

Health psychology: stress and well being assignment

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Health Psychology: Stress and Well Being Shavonia Finley PSY 101:

Introduction to Psychology Destiny Champion February 14, 2011 Health

Psychology: Stress and Well Being In everyone's life a little stress must fall.

We all have to deal with daily hassles and various personal stressors that effect our emotional and physical health. The manner in which we deal with these stressors can alleviate or reduce stress or it can make things worse.

Mind and body issues have bemused philosophers and psychologists since the ancient Greeks; however recently a new subfield in psychology has immersed to investigate the subject.

Health psychology focuses on psychological factors and how they relate to wellness and illness. This would include prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of various medical ailments. More specifically, psychoneuroimmunology is a growing field dedicated to examining how psychological factors, the immune system, and the brain work together. For most people life is filled with small hassles that recur on a regular basis. Busy schedules at home and at work coupled with a traffic filled commute before your day even gets going can cause stress.

These stressors are known as background stressors and are the most easily dealt with. They are the daily hassles that irritate us, do not require much coping, and are soon forgotten. Other background stressors can be classified as long term, chronic problems. Dissatisfaction with work, a relationship that is not fulfilling, or a culmination of minor stressors can manifest into health problems such as psychological symptoms, backaches, sore throat, or even the flu [(Feldman, 2009)]. The opposite of the daily hassle is uplifts. These are those positive little things that make us feel good.

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Uplifts are usually temporary, but when we experience more uplifts than stressors we experience less psychological symptoms. An example of an uplift might be something like getting a compliment or completing a task. Stressors such as the terrorist attack in 2001 or Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are classified as cataclysmic events. Cataclysmic events are experienced by many people at once and usually do not have potent, lingering effects. Social support is abundant because so many people share the same first-hand account of the event and can understand each other's feelings.

Another major category of stressors is personal stressors. This would be brought on by things that are more personal such as the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. These types of stressors yield an immediate response that tapers over time allowing us to better cope. How we initially react to a stressor shows that there is a direct link between our mental and physical functions. Walter Cannon's research in biological psychology, early in the 20th century, led him to describe the "fight or flight" response of the sympathetic nervous system to perceived threats to physical or emotional security (Feldman, 2009).

The body reacts with an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, increase in perspiration, hearing and vision become more acute, and the hands and feet become cold due to blood being directed to large muscles in preparation for fight or fleeing. Hans Selye took this a little further and popularized the concept of stress in the 1950's. His theory, which he called general adaptation syndrome, suggests all individuals have the same or similar response to

threatening situations. He believed that not only did the sympathetic nervous system respond, but also the adrenal cortex and the pituitary gland.

The theory is that enough epinephrine, or adrenaline, is produced to focus the body on immediate self preservation and shut down other functions such as digestion, reproduction, tissue repair, and the immune system. A constant threat or stressor would leave these functions inhibited and cause the individual to be susceptible to illness (Richmond, 1997). This inhibition of bodily functions can also exacerbate an existing illness. There are three stages; alarm and mobilization when the stressor is realized, resistance or the attempt to cope, and if coping was not adequate, exhaustion and the onset of negative consequences.

One example of how stress can leave someone vulnerable to illness is clear when we look at the case of an adolescent girl named Tatiana. Tatiana has had to take on parental responsibilities for her little sister for the past several years, giving up all social time with her friends to do so. She has also had knowledge of the financial difficulties her parents have had to deal with recently. To make matters worse, she has had to move from her home, just as she is starting middle school, to a whole new state. Recently she presented with severe abdominal pains from constipation.

None of the over-the-counter remedies helped and she was admitted to the hospital. She was diagnosed with a virus that paralyzed her intestines so the doctor gave her antibiotics and a special diet to follow. Unfortunately, her condition continued to decline and the doctors decided her symptoms were psychosomatic, implying her illness was not real. She eventually lost all

muscle function in her arms and legs and was confined to a wheelchair. She then was enrolled in a program run by a health psychologist designed to treat psychophysiological disorders.

Since her physical ailments were already being treated by a pediatrician they could concentrate on the psychological and emotional difficulties and how they all interacted. After two months in the program, Tatiana is now able to walk on her own and is no longer having digestive difficulties. As she has stated, “ I was very angry with my parents. They never asked me what I wanted. They treat me like a baby, but they want me to do grown-up stuff. I hated them for that” (Wells, 2011). While Selye’s theory has impacted our understanding of stress, it has also been challenged.

His theory suggests that no matter what the stressor, the biological reaction will be similar in all individuals. Health psychologists today believe the reaction is also determined by how the individual appraises the situation or stressor. For example, another adolescent in Tatiana’s situation may simply have acted out instead of becoming ill. The situation could have been perceived by another as stressful, but not unusual, therefore the different perception would result in a different outcome. Due to these differences in perspective, there has been an increased focus on psychoneuroimmunology and stress.

Psychoneuroimmunology takes a broader approach to stress. It focuses more directly on the outcomes of stress; three main consequences have been identified. First, the physiological results of stress include increased blood pressure, hormonal activity, and an overall decline in the effectiveness of the

immune system. Second, stress can cause people to behave in ways that are not productive and even harmful such as drug, alcohol, or nicotine use, poor eating habits, and a decrease in sleep. Third, indirect consequences that can cause a decline in health and the likelihood that medical advice will be ignored if ever sought.

One of the biggest illnesses associated with stress is coronary heart disease. You may know someone who is always in competition with others, is easily irritated, or is overly aggressive. We all feel this way sometimes, but there are those who carry the set of personality traits known as the Type-A behavior pattern. Then there are those who fall into Type-B behavior pattern which is more patient, noncompetitive, nonaggressive, and cooperative. These two behavior types are the polar ends of a continuum and most people fall somewhere in the middle. Type-A personalities in males are highly associated with coronary heart disease.

Hostility seems to be a key factor since it triggers the production of epinephrine and norepinephrine, increases heart rate, and raises blood pressure. When this response is exaggerated and continuous there is an increased incidence of coronary heart disease (Feldman, 2009). For most of society stress has been recognized as a part of life. Therefore people have devised many ways to control, reduce or tolerate it. These methods are known as coping and are often utilized in multiples. The most common methods of coping with stress are emotion-focused and problem-focused.

Emotion-focused coping focuses on people trying to change the way they feel about or perceive a problem; like looking on the bright side. Problem-

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focused coping strategies include modification of the source of the stress; an example would be learning how to fix your own car to maintain and avoid costly repairs. Common coping methods vary widely in individuals. Most will choose healthy resolutions such as relaxation techniques to slow down the sympathetic nervous system. These include exercise, meditation, prayer, joining a support group, or any other activity that relaxes you such as painting or listening to music.

There are also those who will choose unhealthy courses of action. For them alcohol use is the number one choice. Others may choose to use drugs, nicotine, overeat, or starve themselves. Some people choose yet another course of action called learned helplessness. This is when someone is faced with a situation that seems intolerable and they eventually give up. Their environment has ingrained in them that certain situations cannot be controlled or changed regardless if it can or not. The opposite would be the person with a hardy personality. They seem to have the most success with dealing with stress.

This personality type has three distinct characteristics: commitment, challenge, and control. They usually throw themselves into whatever they are working on, they believe change is the norm in life rather than stability, and they give the perception that they can influence the events in their lives. Managing stress before it becomes too difficult to control is another aspect of coping. Having a healthy perspective of most situations will allow you to prioritize your life reducing the potential stressors. Also, having a realistic

self image and reasonable expectations will allow you to set appropriate goals.

The achievement of such goals will result in an uplift rather than a perceived failure. Once stress can be managed there can be a pursuit for happiness. Over the course of a life there will be times that are happier than others or not happy at all. In a study performed by Carol Ryff it was determined that happiness can be measured in six dimensions; prior studies did not include as many dimensions (1989). The dimensions described in her study would be self acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Her study surveyed 321 men and women of varying ages.

Someone scoring high would possess a positive attitude toward themselves including their good and bad qualities. They would also show empathy towards others and understand the give and take of relationships. Autonomy is seen in someone who is independent and able to resist social pressures. Someone who has become an environmental master has a sense of competence in controlling external activities. Believing you have a purpose in life means you have goals and a sense of direction. Finally, having a feeling of continued development and openness to new experiences shows personal growth.

Another study used the person-environment fit theory to compare work and family experiences to the person's values and how they relate to stress and well-being. The idea behind the study was to see if the amount of supplies we value influences well-being when they increase and decrease. The

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dimensions looked at were autonomy, relationships, security, and segmentation. Person ??? environment fit theory says that stress occurs when there is a perceived mismatch between the environment and a person's goals, desires, and values (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999).

Cognitive appraisal is directly incorporated into the concept of stress.

Basically, person ??? environment theory predicts well-being when there is a perceived match in environment and values. The opposite, or stress, occurs when there is a mismatch. The onset of stress will cause mental and physical strain and stimulate efforts to cope. There are three reasons why well being should be higher when autonomy supplies and values are both high rather than low. First, high autonomy supplies may consist of high supplies for responsibility and authority, in other words accomplishment and status, which many people value.

Second, desiring and attaining high levels of autonomy possibly constitutes a supply for values pertaining to accomplishment and adjustment. Third, autonomy allows for freedom to allocate time and resources to meet life's high demands. High control in addition to high demands gives people the ability to successfully cope with challenging situations, which leads to satisfaction and growth. The next dimension is relationships or personal connections with other people. People are naturally motivated to establish and maintain relationships. This is true at work and with family members.

Relationships play such a dominant role in stress research because they provide social support that facilitates coping with stress and achieving well-being. When a person has a desire for strong connections with others it

suggests they have achieved ambitious goals regarding social integration. The third dimension of well being is security, which is defined as “ the belief that membership in a role is stable and likely to continue” (Edwards ; Rothbard, 1999). An example would be the feeling of job security or security within a marriage.

Security is yet another basic human motive. Finally, the degree of separation or insulation there is between work and family is segmentation. Keeping your family stresses and work stresses separate requires an active effort on the part of the person. Managing boundaries between the two allows the person to inhibit the transfer of stressful experiences between the two. The study of mental and physical well being done by health psychologists and psychoneuroimmunologists is still relatively new and is opening the door to many new career fields.

The opportunities for careers in health psychology in this country are plentiful. Medical settings, especially medical centers, have expanded their employment opportunities for psychologists. In addition to medical centers, health psychologists often work in colleges and universities, medical schools, health maintenance organizations, rehabilitation centers, pain management centers, public health agencies, hospitals, and private consultation/practice offices [(American Psychological Association: Health Psychology, 2011)].

In addition to the specific skills that psychologists offer to patients and staff in the medical community, psychologists offer a unique perspective that assists other healthcare professionals make certain that health care is helpful and cost-effective. Health psychologists have focused on how life's

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ups and downs can affect our mental and physical health. They have stirred professional and public interest in how biology, the environment, and our behaviors influence health and illness. Their studies have provided us with methods of coping and managing stress so it is possible to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The more we learn about the relationship between biology, our environment, and behavior the better equipped we will be at preventing, diagnosing, and managing chronic illness. References American

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