

Topic 5.1

Introduction to Health Psychology

5.1.01 Health Psychology

[5.1.A]

Health psychology, one domain of psychology, is concerned with the way certain factors impact health, including behavioral (eg, exercise, sleep habits), psychological (eg, beliefs related to health), and sociocultural factors (eg, daily meal routines in a family).

Health psychology focuses on promoting wellness and also looks at how psychological factors relate to illness, including its prevention, cause, or treatment. One area of interest to health psychologists is the field of *psychoneuroimmunology*, which examines the interaction among behavior, the nervous system, and the immune system.

Health psychologists may work with individuals to promote healthy behavior change, such as quitting smoking, developing good exercise habits, improving coping around stress (Sub-Topic 5.1.04), or maintaining a consistent sleep schedule; or they may help individuals manage chronic pain. In addition, some health psychologists conduct research or work with institutions (eg, hospitals, government) to promote health and wellness.

5.1.02 Types of Stressors

[5.1.B.1 5.1.B.2]

Stress

Stress refers to a threatening or demanding stimulus that disturbs equilibrium in some way (eg, mentally, emotionally, physically). Stress can lead to hypertension (high blood pressure), anxiety, headaches, and many other mental and physical health problems. Prolonged stress can result in the suppression of certain immune responses and the body being more vulnerable to negative health effects such as viral illness.

Types of stress and stressors

The term **eustress** refers to stress that is positive, motivating, and beneficial; for example, a musician who is looking forward to a performance may experience eustress. Conversely, **distress** refers to negative, overwhelming, and detrimental stress; for example, a student who misses the bus and is late to school may experience distress.

Types of stressors include traumatic events (eg, natural disasters) as well as daily hassles, which are more minor irritating, common, everyday occurrences (eg, driving in traffic).

As Sub-Topic 3.6.07 discusses, **adverse childhood experiences** (ACEs) are stressful, traumatic incidents that occur in childhood (eg, experiencing neglect). ACEs often continue to impact individuals even into adulthood. For example, ACEs are associated with increased risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.

5.1.03 Reactions to Stress

[5.1.C.1 5.1.C.2]

The general adaptation syndrome

The **general adaptation syndrome**, proposed by Hans Selye, is a model describing how the body reacts to stress. According to this model, there are three stages of the stress response (Figure 5.1):

- The **alarm** stage occurs during the first few minutes of the stress response when a stressor triggers the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response (eg, increasing the heart rate and perspiration).
- The **resistance** stage can last for hours (eg, exercise), days (eg, final exams), or months (eg, taking several AP courses). During this stage, the body attempts to establish a new equilibrium in response to an ongoing stressor.
- The **exhaustion** stage occurs if the stressor continues. Prolonged stress depletes energy and results in the body being more vulnerable to negative health effects (eg, depression, viral illness).




| | Characteristics | Example |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Stage 1: Alarm | A stressor triggers the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response. |  <p>A student realizes how difficult it will be to keep up with their classes.</p> |
| Stage 2: Resistance | The body attempts to establish a new equilibrium. |  <p>The student follows a rigid study plan for weeks.</p> |
| Stage 3: Exhaustion | Energy is depleted, and the body is more vulnerable to negative health effects. |  <p>The student burns out and is unable to keep up with their classes.</p> |

Figure 5.1 The general adaptation syndrome example.

The tend-and-befriend theory

The **tend-and-befriend theory** states that in times of stress, women may be more likely to engage in socially driven behavior than men are. This stress response can include nurturing and protecting themselves and their offspring (ie, *tending*), as well as building social bonds (ie, *befriending* others).

5.1.04 Coping with Stress

[5.1.D.1 5.1.D.2]

Using cognitive, emotional, or behavioral strategies to decrease stress is known as *coping*. The type of coping an individual uses may be influenced by whether they believe an event or situation is changeable (ie, able to be modified) or unchangeable (ie, unable to be modified).

For stressors that are viewed as changeable, an individual may be more likely to use problem-focused coping. **Problem-focused coping** seeks to decrease stress by directly modifying aspects of the stressor. For example, a dancer attempts to feel less stressed about performing a new choreography by rehearsing it more.

Conversely, for stressors that are viewed as unchangeable, an individual may be more likely to use emotion-focused coping. **Emotion-focused coping** seeks to regulate one's emotional response to a stressor. For example, an actor attempts to decrease their stress about an upcoming performance by using strategies to achieve a more relaxed state, such as meditation.

Research indicates that relaxation, a physiological state of reduced arousal and [sympathetic nervous system](#) activity (Sub-Topic 1.2.02), is effective for reducing stress. Relaxation can be achieved through many different techniques (eg, massage, deep breathing, meditation).

Meditation is a practice whereby individuals regulate their awareness and attention with the goal of achieving mental clarity and emotional calmness. Although meditation techniques vary, they can include focusing on one's own breathing or other present-moment stimuli (eg, the sound of rain) or mentally repeating a mantra (a short saying or thought).

Alternatively, some individuals will turn to psychoactive medication (Sub-Topic 5.5.10) or substances to help regulate their emotions; these substances affect the [central nervous system](#), resulting in changes in mood, thinking, and/or behavior.

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Check for Understanding Quiz

1. In Hans Selye's general adaptation syndrome, which of the following is the stage that occurs when prolonged stress depletes energy and causes the body to be more vulnerable to illness?
 - A. Alarm
 - B. Exhaustion
 - C. Resistance
 - D. Tend-and-befriend

2. Which of the following terms best describes stress that is positive, motivating, and beneficial?
 - A. An adverse childhood experience
 - B. A daily hassle
 - C. Eustress
 - D. Distress

Note: Answers to this quiz are in the back of the book (appendix).