Sources of stress

Lesson 5.4.1 | Health psychology

Core ideas

A stressor is a demand or threat that a person perceives as difficult to cope with, not just any unpleasant event.

Major life events such as bereavement, divorce, moving home or serious illness can create stress because they require major adjustment.

Daily hassles are smaller repeated irritations, such as traffic, deadlines or conflicts, that can build up over time.

Chronic stressors are long-lasting pressures, such as caregiving, poverty, discrimination, work overload or ongoing health problems.

Workplace stress often increases when demands are high, control is low, support is weak or roles are unclear.

Stress depends partly on appraisal: people judge how serious a demand is and whether they have the resources to cope.

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Lesson 5.4.1 | Health psychology

Key terms

Stressor: A demand, threat or pressure that may trigger stress.

Stress response: The psychological and bodily reaction to a perceived demand.

Major life event: A significant change that requires adjustment.

Daily hassle: A small but repeated irritation or demand in everyday life.

Chronic stressor: A long-lasting source of pressure.

Work overload: Having more work demands than a person feels able to manage.

Perceived control: How much influence a person believes they have over a situation.

Appraisal: A person's judgement of a demand and their ability to cope with it.

Further detail and evidence

General Adaptation Syndrome: alarm mobilises an immediate physiological response, resistance sustains adaptation, and prolonged demands can lead to exhaustion. Sympathetic activation and stress-hormone systems support short-term action; prolonged activation can carry health costs.

Holmes and Rahe's life-event approach sums weighted life changes, including desirable changes requiring adjustment. The same total can conceal different meanings, resources and timing. Daily hassles are useful context, but do not replace the required life-event account.

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Lesson 5.4.1 | Health psychology

Continued

Chandola et al. (2008) used the Whitehall II cohort to examine work stress and coronary heart disease alongside behavioural/biological pathways. Work stress was associated with CHD, with health behaviours and physiological processes helping explain the relationship. A longitudinal association is not random assignment to stress.

Type A pattern involves competitiveness, time urgency and hostility, compared with a more relaxed Type B pattern. Friedman and Rosenman linked the pattern with coronary risk. Treat it as an historical risk account, rather than proof that a personality label inevitably causes disease.

Applying the ideas

An upcoming deadline can activate alarm; continuing demands may sustain resistance. A life-event score estimates adjustment demands, whereas a work-stress questionnaire concerns the organisation of everyday demands. Neither alone reveals exactly how stressed every individual feels.

Evaluation and connections

GAS provides an organised physiological model but can understate individual appraisal and differences between stressors. Life-event measures rely on recall and fixed weights. Cohorts improve temporal evidence but retain confounds. Personality and work exposures may interact with smoking, sleep, support and health history.