

## **Individual Factors that Influence the Response to Stress**

Not everyone responds to stressful events in the same way.

Psychological factors influence a person's response to stressful events.

- Personal control
- Explanatory style (optimistic versus pessimistic)
- Chronic negative emotions
- Type A Behavior and Hostility

Social factors also influence a person's response to stressful events. The amount of social support influences our response to stress and our health.

## **Psychological factors: Personal control**

Having a sense of control over a stressful situation reduces the impact of stressor and decreases the feelings of anxiety and depression.

- Your sense of control had to be realistic to be adaptive. Unrealistic perceptions of control over debilitating diseases can add to the stress. Sometimes the control needs to be refocused.
  - Well-adjusted cancer patients accepted that they could not control the disease, but they could control the consequences. Deciding what you can control and what you can't control is hard.
- When residents of a nursing home were involved in the decision making process (e.g. deciding daily activities, where they received visitors, when they would attend a movie screening, etc), they were more active, alert, sociable, healthier and lived longer compared to residents where the decisions were made for them.
- One of the factors that create stress at the workplace is the lack of involvement (control) in business decisions. However, sometimes, we want decisions to be made immediately.
- Learning more about the process (eg. politics, mechanical, administrative, etc.) allows you to be more effective in reaching your goals or make changes.

## **Explanatory Style: Optimistic versus Pessimistic**

We all experience failure (at the job, taking tests, or extracurricular activities). Yet some people persist in spite of this failure. How we explain these failures makes a difference.

<p><u>Optimistic Explanatory Style for Failures:</u> Accounting for negative events or situations with external, unstable, and specific explanations.</p>	<p><u>Pessimistic Explanatory Style for Failures:</u> Accounting for negative events or situations with internal, stable, and global explanations.</p>
<p><u>External</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The job was difficult.</li><li>• It wasn't my fault.</li><li>• Who could predict how a faulty relay at Niagara Falls would shut down NYC.</li></ul>	<p><u>Internal</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I didn't work hard enough.</li><li>• It's my fault.</li><li>• I wasn't careful.</li></ul>
<p><u>Unstable</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I needed more sleep.</li><li>• It is a horrible test.</li><li>• The stars are not aligned.</li></ul>	<p><u>Stable</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I'm no good at tests.</li><li>• The questions are difficult.</li><li>• Women are no good at math (I do not endorse this rationale)—a problem with negative and inaccurate stereotypes.</li></ul>
<p><u>Specific</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I am no good at hockey.</li><li>• I am no good at chess.</li><li>• I am no good at math.</li></ul> <p>(I hate to use the stereotype).</p>	<p><u>Global/General</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I am no good at sports.</li><li>• I am no good at games.</li><li>• I am no good at school.</li></ul>

Let's look at these two explanatory styles in action.

- Optimistic Olive sees an attractive guy at a party and starts across the room to introduce herself and strike up a conversation. As she approaches him, the guy glances at her, then abruptly turns away hurt by the obvious snub
- Optimist Olive retreats to the buffet table. Munching on some fried zucchini, she mulls the matter over in her mind.
- At the same party, Pessimistic Pete sees an attractive female across the room and approaches her. He, too, gets a cold shoulder and retreats to the chips and clam dip. Standing at opposite ends of the buffet table, here is what each of them is thinking:

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## OPTIMISTIC OLIVE

## PESSIMISTIC PETE

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What's his problem?  
(External explanation: the optimist blames other people or external circumstances)

I must have said the wrong thing. She probably saw me stick my elbow in the clam dip before I walked over.  
(Internal explanation: the pessimist blames self)

I'm really not looking my best tonight. I've just got to get more sleep. (Unstable, temporary explanation)

Let's face it, I'm a pretty boring guy and really not very good-looking. (Stable, permanent explanation)

He looks pretty preoccupied. Maybe he's waiting for his girlfriend to arrive. Or his boyfriend! Ha! (Specific explanations)

Women never give me a second look, probably because I dress like a nerd and I never know what to say to them. (Global, pervasive explanation)

### Effect on subsequent behavior

Whoa! Who's that hunk over there?! Okay, Olive, turn on the charm! Here goes!  
(Perseverance after a rejection)

Maybe I'll just hold down this corner of the buffet table...or go home and soak up some TV. (Passivity and withdrawal after a rejection)

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Pessimistic explanatory style is associated with poorer physical health and a poorer immune system.

## **Chronic negative emotions**

People who are habitually

- anxious,
- depressed,
- angry or
- hostile

are more likely to develop a chronic disease such as arthritis or heart disease.

- These people tend to report (perceive) more daily hassles than people who are generally in a positive mood, and they react much more intensely and with far greater distress to stressful events.
- In addition, negative emotions such as loneliness and depression can increase the levels of stress hormones that can adversely affect the immune system.

## Factors that Influence Stress/Health: Type A Behavior Pattern

### Type A consists of a cluster of three characteristics

- An exaggerated sense of time urgency, often trying to do more in less time,
- intense ambition and competitiveness and
- a general sense of hostility, frequently displaying anger and irritation.

### Type B

- More relaxed and laid back

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### Self-Evaluation: Which type to you tend to be?

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Type A	Type B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Very competitive</li><li>• Always on the go</li><li>• Hard driving</li><li>• Demands perfection</li><li>• Ambitious, wants quick promotions</li><li>• Is a “workaholic”—even at play</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Noncompetitive</li><li>• Relaxed, in control</li><li>• Easygoing</li><li>• Understanding, forgiving</li><li>• Confident and happy in job</li><li>• Enjoys leisure and weekends</li></ul>

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## **Type A Personalities**

Type A personalities virtually guarantees that they will encounter many stressful situations such as time pressures of their own making and barriers that anger them.

What does the research in health psychology show with respect to differences in personality type (Type A versus Type B)?

- When 3,000 middle aged men were tracked for 8 years, those with a Type A personality were twice as likely to develop heart disease than Type B, even taking into account such risk factors as smoking, high blood pressure, and elevated levels of cholesterol. However...

Type A people with high levels of competitiveness and ambition can foster aggressive behavior and hostility when things get in their way.

## Type A and Hostility

Researchers found that even within the Type A, there were differences. It was not the time urgency and being competitive that was a factor—it was the hostility.

Hostility dimension: Hostility refers to the tendency to feel anger, annoyance, resentment and contempt and to hold negative beliefs about human nature in general.

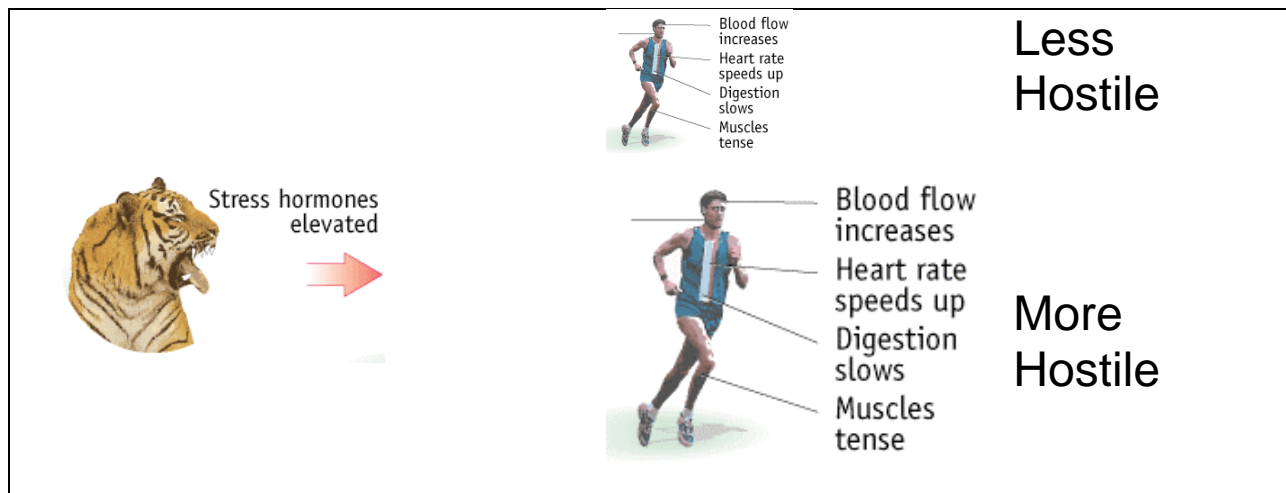
- A cynical hostility marked by suspiciousness, resentment, frequent anger, distrust and antagonism seem important in the relation between personality and stress.
- Hostile people are also prone to believing that the disagreeable behavior of others is intentionally directed at them. Thus hostile people tend to be suspicious, mistrustful, cynical and pessimistic. (page 567, 568, Hockenbury)
  - Type A and Hostile personalities tend to alienate others and produce interpersonal stress and conflict which reduces the amount of social support the person has.
  - Because of their attitudes, they also create more stress in their life (a self-fulfilling prophecy, and perhaps a learned behavior). The experience more frequent and more severe, negative life events and daily hassles.

## Hostility and Health

Hostile men were five times as likely to develop heart disease and seven times as likely to die as non-hostile men.

Why does hostility predispose people to heart disease?

- Type A personalities tend to react more intensely to a stressor than other people do and take more time to recover.
  - They experience greater increases in blood pressure, heart rate and the production of stress related hormones.



## **Factors that Influence Stress/Health: Social Support**

Social support refers to the resources provided by other people in times of need. Those who lack social support are more vulnerable to illness when stressful events occur.

What do psychologists know about the relation between health and social support?

- Patients with advanced breast cancer who attend weekly support group sessions survived twice as long as a matched group of patients who did not. There was a comparable level of medical treatment in both groups
- After monitoring the health of 2,800 people, those who had no one to talk to, were three times as likely to die after being hospitalized for a heart attack than those who had at least one person to provide such support.
- Of the nearly 7,000 adults whose health was tracked, those who few social connections were twice as likely to die from all causes than those who had numerous social contacts, even with risk factors such as cigarette smoking, obesity and elevated levels of cholesterol were taken into account.

## Social Support

Social support seems to enhance the functioning of our immune system. People who feel that they are a part of a social system experience a greater sense of *identity* and meaning in their lives, which in turn results in greater well-being.

- (1) Friends and relatives can modify our appraisal of the threat of the stressor. Since we are in the situation, we have a difficult time being objective about the situation. The backing of others can increase one's sense of control over stressors.
- (2) The presence of supportive others seems to decrease the intensity of the physical reaction. It has a calming effect.
- (3) Social support makes it less likely we will experience negative emotions and reduce risk factors such as loneliness.
- (4) True friends can apply social pressure to prevent people from coping with stressors in maladaptive ways such as alcohol and/or drug use, excessive spending, questionable therapies.
  - This means your friends are willing to tell you what you don't want to hear
  - This means you are willing to hear what you don't want to hear.

[true words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not true]

## **Social Support**

Is social support a panacea? It depends on how social support is employed.

Negative relations can be a source of stress. The development of good interpersonal relationships is important for making social support effective. The quality of the interpersonal relationships is an important determinant of whether those relationships help or hinder our ability to cope.

- How do you provide effective social support?
- What psychological factors can decrease social support?

Describe behaviors (or thinking patterns) that would generally be perceived as NOT being helpful for providing social support

Describe behaviors (or thinking patterns) that would generally be perceived as being helpful for providing social support

- Talk about yourself and your own problems.
- Give advice that person under stress has not requested.
- Offer your philosophic or religious interpretation of the stressful event by saying things like, "It's just fate", "It's just God's will," or "It's your karma."
- Pretend to be cheerful.
- Tell the person, "I know exactly how you feel".
- Minimize the important of the person's problem by saying things like, "Hey, don't make such a big deal out of it; it could be a lot worse" or "Don't worry, everything will work out."



- Ask questions that encourage the person under stress to express his or her feelings and emotions.
- You are willing to invest time and attention to help.
- Express affection for the person, whether with a warm hug or simply a pat on the arm.
- Be a good listener and show concern and interest.
- Help the person with practical tasks, such as housework, transportation, or responsibilities at work or school.
- Express an understanding about why the person might be upset.