with demanding or threatening situations (e.g., increased arousal). These ideas are referred to as response-based definitions because they describe stress as a response to environmental conditions. For example, the endocrinologist Hans Selye, a famous stress researcher, once defined stress as the “response of the body to any demand, whether it is caused by, or results in, pleasant or unpleasant conditions”. Selye’s definition of stress is response-based in that it suggests that stress is the body’s physiological reaction to any demand that is placed on it.

Neither stimulus-based nor response-based definitions provide a complete definition of stress. Many of the physiological reactions that occur when faced with demanding situations (e.g., accelerated heart rate) can also occur in response to things that most people would not consider to be genuinely stressful, such as receiving unanticipated good news: an unexpected promotion or raise.

A useful way to view stress is to see it as a process where an individual perceives and responds to events that they interpret as overwhelming or threatening to his well-being. A critical element of this definition is that it emphasizes the importance of how we interpret—that is, judge—demanding or threatening events (often referred to as **stressors**); these judgments, in turn, influence our reactions to such events.

Two kinds of appraisals of a stressor are especially important in this regard: primary and secondary appraisals. A **primary appraisal** involves judgment about the degree of potential harm or threat to well-being that a stressor might entail. A stressor would likely be appraised as a threat if one anticipates that it could lead to some kind of harm, loss, or other negative consequence; conversely, a stressor would likely be appraised as a challenge if one believes that it carries the potential for gain or personal growth.

➞ **EXAMPLE** an employee who is promoted to a leadership position would likely perceive the promotion as a much greater threat if she believed the promotion would lead to excessive work demands than if she viewed it as an opportunity to gain new skills and grow professionally. Similarly, a college student on the cusp of graduation may face the change as a threat or a challenge.

The perception of a threat triggers a **secondary appraisal**: judgment of the options available to cope with a stressor, as well as perceptions of how effective such options will be. As you may recall from what you learned about self-efficacy, an individual’s belief in his ability to complete a task is important. A threat tends to be viewed as less catastrophic if one believes something can be done about it.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Imagine that two middle-aged women, Robin and Maria, perform breast self-examinations one morning and each woman notices a lump on the lower region of her left breast. Although both women view the breast lump as a potential threat (primary appraisal), their secondary appraisals differ considerably. In considering the breast lump, some of the thoughts racing through Robin’s mind are, “Oh my goodness, I could have breast cancer! What if the cancer has spread to the rest of my body and I cannot recover? What if I have to go through chemotherapy? I’ve heard that experience is awful! What if I have to quit my job? My husband and I won’t have enough money to pay the mortgage. Oh, this is just horrible...I can’t deal with it!” On the other hand, Maria thinks, “Hmm, this may not be good. Although most times these things turn out to be benign, I need to have it checked out. If it turns out to be breast cancer, there are doctors who can take care of it because the medical technology today is quite advanced. I’ll have a lot of different options, and I’ll be just fine.”

Clearly, Robin and Maria have different outlooks on what might turn out to be a very serious situation: Robin

seems to think that little could be done about it, whereas Maria believes that, worst case scenario, a number of options that are likely to be effective would be available. As such, Robin would clearly experience greater stress than would Maria.

When encountering a stressor, a person judges its potential threat (primary appraisal) and then determines if effective options are available to manage the situation. Stress is likely to result if a stressor is perceived as extremely threatening or threatening with few or no effective coping options available.



TERMS TO KNOW

Primary Appraisal

A judgment about the degree of potential harm from a stressor.

Secondary Appraisal

A judgment about how to cope with a stressor.

Stress

A process where an individual responds to events they interpret as threatening.

3. Good Stress

Although stress carries a negative connotation, at times it may be of some benefit. Stress can motivate us to do things in our best interests, such as study for exams, visit the doctor regularly, exercise, and perform to the best of our ability at work. Indeed, Selye pointed out that not all stress is harmful. He argued that stress can sometimes be a positive, motivating force that can improve the quality of our lives. This kind of stress, which Selye called **eustress** (from the Greek *eu* meaning “good”), is a good kind of stress associated with positive feelings, optimal health, and performance.

A moderate amount of stress can be beneficial in challenging situations. For example, athletes may be motivated and energized by pregame stress, and students may experience similar beneficial stress before a major exam. Indeed, research shows that moderate stress can enhance both immediate and delayed recall of educational material. Male participants in one study who memorized a scientific text passage showed improved memory of the passage immediately after exposure to a mild stressor as well as one day following exposure to the stressor.



Problem Solving: Why Employers Care

Good stress may help you stay focused and productive at work. When you are faced with challenging problems you may be able to use the good stress to overcome them with hard work and determination.

Increasing one’s level of stress will cause performance to change in a predictable way. As stress increases, so do performance and general well-being; when stress levels reach an optimal level, performance reaches its peak. A person at this stress level is colloquially at the top of their game, meaning they feel fully energized, focused, and can work with minimal effort and maximum efficiency. But when stress exceeds this optimal level, it is no longer a positive force—it becomes excessive and debilitating, or what Selye termed **distress** (from the Latin *dis* meaning “bad”). People who reach this level of stress feel burned out; they are fatigued, exhausted,

and their performance begins to decline. If the stress remains excessive, health may begin to erode as well. Keep this in mind when you consider your stress levels at work. Use your **self and social awareness skill** to know when your workload is too overwhelming or challenging.



WATCH

Ever since she first saw an airshow as a child, Nicole Malachowski dreamt of flying military jets. In this week's Strayer Story, hear how this groundbreaking pilot achieved her dream of becoming the first female Thunderbird — the Air Force's elite air demonstration squadron — by tuning into her emotions and eventually mastering her fears.



TERMS TO KNOW

Eustress

Positive, motivating stress that improves the quality of life.

Distress

Excessive or debilitating stress.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned about some of the ways **stress** affects our **psychological health**, the different stimulus-based and response-based definitions of stress, and some types of bad and **good stress**.

Good luck!

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY SOPHIA LEARNING. PLEASE SEE OUR [TERMS OF USE](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Distress

Excessive or debilitating stress.

Eustress

Positive, motivating stress that improves the quality of life.

Health Psychology

A field of scientific study devoted to the general impact of psychological factors on health.

Primary Appraisal

A judgment about the degree of potential harm from a stressor.

Secondary Appraisal

A judgment about how to cope with a stressor.

Stress

A process where an individual responds to events they interpret as threatening.

