

Chapter 8: Stress

Have you ever forgotten where you left your keys and it caused you to be late? Or perhaps you have had multiple assignments due and not enough time to get them all done? These events can cause us to feel overwhelmed and experience stress.

In this chapter you will learn about stress. You will learn about sources of stress, how to cope with stress, and what to do about workplace stress. This will provide you with coping skills to handle the stress you experience.

8.1 What is Stress?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe various definitions of stress, including the difference between stimulus-based and response-based stress and good stress and bad stress.
- Describe different types of possible stressors.
- Differentiate between good stress and bad stress.

You are exhausted. When you get home, you drop your work bag and realize you forgot to send an e-mail to your supervisor about an upcoming project. You groan as you run downstairs to your computer. The clock says 7:03 p.m. and you feel like you haven't had a minute to yourself since this morning. As you think about your day, you realize, you haven't! It is your company's busy time so the last few days have been booked with meetings and a huge project, with a Friday deadline. You send the e-mail, make a quick sandwich for dinner, and sit back down at your computer. You are hoping to get a few more things done on the project before tomorrow morning. As you work, you receive text messages from a colleague who is working on one portion of the project. You answer her texts and think about checking Facebook but decide against it as you just have too much to do. Your status update meeting is at 9 a.m. and you want to be able to show extensive progress on the project. At 10:30 p.m., you shut your computer, go to bed, and have a hard time falling asleep because you are thinking about everything you need to finish this week.

Does this sound like someone you know? Many people today are struggling with the ability to manage time with so much work/school to do and personal/family lives to manage. Technology has certainly made working longer hours easier, as we are always in touch with the office. What we can tend to forget is the importance of managing our stress levels so we can function more effectively. In this situation, having no free time during the day may work for a few days but isn't a healthy long-term solution. This chapter will discuss some types of stress, the effects of stress, and what you can do to reduce stress.

You probably know exactly what it's like to feel stress, but what you may not know is that it can objectively influence your health. Answers to questions like, "How stressed do you feel?" or "How overwhelmed do you feel?" can predict your likelihood of developing both minor illnesses as well as serious problems like future heart attack (Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, & Miller, 2007).

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 (Lyon, 2012). 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 conceptualized stress as a demanding or threatening event or situation (e.g., a high-stress job, overcrowding, and long commutes to work). Such conceptualizations 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.

Others have conceptualized stress in ways that emphasize the physiological responses that occur when faced with demanding or threatening situations (e.g., increased arousal). These conceptualizations 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, 1976, p. 74). Selye’s definition of stress is response-based in that it conceptualizes stress chiefly in terms of 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 conceptualize **stress** is to view it as a process whereby an individual perceives and responds to events that they appraise as overwhelming or threatening to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A critical element of this definition is that it emphasizes the importance of how we appraise—that is, judge—demanding or threatening events (often referred to as stressors); these appraisals, 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. For example, an employee who is promoted to a leadership position would likely perceive the promotion as a much greater threat if they believed the promotion would lead to excessive work demands than if they 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 (Figure 8.1).



Figure 8.1 Graduating from college and entering the workforce can be viewed as either a threat (loss of financial support) or a challenge (opportunity for independence and growth). [Graduation](#) – [Leo_Fontes](#) – [Pixabay License](#)

The perception of a threat triggers a **secondary appraisal**, a judgment of the options available to cope with a stressor, as well as perceptions of how effective such options will be (Lyon, 2012) (Figure 8.2). As you may recall from what you learned about self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their ability to complete a task is important (Bandura, 1994). A threat tends to be viewed as less catastrophic if one believes something can be done about it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Imagine that two middle-aged people, Robin and Madhuri, perform breast self-examinations one morning and each notices a lump on the lower region of their left breast. Although both 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 God, 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! Oh, this is just horrible...I can't deal with it!" On the other hand, Madhuri 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 Madhuri have different outlooks on what might turn out to be a very serious situation. As such, Robin would clearly experience greater stress than would Madhuri.

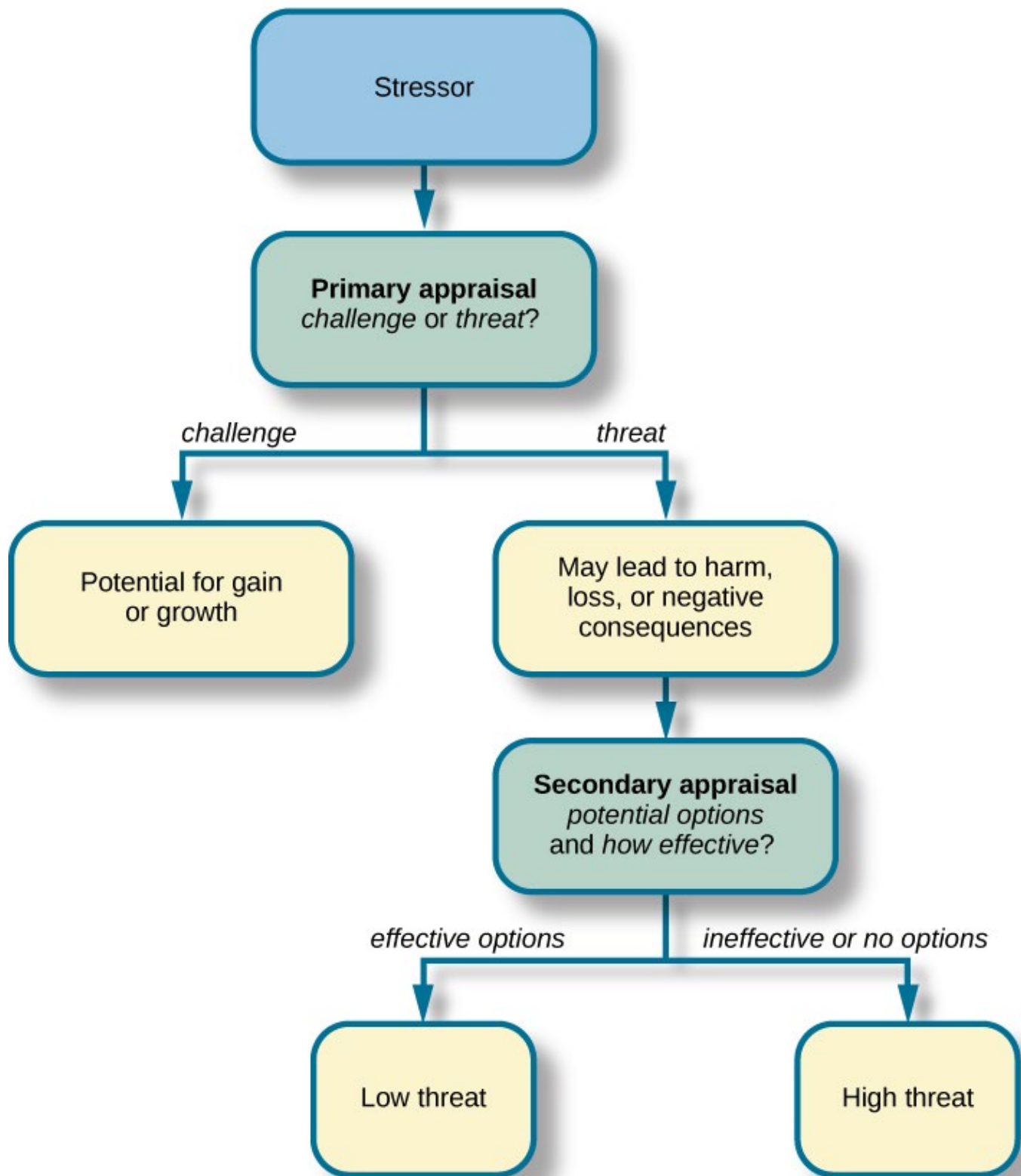


Figure 8.2 When encountering a stressor, a person judges its potential threat (primary appraisal) and then determines if effective options are available to manage the situation. Stress is likely to result if a stressor is perceived as extremely threatening or threatening with few or no effective coping options available.

To be sure, some stressors are inherently more stressful than others in that they are more threatening and leave less potential for variation in cognitive appraisals (e.g., objective threats to one's health or safety). Nevertheless, appraisal will still play a role in augmenting or diminishing our reactions to such events (Everly & Lating, 2002).

If a person appraises an event as harmful and believes that the demands imposed by the event exceed the available resources to manage or adapt to it, the person will subjectively experience a state of stress. In contrast, if one does not appraise the same event as harmful or threatening, they are unlikely to experience stress. According to this definition, environmental events trigger stress reactions by the way they are interpreted and the meanings they are assigned. In short, stress is largely in the eye of the beholder: it's not so much what happens to you as it is how you respond (Selye, 1976).

Stressors

For an individual to experience stress, they must first encounter a potential stressor. In general, stressors can be placed into one of two broad categories: chronic and acute.

Chronic stressors include events that persist over an extended period of time, such as caring for a parent with dementia, long-term unemployment, or imprisonment. **Acute stressors** involve brief focal events that sometimes continue to be experienced as overwhelming well after the event has ended, such as falling on an icy sidewalk and breaking your leg (Cohen, Janicki-Deverts, & Miller, 2007). Whether chronic or acute, potential stressors come in many shapes and sizes. They can include major traumatic events, significant life changes, daily hassles, as well as other situations in which a person is regularly exposed to threat, challenge, or danger.

Traumatic Events

Some stressors involve traumatic events or situations in which a person is exposed to actual or threatened death or serious injury. Stressors in this category include exposure to military combat, threatened or actual physical assaults (e.g., physical attacks, sexual assault, robbery, childhood abuse), terrorist attacks, natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, hurricanes), and automobile accidents. Men, People of Color, and individuals in lower socioeconomic status (SES) groups report experiencing a greater number of traumatic events than do women, Whites, and individuals in higher SES groups (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007). Some individuals who are exposed to stressors of extreme magnitude develop **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, a chronic stress reaction characterized by experiences and behaviors that may include intrusive and painful memories of the stressor event, jumpiness, persistent negative emotional states, detachment from others, angry outbursts, and avoidance of reminders of the event (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

Significant Life Changes

Most stressors that we encounter are not nearly as intense as the ones described above. Many potential stressors we face involve events or situations that require us to make changes in our ongoing lives and require time as we adjust to those changes. Examples include death of a close family member, marriage, divorce, and moving (Figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3 Some fairly typical life events, such as moving, can be significant stressors. Even when the move is intentional and positive, the amount of resulting change in daily life can cause stress. [Moving Day](#) – [Jellaluna](#) – [CC BY 2.0](#)

In the 1960s, psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe wanted to examine the link between life stressors and physical illness, based on the hypothesis that life events requiring significant changes in a person's normal life routines are stressful, whether these events are desirable or undesirable. They developed the **Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)**, consisting of 43 life events that require varying degrees of personal readjustment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Many life events that most people would consider pleasant (e.g., holidays, retirement, marriage) are among those listed on the SRRS; these are examples of eustress. Holmes and Rahe also proposed that life events can add up over time, and that experiencing a cluster of stressful events increases one's risk of developing physical illnesses.

In developing their scale, Holmes and Rahe asked 394 participants to provide a numerical estimate for each of the 43 items; each estimate corresponded to how much readjustment participants felt each event would require (Table 8.1). These estimates resulted in mean value scores for each event—often called life change units (LCUs) (Rahe, McKeen, & Arthur, 1967). The numerical scores ranged from 11 to 100, representing the perceived magnitude of life change each event entails. Death of a spouse ranked highest on the scale with 100 LCUs, and divorce ranked second highest with 73 LCUs. In addition,

personal injury or illness, marriage, and job termination also ranked highly on the scale with 53, 50, and 47 LCUs, respectively. Conversely, change in residence (20 LCUs), change in eating habits (15 LCUs), and vacation (13 LCUs) ranked low on the scale (Table 1). Minor violations of the law ranked the lowest with 11 LCUs. To complete the scale, participants checked yes for events experienced within the last 12 months. LCUs for each checked item are totaled for a score quantifying the amount of life change. Agreement on the amount of adjustment required by the various life events on the SRRS is highly consistent, even cross-culturally (Holmes & Masuda, 1974).

Table 8.1 Stressors on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)

Life Event	Life Change Units
Death of a close family member	63
Personal injury or illness	53
Dismissal from work	47
Change in financial state	38
Change to different line of work	36
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Beginning or ending school	26
Change in living conditions	25
Change in working hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in schools	20
Change in social activities	18
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in eating habits	15
Minor violation of the law	11

Extensive research has demonstrated that accumulating a high number of life change units within a brief period of time (one or two years) is related to a wide range of physical illnesses (even accidents and athletic injuries) and mental health problems (Monat & Lazarus, 1991; Scully, Tosi, & Banning, 2000). In an early demonstration, researchers obtained LCU scores for U.S. and Norwegian Navy personnel who were about to embark

on a six-month voyage. A later examination of medical records revealed positive (but small) correlations between LCU scores prior to the voyage and subsequent illness symptoms during the ensuing six-month journey (Rahe, 1974). In addition, people tend to experience more physical symptoms, such as backache, upset stomach, diarrhea, and acne, on specific days in which self-reported LCU values are considerably higher than normal, such as the day of a family member's wedding (Holmes & Holmes, 1970).

The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) provides researchers a simple, easy-to-administer way of assessing the amount of stress in people's lives, and it has been used in hundreds of studies (Thoits, 2010). Despite its widespread use, the scale has been subject to criticism. First, many of the items on the SRRS are vague; for example, death of a close friend could involve the death of a long-absent childhood friend that requires little social readjustment (Dohrenwend, 2006). In addition, some have challenged its assumption that undesirable life events are no more stressful than desirable ones (Derogatis & Coons, 1993). However, most of the available evidence suggests that, at least as far as mental health is concerned, undesirable or negative events are more strongly associated with poor outcomes (such as depression) than are desirable, positive events (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007). Perhaps the most serious criticism is that the scale does not take into consideration respondents' appraisals of the life events it contains. As you recall, appraisal of a stressor is a key element in the conceptualization and overall experience of stress. Being fired from work may be devastating to some but a welcome opportunity to obtain a better job for others. The SRRS remains one of the most well-known instruments in the study of stress, and it is a useful tool for identifying potential stress-related health outcomes (Scully et al., 2000).

Daily Hassles

Potential stressors do not always involve major life events. **Daily hassles** are the minor irritations and annoyances that are part of our everyday lives (e.g., rush hour traffic, lost keys, obnoxious coworkers, inclement weather, arguments with friends or family) and can build on one another and leave us just as stressed as significant life changes (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981).

Researchers have demonstrated that the frequency of daily hassles is actually a better predictor of both physical and psychological health than are life change units. In a well-known study of San Francisco residents, the frequency of daily hassles was found to be more strongly associated with physical health problems than were life change events (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982). In addition, daily minor hassles, especially interpersonal conflicts, often lead to negative and distressed mood states (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989). Cyber hassles that occur on social media may represent a modern and evolving source of stress. In one investigation, social media stress was tied to loss of sleep in adolescents, presumably because ruminating about social media caused a physiological stress response that increased arousal (van der Schuur,

Baumgartner, & Sumter, 2018). Clearly, daily hassles can add up and take a toll on us both emotionally and physically.



Figure 8.4 The importance of likes and online harassment through social media are increasing sources of stress for today's youth. [Girl with Smartphone](#) – [MarieXMartin](#) – [Pixabay License](#)

Is There Good Stress?

Stress is everywhere and has been on the rise over the last several years (Figure 8.5). Each of us is acquainted with stress—some are more familiar than others. In many ways, stress feels like a load you just can't carry—a feeling you experience when, for example, you have to drive somewhere in a blizzard, when you wake up late the morning of an important job interview, when you run out of money before the next pay period, and before taking an important exam for which, you realize you are not fully prepared.

Change in Stress Levels Over Past 5 Years

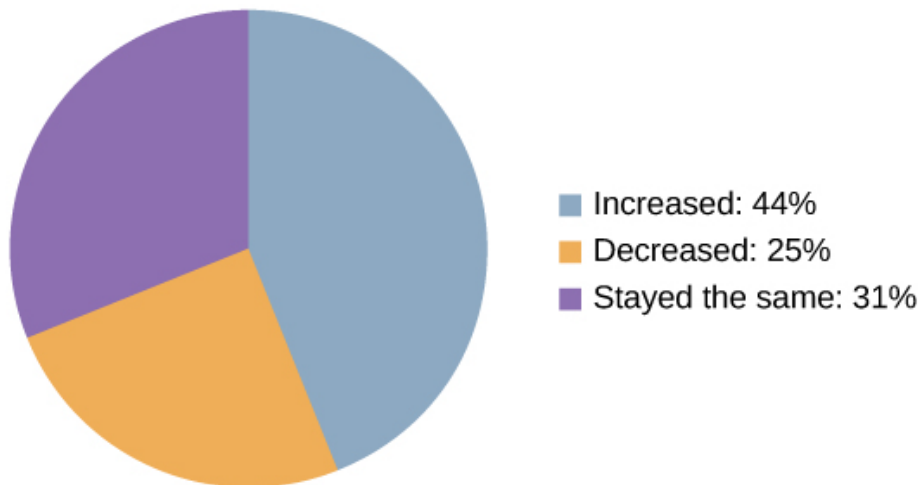


Figure 8.5 Nearly half of U.S. adults indicated that their stress levels have increased over the last five years (Neelakantan, 2013).

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 (1974) 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* = “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, students may experience beneficial stress before a major exam. Research shows that moderate stress can enhance both immediate and delayed recall of educational material. 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 (Hupbach & Fieman, 2012).

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 (eustress); when stress levels reach an optimal level (the highest point of the curve), performance reaches its peak (Figure 8.6). A person at this stress level will 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* = “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 (Everly & Lating, 2002). A good example of distress is severe test anxiety. When students are feeling very stressed about a test, negative emotions combined with physical symptoms may make concentration difficult, thereby negatively affecting test scores.

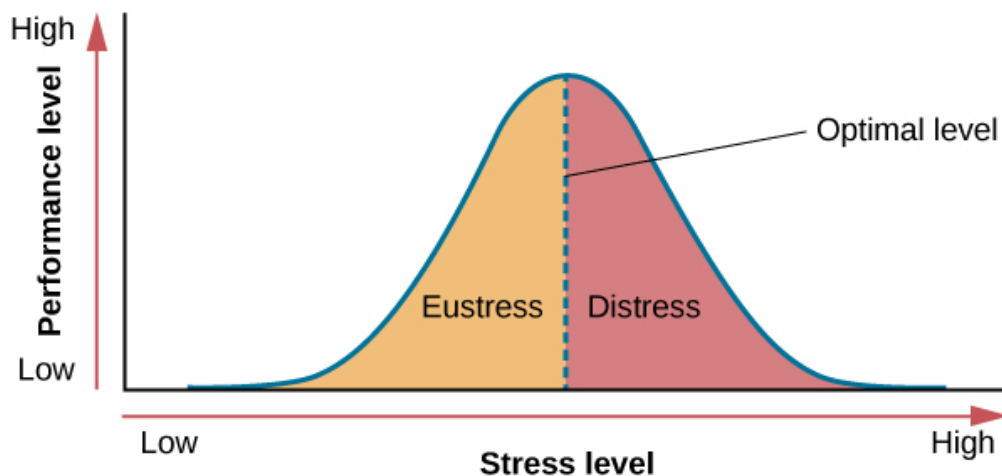


Figure 8.6 As the stress level increases from low to moderate, so does performance (eustress). At the optimal level (the peak of the curve), performance has reached its peak. If stress exceeds the optimal level, it will reach the distress region, where it will become excessive and debilitating, and performance will decline (Everly & Lating, 2002).

Summary

- Stress is a process whereby an individual perceives and responds to events appraised as overwhelming or threatening to one's well-being.
- 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.
- Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe developed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) to measure stress by assigning a number of life change units to life events that typically require some adjustment, including positive events.
- Many potential stressors also include daily hassles, which are minor irritations and annoyances that can build up over time.
- Stress can be positive (eustress) or negative (distress).

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss an example of a situation or event that could be appraised as either threatening or challenging.
2. Compare and contrast examples of chronic stress and acute stress. Discuss an example of when chronic stress might contribute to more negative effects on your life than acute stress. Discuss an example of when acute stress might contribute to more negative effects on your life than chronic stress.
3. Describe an example of how a daily hassle could contribute to chronic stress.

Remix/Revisions featured in this section

- Small editing revisions to tailor the content to the Psychology of Human Relations course.
- Remix of combining sections [What is Stress](#) and [Stressors](#) (Psychology 2e – Openstax).
- Added and changed some images as well as changed formatting for photos to provide links to locations of images and CC licenses.
- Added doi links to references to comply with APA 7th edition formatting reference manual.

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8.2 Coping With Stress

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define coping and differentiate between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping
- Describe the importance of perceived control in our reactions to stress
- Explain how social support is vital in health and longevity

As we learned in the previous section, stress—especially if it is chronic—takes a toll on our bodies and can have enormously negative health implications. When we experience events in our lives that we appraise as stressful, it is essential that we use effective coping strategies to manage our stress. **Coping** refers to mental and behavioral efforts that we use to deal with problems relating to stress.

Coping Styles

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished two fundamental kinds of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. In **problem-focused coping**, one attempts to manage or alter the problem that is causing one to experience stress (i.e., the stressor). Problem-focused coping strategies are similar to strategies used in everyday problem-solving: they typically involve identifying the problem, considering possible solutions, weighing the costs and benefits of these solutions, and then selecting an alternative (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As an example, suppose Bradford receives a midterm notice that he is failing statistics class. If Bradford adopts a problem-focused coping approach to managing his stress, he would be proactive in trying to alleviate the source of the stress. He might contact his professor to discuss what must be done to raise his grade, he might also decide to set aside two hours daily to study statistics assignments, and he may seek tutoring assistance. A problem-focused approach to managing stress means we actively try to do things to address the problem.

Emotion-focused coping, in contrast, consists of efforts to change or reduce the negative emotions associated with stress. These efforts may include avoiding, minimizing, or distancing oneself from the problem, or positive comparisons with others (“I’m not as bad off as she is”), or seeking something positive in a negative event (“Now that I’ve been fired, I can sleep in for a few days”). In some cases, emotion-focused coping strategies involve **reappraisal**, whereby the stressor is construed differently (and somewhat self-deceptively) without changing its objective level of threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, a person sentenced to federal prison who thinks, “This will give me a great

chance to network with others,” is using reappraisal. If Bradford adopted an emotion-focused approach to managing his midterm deficiency stress, he might watch a comedy movie, play video games, or spend hours on social media to take his mind off the situation. In a certain sense, emotion-focused coping can be thought of as treating the symptoms rather than the actual cause.

While many stressors elicit both kinds of coping strategies, problem-focused coping is more likely to occur when encountering stressors, we perceive as controllable, while emotion-focused coping is more likely to predominate when faced with stressors that we believe we are powerless to change (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Clearly, emotion-focused coping is more effective in dealing with uncontrollable stressors. For example, the stress you experience when a loved one dies can be overwhelming. You are simply powerless to change the situation as there is nothing you can do to bring this person back. The most helpful coping response is emotion-focused coping aimed at minimizing the pain of the grieving period.

Fortunately, most stressors we encounter can be modified and are, to varying degrees, controllable. A person who cannot stand her job can quit and look for work elsewhere; a middle-aged divorcee can find another potential partner; the freshman who fails an exam can study harder next time, and a breast lump does not necessarily mean that one is fated to die of breast cancer.

Control and Stress

The desire and ability to predict events, make decisions, and affect outcomes—that is, to enact control in our lives—is a basic tenet of human behavior (Everly & Lating, 2002). Albert Bandura (1997) stated that “the intensity and chronicity of human stress is governed largely by perceived control over the demands of one’s life” (p. 262). As cogently described in his statement, our reaction to potential stressors depends to a large extent on how much control we feel we have over such things. **Perceived control** is our beliefs about our personal capacity to exert influence over and shape outcomes, and it has major implications for our health and happiness (Infurna & Gerstorf, 2014). Extensive research has demonstrated that perceptions of personal control are associated with a variety of favorable outcomes, such as better physical and mental health and greater psychological well-being (Diehl & Hay, 2010). Greater personal control is also associated with lower reactivity to stressors in daily life. For example, researchers in one investigation found that higher levels of perceived control at one point in time were later associated with lower emotional and physical reactivity to interpersonal stressors (Neupert, Almeida, & Charles, 2007). Further, a daily diary study with 34 older widows found that their stress and anxiety levels were significantly reduced on days during which the widows felt greater perceived control (Ong, Bergeman, & Bisconti, 2005).

People who report higher levels of perceived control view their health as controllable, thereby making it more likely that they will better manage their health and engage in behaviors conducive to good health (Bandura, 2004). Not surprisingly, greater perceived control has been linked to lower risk of physical health problems, including declines in physical functioning (Infurna, Gerstorf, Ram, Schupp, & Wagner, 2011), heart attacks (Rosengren et al., 2004), and both cardiovascular disease incidence (Stürmer, Hasselbach, & Amelang, 2006) and mortality from cardiac disease (Surtees et al., 2010). In addition, longitudinal studies of British civil servants have found that those in low-status jobs (e.g., clerical and office support staff) in which the degree of control over the job is minimal are considerably more likely to develop heart disease than those with high-status jobs or considerable control over their jobs (Marmot, Bosma, Hemingway, & Stansfeld, 1997).

The link between perceived control and health may provide an explanation for the frequently observed relationship between social class and health outcomes (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). In general, research has found that more affluent individuals experience better health partly because they tend to believe that they can personally control and manage their reactions to life's stressors (Johnson & Krueger, 2006). Perhaps buoyed by the perceived level of control, individuals of higher social class may be prone to overestimating the degree of influence they have over particular outcomes. For example, those of higher social class tend to believe that their votes have greater sway on election outcomes than do those of lower social class, which may explain higher rates of voting in more affluent communities (Krosnick, 1990). Other research has found that a sense of perceived control can protect less affluent individuals from poorer health, depression, and reduced life-satisfaction—all of which tend to accompany lower social standing (Lachman & Weaver, 1998).

Taken together, findings from these and many other studies clearly suggest that perceptions of control and coping abilities are important in managing and coping with the stressors we encounter throughout life.

Social Support

The need to form and maintain strong, stable relationships with others is a powerful, pervasive, and fundamental human motive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Building strong interpersonal relationships with others helps us establish a network of close, caring individuals who can provide social support in times of distress, sorrow, and fear. **Social support** can be thought of as the soothing impact of friends, family, and acquaintances (Baron & Kerr, 2003). Social support can take many forms, including advice, guidance, encouragement, acceptance, emotional comfort, and tangible assistance (such as financial help). Thus, other people can be very comforting to us when we are faced with a wide range of life stressors, and they can be extremely helpful in our efforts to manage these challenges. Even in nonhuman animals, species mates can offer social support during times of stress. For example, elephants seem to be able to sense when other

elephants are stressed and will often comfort them with physical contact—such as a trunk touch—or an empathetic vocal response (Krumboltz, 2014).

Scientific interest in the importance of social support first emerged in the 1970s when health researchers developed an interest in the health consequences of being socially integrated (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). Interest was further fueled by longitudinal studies showing that social connectedness reduced mortality. In one classic study, nearly 7,000 Alameda County, California, residents were followed over 9 years. Those who had previously indicated that they lacked social and community ties were more likely to die during the follow-up period than those with more extensive social networks. Compared to those with the most social contacts, isolated men and women were, respectively, 2.3 and 2.8 times more likely to die. These trends persisted even after controlling for a variety of health-related variables, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, self-reported health at the beginning of the study, and physical activity (Berkman & Syme, 1979).

Since the time of that study, social support has emerged as one of the well-documented psychosocial factors affecting health outcomes (Uchino, 2009). A statistical review of 148 studies conducted between 1982 and 2007 involving over 300,000 participants concluded that individuals with stronger social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with weak or insufficient social relationships (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). According to the researchers, the magnitude of the effect of social support observed in this study is comparable with quitting smoking and exceeded many well-known risk factors for mortality, such as obesity and physical inactivity (Figure 8.7).



Figure 8.7 Close relationships with others provide more than happiness and fulfillment—they can help foster good health. Modification of [Group of Friends](#) – [Damian Gadal/Flickr](#) – [CC BY 2.0](#)

A number of large-scale studies have found that individuals with low levels of social support are at greater risk of mortality, especially from cardiovascular disorders (Brummett et al., 2001). Further, higher levels of social supported have been linked to

better survival rates following breast cancer (Falagas et al., 2007) and infectious diseases, especially HIV infection (Lee & Rotheram-Borus, 2001). In fact, a person with high levels of social support is less likely to contract a common cold. In one study, 334 participants completed questionnaires assessing their sociability; these individuals were subsequently exposed to a virus that causes a common cold and monitored for several weeks to see who became ill. Results showed that increased sociability was linearly associated with a decreased probability of developing a cold (Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, & Skoner, 2003).

For many of us, friends are a vital source of social support. But what if you find yourself in a situation in which you have few friends and companions? Many students who leave home to attend and live at college experience drastic reductions in their social support, which makes them vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Social media can sometimes be useful in navigating these transitions (Raney & Troop Gordon, 2012) but might also cause increases in loneliness (Hunt, Marx, Lipson, & Young, 2018). For this reason, many colleges have designed first-year programs, such as peer mentoring (Raymond & Shepard, 2018), that can help students build new social networks. For some people, our families—especially our parents—are a major source of social support.

Social support appears to work by boosting the immune system, especially among people who are experiencing stress (Uchino, Vaughn, Carlisle, & Birmingham, 2012). In a pioneering study, spouses of cancer patients who reported high levels of social support showed indications of better immune functioning on two out of three immune functioning measures, compared to spouses who were below the median on reported social support (Baron, Cutrona, Hicklin, Russell, & Lubaroff, 1990). Studies of other populations have produced similar results, including those of spousal caregivers of dementia sufferers, medical students, elderly adults, and cancer patients (Cohen & Herbert, 1996; Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002).

In addition, social support has been shown to reduce blood pressure for people performing stressful tasks, such as giving a speech or performing mental arithmetic (Lepore, 1998). In these kinds of studies, participants are usually asked to perform a stressful task either alone, with a stranger present (who may be either supportive or unsupportive), or with a friend present. Those tested with a friend present generally exhibit lower blood pressure than those tested alone or with a stranger (Fontana, Diegnan, Villeneuve, & Lepore, 1999). In one study, 112 female participants who performed stressful mental arithmetic exhibited lower blood pressure when they received support from a friend rather than a stranger, but only if the friend was a male (Phillips, Gallagher, & Carroll, 2009). Although these findings are somewhat difficult to interpret, the authors mention that it is possible that females feel less supported and more evaluated by other females, particularly females whose opinions they value.

Taken together, the findings above suggest one of the reasons social support is connected to favorable health outcomes is because it has several beneficial physiological

effects in stressful situations. However, it is also important to consider the possibility that social support may lead to better health behaviors, such as a healthy diet, exercising, smoking cessation, and cooperation with medical regimens (Uchino, 2009).

Stress Reduction Techniques

Beyond having a sense of control and establishing social support networks, there are numerous other means by which we can manage stress (Figure 8.8). A common technique people use to combat stress is exercise (Salmon, 2001). It is well-established that exercise, both of long (aerobic) and short (anaerobic) duration, is beneficial for both physical and mental health (Everly & Lating, 2002). There is considerable evidence that physically fit individuals are more resistant to the adverse effects of stress and recover more quickly from stress than less physically fit individuals (Cotton, 1990). In a study of more than 500 Swiss police officers and emergency service personnel, increased physical fitness was associated with reduced stress, and regular exercise was reported to protect against stress-related health problems (Gerber, Kellman, Hartman, & Pühse, 2010).



Figure 8.8 Exercise is one primary stress reduction technique. [Sport UNE Gym](#) – [UNE Photos](#) – [CC BY 2.0](#)

One reason exercise may be beneficial is because it might buffer some of the deleterious physiological mechanisms of stress. One study found rats that exercised for six weeks showed a decrease in hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal responsiveness to mild stressors (Campeau et al., 2010). In high-stress humans, exercise has been shown to prevent telomere shortening, which may explain the common observation of a youthful appearance among those who exercise regularly (Puterman et al., 2010). Further, exercise in later adulthood appears to minimize the detrimental effects of stress on the hippocampus and memory (Head, Singh, & Bugg, 2012). Among cancer survivors, exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety (Speck, Courneya, Masse, Duval, & Schmitz, 2010) and depressive symptoms (Craft, VanIterson, Helenowski, Rademaker, & Courneya, 2012). Clearly, exercise is a highly effective tool for regulating stress.

In the 1970s, Herbert Benson, a cardiologist, developed a stress reduction method called the **relaxation response technique** (Greenberg, 2006). The relaxation response technique combines relaxation with transcendental meditation, and consists of four components (Stein, 2001):

1. sitting upright on a comfortable chair with feet on the ground and body in a relaxed position,
2. being in a quiet environment with eyes closed,
3. repeating a word or a phrase—a mantra—to oneself, such as “alert mind, calm body,”
4. passively allowing the mind to focus on pleasant thoughts, such as nature or the warmth of your blood nourishing your body.

The relaxation response approach is conceptualized as a general approach to stress reduction that reduces sympathetic arousal, and it has been used effectively to treat people with high blood pressure (Benson & Proctor, 1994) (Figure 8.9).



Figure 8.9 Meditation and relaxation are also effective stress reduction techniques. [Meditate](#) – [Caleb Roenigk](#) – [CC BY 2.0](#)

Another technique to combat stress, **biofeedback**, was developed by Gary Schwartz at Harvard University in the early 1970s. Biofeedback is a technique that uses electronic equipment to accurately measure a person’s neuromuscular and autonomic activity—feedback is provided in the form of visual or auditory signals (Figure 8.10). The main assumption of this approach is that providing somebody biofeedback will enable the individual to develop strategies that help gain some level of voluntary control over what are normally involuntary bodily processes (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1995). A number of different bodily measures have been used in biofeedback research, including facial muscle movement, brain activity, and skin temperature, and it has been applied successfully with individuals experiencing tension headaches, high blood pressure, asthma, and phobias (Stein, 2001).



Figure 8.10 Biofeedback is one type of stress reduction technique used to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). [Biofeedback training program](#) - [Dr. Carmen Russoniello](#) – [CC BY 2.0](#)

Understanding your current coping mechanisms for stress can help you determine what works to manage stress—and what doesn't. Once we do some self-analysis, we can use a method called the four A's (Sparks, 2019). The four A's gives us four choices for dealing with a stressor (Figure 8.11):

1. **Avoid the stressor.** We can try to avoid situations that stress us out. If watching certain television programs causes stress, stop watching them! Spend time with people who help you relax. We can also look at saying no more often if we do not have the time necessary to complete everything we are doing.
2. **Alter the stressor.** Another option in dealing with stress is to try to alter it, if you can't avoid it. This often involved problem-focused coping techniques. When changing a situation, you can be more assertive, manage time better, and communicate your own needs and wants better. For example, Karen can look at the things causing her stress, such as her home and school commitments; while she can't change the workload, she can examine ways to avoid a heavy workload in the future. If Karen is stressed about the amount of homework she has and the fact that she needs to clean the house, asking for help from roommates, for example, can help alter the stressor. Often this involves the ability to communicate well.
3. **Adapt to the stressor.** If you are unable to avoid or change the stressor, getting comfortable with the stressor is a way to handle it. Creating your own coping mechanisms for the stress and learning to handle it can be an effective way to handle the stress. These will likely employ emotion-focused coping techniques. For example,

we can try looking at stressful situations in a positive light, consider how important the stressor is in the long run, and adjust our standards of perfectionism.

4. **Accept the stressor.** Some stressors are unavoidable. We all have to go to work and manage our home life. So, learning to handle the things we cannot change by forgiving, developing tolerances, and letting go of those things we cannot control is also a way to deal with a stressor. This also involves emotion-focused coping. For example, if your mother-in-law's yearly visits and criticisms cause stress, obviously you are not able to avoid or alter the stress, but you can adapt to it and accept it. Since we cannot control another person, accepting the stressor and finding ways of dealing with it can help minimize some negative effects of the stress we may experience.

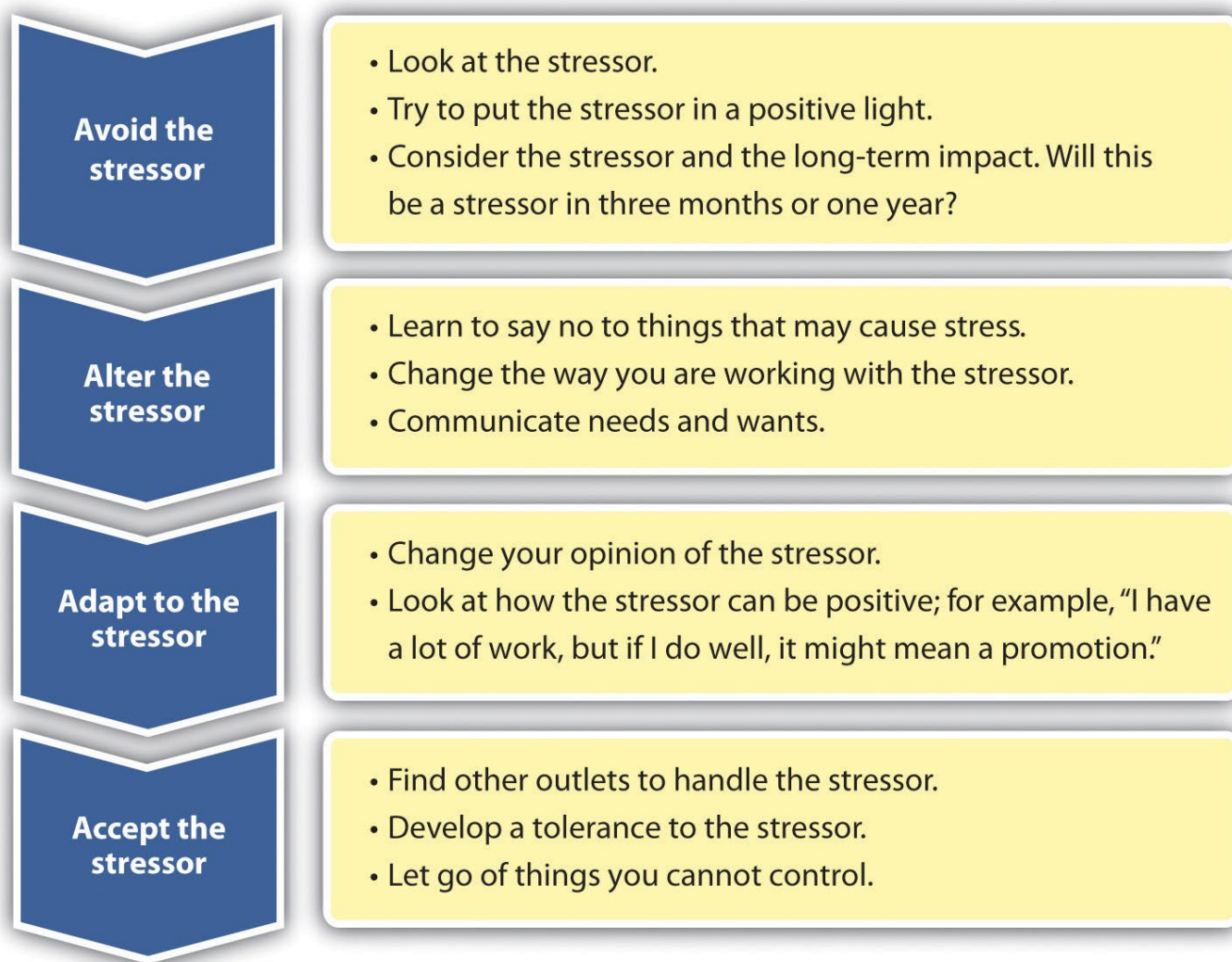


Figure 8.11 The Four As for Dealing with Stress

Summary

- When faced with stress, people must attempt to manage or cope with it.
- In general, there are two basic forms of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.
- Those who use problem-focused coping strategies tend to cope better with stress because these strategies address the source of stress rather than the resulting symptoms.
- To a large extent, perceived control greatly impacts reaction to stressors and is associated with greater physical and mental well-being.
- Social support has been demonstrated to be a highly effective buffer against the adverse effects of stress.
- The four As of stress reduction can help us reduce stress. They include: avoid, alter, adapt, and accept. By using the four As to determine the best approach to deal with a certain stressor, we can begin to have a more positive outlook on the stressor and learn to handle it better.

Discussion Questions

1. Although problem-focused coping seems to be a more effective strategy when dealing with stressors, do you think there are any kinds of stressful situations in which emotion-focused coping might be a better strategy?
2. Describe how social support can affect health both directly and indirectly.
3. Of the ways to handle stress listed in this chapter, which ones do you already integrate in your life? Do you engage in other methods not listed here? Share your ideas for stress reduction in small groups.

Remix/Revisions featured in this section

- Small editing revisions to tailor the content to the Psychology of Human Relations course and removal of some content.
- Remix of [3.4 Reducing Stress](#) (Human Relations – Saylor) added to [14.4 Regulation of Stress](#) (Psychology 2e – Openstax).
- Provided links to locations of images and CC licenses.
- Added doi links to references to comply with APA 7th edition formatting reference manual.

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Psychology 2e. **Authored by:** Rose M. Spielman, William J. Jenkins, Marilyn D. Lovett. **Publisher:** Openstax. **Located at:** <https://openstax.org/books/psychology-2e/pages/14-4-regulation-of-stress> **License:** [CC-BY 4.0](#)

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8.3 Stress in the Workplace

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Compare and contrast the individual, organizational, and environmental factors that lead to stress in the workplace.
- Discuss managerial and organizational approaches to stress management in the work place.

Sources of Workplace Stress

In most surveys on stress and its causes, Money, Work, Family Responsibilities, and Health Concerns have been at the top of the list for quite a long time. All four of these factors are either directly or indirectly impact and are impacted by the workplace.

There are many differences among individuals and their stressors. Why is one person's mind-crippling stress another person's biggest motivation and challenge? We're going to attempt to answer this by looking at the three sources of stress—individual, organizational, and environmental—and then add in the concept of human perception in an attempt to understand this conundrum.

Individual Factors

Individuals might experience stressful commutes to work, or a stressful couple of weeks helping at a work event, but those kinds of temporary, individual stresses are not what we're looking at here. We're looking for a deeper, longer-term stress. Family stress—marriages that are ending, issues with children, an ailing parent—these are stressful situations that an employee really can't leave at home when he or she comes to work. Financial stress, like the inability to pay bills or an unexpected new demand on a person's cash flow might also be an issue that disturbs an employee's time at work. Finally, an individual's own personality might actually contribute to his or her stress. People's dispositions—how they perceive things as negative or positive—can be a factor in each person's stress as well.

Organizational Factors

There are several organizational sources of stress (Figure 8.12):

- **Task or role demands:** these are factors related to a person's role at work, including the design of a person's job or working conditions. A stressful task demand might be a detailed, weekly presentation to the company's senior team. A stressful role demand

might be where a person is expected to achieve more in a set amount of time than is possible.

- **Interpersonal demands:** these are stressors created by co-workers. Perhaps an employee is experiencing ongoing conflict with a co-worker he or she is expected to collaborate closely with. Or maybe employees are experiencing a lack of social support in their roles.
- **Organizational structure:** this refers to the level of differentiation within an organization, the degree of rules and regulations, and where decisions are made. If employees are unable to participate in decisions that affect them, they may experience stress.
- **Organizational leadership:** this refers to the organization's style of leadership, particularly the managerial style of its senior executives. Leaders can create an environment of tension, fear and anxiety and can exert unrealistic pressure and control. If employees are worried that they'll be fired for not living up to leadership's standards, this can definitely be a source of stress.
- **Organizational life stage:** an organization goes through a cycle of stages (birth, growth, maturity, decline). For employees, the birth and decline of an organization can be particularly stressful, as those stages tend to be filled with heavy workloads and a level of uncertainty about the future.



Figure 8.12 There are many sources of stress at work.

[Workplace Stress](#) – [CIPHR Connect](#) – [CC BY 2.0](#)

Environmental Factors

Finally, there are environmental sources of stress. The economy may be in a downturn, creating uncertainty for job futures and bank accounts. There may be political unrest or change creating stress. Finally, technology can cause stress, as new developments are constantly making employee skills obsolete, and workers fear they'll be replaced by a

machine that can do the same. Employee are also often expected to stay connected to the workplace 24/7 because technology allows it.

As a side note, it's important to understand that these stressors are additive. In other words, stress builds up, and new elements add to a person's stress level. So, a single element of stress might not seem important in itself, but when added to other stresses the worker is experiencing, it can, as the old adage says, be the straw that broke the camel's back (Figure 8.13).

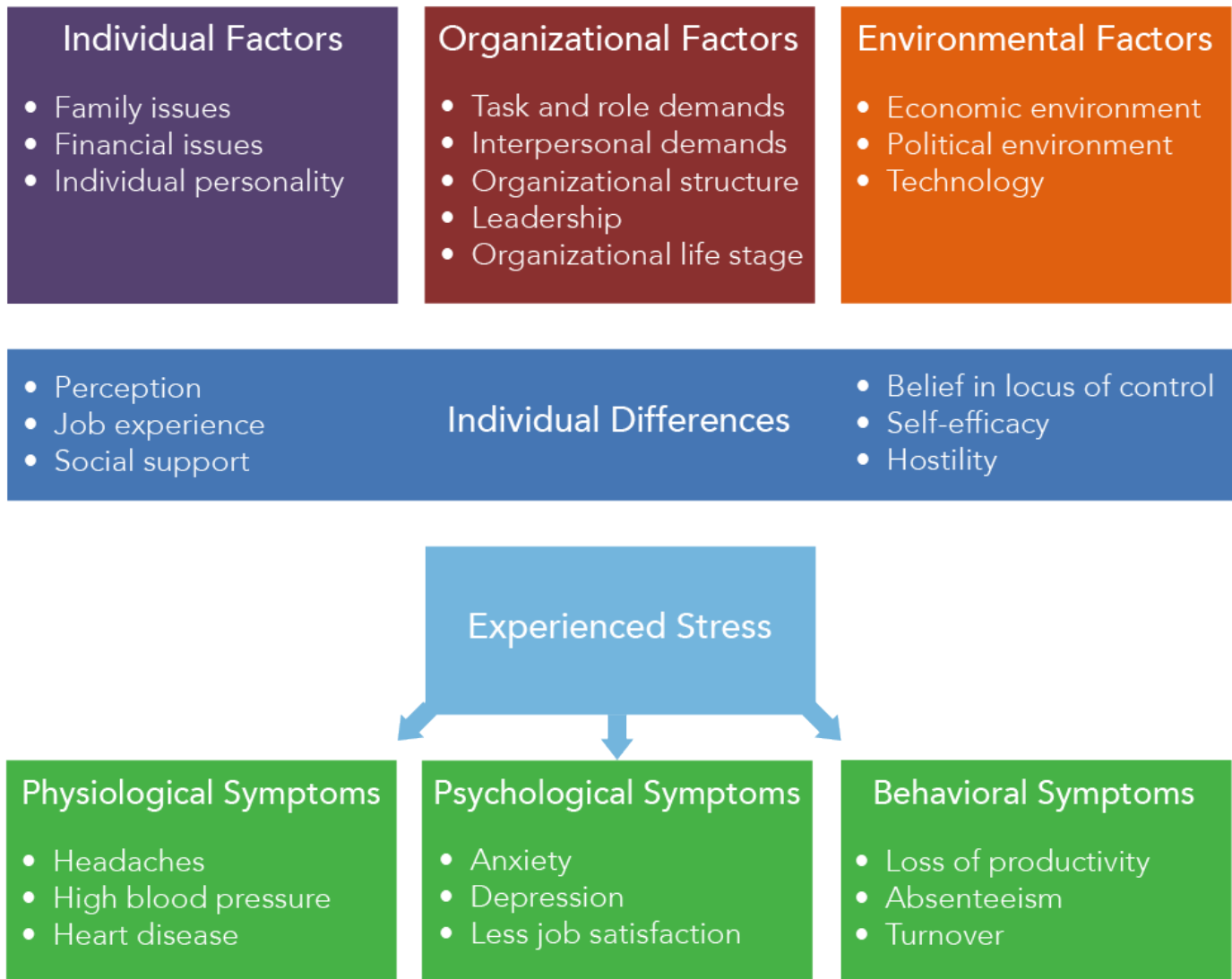


Figure 8.13 Diagram of the sources of stress. Factors of Stress – Freedom Learning Group – [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Individual Differences

Those are the sources of stress, but differences within an individual determine whether that stress will be positive or negative. Those individual differences include:

- **Perception.** This is what moderates the individual's relationship to the stressor. For instance, one person might see a potential layoff as a stressful situation, while another

person might see that same layoff as an opportunity for a nice severance package and the opportunity to start a new business.

- **Job Experience.** Because stress is associated with turnover, it would stand to reason that those employees with a long tenure are the most stress-resistant of the bunch.
- **Social Support.** Co-workers, especially those who are caring or considered to be friends, can help protect a fellow employee against the effects of stress.
- **Belief in locus of control.** Those who have a high internal locus of control (those that believe they are in control of their own fate) are, unsurprisingly, not as affected by stress as those who feel they are not in control.
- **Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is an individual's belief that he or she can complete a task. Research shows that employees who have strong levels of self-efficacy are more resistant to the effects of stress.
- **Hostility.** Some employees carry around a high level of hostility as a part of their personalities, and they're often suspicious and distrustful of their co-workers. These personality traits make a person more susceptible to stress.

If those potential sources of stress sneak through the individual difference filters and manifest themselves as stress, they will appear in a variety of physiological, psychological and behavioral symptoms. We reviewed the physiological symptoms when we talked about the definition of stress. Add to that psychological symptoms, like tension and anxiety, but also job dissatisfaction and boredom, and behavioral symptoms, like turnover and absenteeism, and you can see how stress can become an organizational problem.

Consequences and Costs of Stress

Today's typical workplace expects quite a bit from its employees. In a climate of layoffs and downsizing, employees are typically expected to do "more with less"—that is, additional work for the same pay, often without updated resources and in a short amount of time. Demands for increased efficiency, quality and innovation can come at quite the cost, and employees are caving under the pressure.

A study conducted by Mental Health America (formerly the National Mental Health Association) suggests that stress costs US employers an estimated \$500 billion dollars in lost productivity annually.

What does lost productivity mean? Let's take a look at how employees responded to that 2017 survey, and talk about how it can directly (and indirectly) impact a company's bottom line.

Absenteeism

What employees are saying (Hellebuyck, Nguyen, Halphern, Fritze, & Kennedy, 2017):

- A third of employees surveyed reported staying away from work at least two or more days a month because their work environments were so stressful
- Of those that responded that they missed two or more days of work
 - 35% said they missed between three and five days a month
 - 38% said they missed six days or more

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), absenteeism alone costs US employers \$225.8 billion annually, or about \$1,685 per employee. This cost, they say, comes from (CDC Foundation, 2015):

- Wages associated with unreported paid time off
- High cost of replacement workers
- Overtime pay for employees picking up their additional work
- Overall administrative costs of managing absenteeism

It isn't just the loss of productivity of the absentees, but their co-workers who are affected by this. In an article for BenefitsPro.com, Mental Health American CEO Paul Gionfriddo said, "Overstressed and unhealthy employees contribute to unhappy workplaces. This means that the indirect effects on everyone else—the people who dread coming to work—may not show up in the calculated productivity losses, but contribute to them nevertheless" (Hellebuyck, et al., 2017). Indeed, this low morale, combined with possible safety and quality issues that can result, are uncalculated effects.

Burn-Out

Burn-out is characterized as a symptom of long-term, unmanaged chronic stress in the workplace (World Health Organization, 2019). It includes constant exhaustion, feelings of distance or negative views of the workplace, and lowered professional efficacy. Burn-out is specific to the workplace and should not be considered as a phenomenon in other life areas.

Burn-out has become an increasing concern in the U.S. In 2021, 79% of adult workers who completed the American Psychological Association's Work and Well-Being Survey reported experiencing stress in their workplaces. Additionally, 3 of 5 employees reported that their workplace stress also reduced their motivation, interest, and effort in their jobs and job performance (Abramson, 2022).

A 2015 Gallup poll found the main reasons for employee burn-out have to do with how employees are managed, rather than performance expectations (Wigert and Agrawal, 2018). The five factors that were most correlated with burn-out were:

1. Being treated unfairly at work

Unfair treatment can include mistreatment, favoritism, and bias by coworkers, supervisors, or company policies.

2. A workload that is difficult to manage

Employees often look to their supervisors to help regulate their workloads and look for others who can assist in completing tasks.

3. Ambiguity in workplace role

40% of employees report being unsure of what is expected of them at work. Lack of clarity about job responsibilities can lead to exhaustion

4. Supervisor's lack of support and communication

Supervisors who are negligent or hostile create defensive employees who are often uninformed.

5. Unrealistic deadlines

Supervisors who set unreasonable deadlines increase the stress their employees experience. Continually aggressive deadlines will eventually cause employees to fall behind.

Turnover

Here's what employees are saying about the effects of stress on their workplaces (Hellebuyck, et al., 2017):

- Two-thirds felt they worked in an unsupportive or even hostile environment
- Two-thirds said they didn't often trust their coworkers to support them at work
- Two-thirds said their supervisor was unsupportive
- More than eight in 10 said the stress at work directly caused stress with family and friend relationships
- More than seven in 10 admitted they bad-mouth their employer outside of work

It's easy to see why, considering these sentiments, that nearly three quarters of the employees surveyed are either actively seeking new employment or thinking of doing so.

The Work Institute's 2017 Retention Report suggested that replacing an employee costs about 33% of that employee's salary, meaning that the average worker making \$45,000 a year will cost about \$15,000 to replace, when you consider advertising, screening and

testing applicants, training, and onboarding costs (among others). For some harder-to-fill positions, this cost could increase to 50% of the worker's salary (Sears, 2017).

Turnover also lowers productivity in that there is a shift of work while the position is empty and even after when the new employee is learning her position, and the employee leaving takes with him knowledge of the company that may not be recaptured.

Sadly, the Work Institute's 2017 Retention Report also captured data that led them to determine that roughly 75% of all turnover could be avoided. When surveying their 34,000 respondents, the top reasons for turnover were cited as career development, compensation and benefits...and then three that are directly related to stress: work-life balance, manager's behavior and well-being (Sears, 2017)

Workplace Violence

Workplace violence is on the rise, and it is the third leading cause of death for workers on the job. Of course, some workplace violence, like an active shooter or even an angry retail customer who takes a swing, is not due to workplace stress. Still, this kind of activity takes a toll on businesses, adding yet another layer of stress and a price tag of about \$55 million in lost wages for the 1.8 million work days lost each year due to workplace violence (Lower & Associates, 2019).

But workplace violence rears its ugly head on a smaller level as well. **Desk rage** is a term used to describe extreme or violent anger shown by someone in an office, especially when this is caused by worry or a difficult situation. This can manifest itself in screaming and shouting, throwing or angrily destroying office equipment, or it can be more subtle, like damaging water cooler gossip, theft or abuse of sick time. The people who work with someone experiencing desk rage are as much victims of workplace stress here as the "desk rager."

These are some of the results of stress that drive down productivity, but stress also affects the cost of health benefits and medical needs that an employer will pick up by providing health insurance. Stress factors into five of the six leading causes of death in the US, and a staggering number of medical office visits will, in part, address symptoms related to stress.

It's no surprise to hear that a company like General Motors spends more money on healthcare than it does on steel. And (surprise!) workplace stress is responsible for up to \$190 billion in annual US healthcare costs.

Goh, Pfeffer, and Zenios (2016) cited ten major factors of workplace stress and then mathematically examined their occurrences (and co-occurrences), concluding that workplace stress contributes to approximately 120,000 deaths each year. That, and additional healthcare expenses related to addressing stress related problems, accounted

for \$125 to \$190 billion in healthcare costs, or about 5% to 8% of the nation's total expenditure.

Managerial Approaches to Stress Management

Employees don't just get distracted from work but get distracted from work by other work. Workers are sitting down to thoughtful tasks and being lured away by client emails, experiencing a new interruption every few minutes and working at a frantic pace. "Managing your time" used to be synonymous with "managing your attention," but the workplace doesn't function like that anymore. Time management training needs to change with the times.

Thomas (2015) suggests that, rather than training individuals on time management techniques, managers should spend more time on clarity around role priorities rather than specific task priorities. When managers can make clear to an employee what the expectations of their role is and how they match up with the priorities of the company, the employee can gain a new clarity on how to prioritize incoming work. Job design, its initial conception and its constant evaluation, are important in managing workplace stress.

Job design is also key in motivating employees. Skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback are all components that should be considered when designing a job, no matter how complicated or repetitive the job might be. Job design should reinforce the effort-to-performance link on the expectancy framework.

If job design provides the challenge that motivates an employee, it can also tip the scales toward stress. Managers can reevaluate job design to ensure that expectations for the role don't exceed the employee's abilities. They can also reduce role ambiguity by aligning employees around company objectives and helping them prioritize need-to-do tasks over day-to-day minutiae (Thomas, 2015).

While certain jobs are more stressful than others—consider an air traffic controller's daily stress versus that of a clerical worker—individual responses to stress are also very specific to an employee's personality. Managers should take into consideration how an individual might adapt to a high-stress role during the selection and placement process. Previous experience is often a good indicator of a potential employee's suitability.

Another motivating factor for employees is goal-setting. As we learned in chapter 3, individuals should have specific, measurable goals that they can achieve if they stretch themselves. Managers should take care that they're achieving good, and not bad, levels of stress when working with employees to set goals. Goals that tie into company objectives work to clarify role responsibilities, and managers who review their employees' progress can protect them from demotivation and stress.

Finally, there's the managerial option of job redesign to help with stress management. Redesigning jobs to make them richer for the employees can alleviate stress and add new motivation. A job redesign that gives the team member more responsibility, more say in decisions that involve them, and more meaningful work can give an employee more control over work activities and lessen his reliance on others. Each of these managerial approaches to stress management can be used as a motivational tool for employees.

But what about the effects of an organization's culture on stress levels? Some organizations expect an employee to put in far more than the standard 40 hours of work in a week. Employees feel an increasing need to stay connected to email and voice mail when not in the office, and often their managers expect to be able to contact them by phone or text well after working hours. International companies expect employees to navigate time differences, and employees in the U.S. find themselves staying at work late or coming in early to have necessary conversations with Europe and Asia.

Organizational Approaches to Stress Management

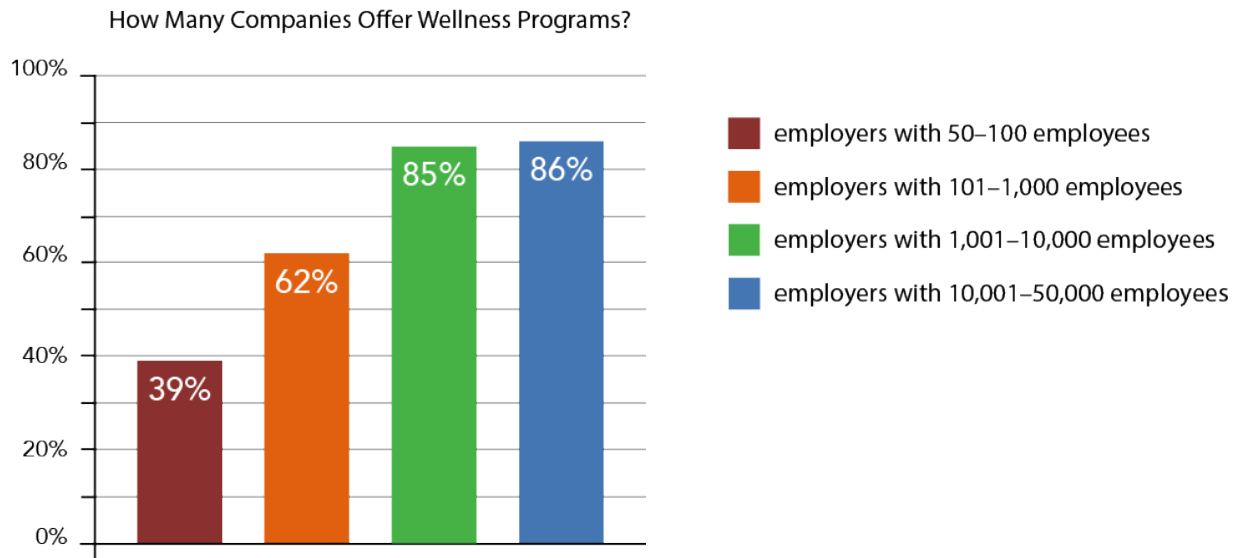
In addition to careful job design and managing stifling company cultures, organizations are taking steps to help employees battle stress by offering programs, benefits and office "perks" that allow workers to make choices about managing stress as it best suits their needs.

Healthcare is an expensive endeavor for employers these days, and smaller, privately held companies are looking for clever benefit package designs that reduce an organization's costs without costing the employee too much more. Stress and stress-related illness has a significant impact on healthcare costs, given annual costs for those stress-related health issues could be anywhere from \$125 to \$190 billion.

It's not unusual for a company to offer their employees smoking cessation programs or asthma management programs to help keep healthcare costs in check. Now employers are looking to implement other wellness programs, knowing that stress-related health issues are driving the cost of medical benefits. In fact, health care providers are starting to support these client endeavors, too, recognizing the need to cut spending however they can.

Wellness programs are organizational efforts to help employees improve their health and mental well-being by offering company-sponsored exercise, weight-loss competitions, health screenings and more. Some companies are looking at a more holistic view of stress release by concentrating not just on employee physical health, but also offering financial management classes and opportunities to give back to the community.

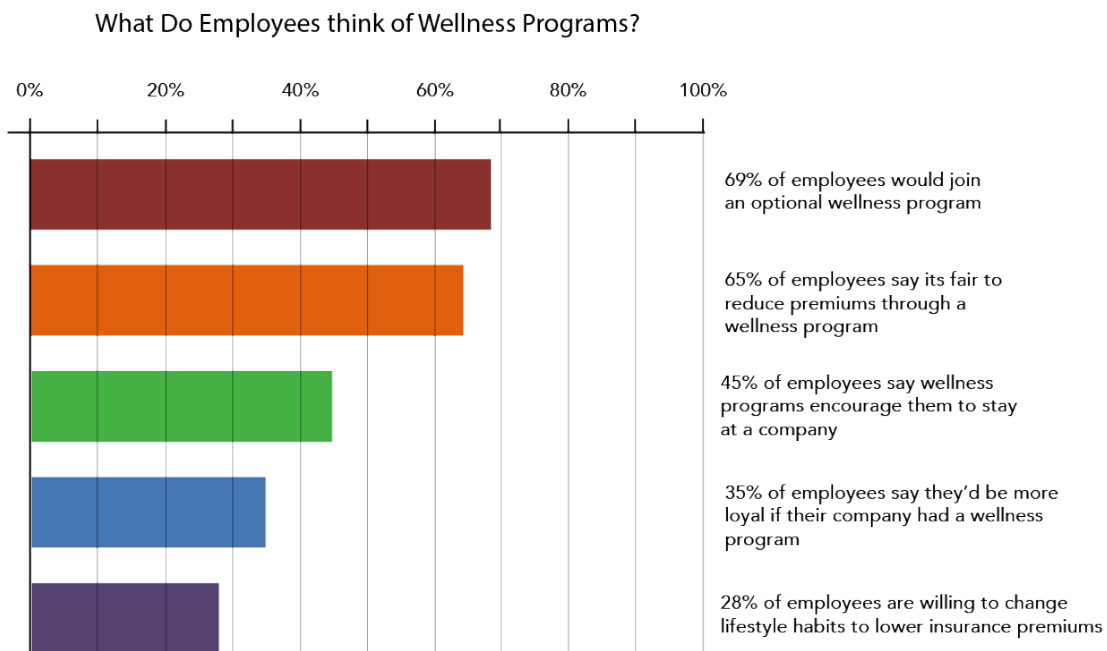
Nationwide, companies are seeing the benefits of offering their employees wellness programs. 91% of all large companies (with more than 10,000 employees) offer some type of wellness program (Figure 8.14).



Source: <https://www.webfx.com/data/why-your-company-needs-a-wellness-program/>

Figure 8.14 Wellness programs are increasingly used to reduce workplace stress.

They're a cost-effective solution to a very expensive problem. Furthermore, as shown in the second graph below, a majority of employees are open to participating in them (Figure 8.15). Wellness programs are a win-win for companies and their employees.



Source: <https://www.webfx.com/data/why-your-company-needs-a-wellness-program/>

Figure 8.15 Employee opinions of wellness programs.

Now, some employers offer these types of programs and then get in the way of their effectiveness. In Joel Goh's study, he pointed out that, while US employers recognize that stress leads to costly health issues and put programs in place to combat them, those same employers sometimes undermine those programs with stress-inducing employment practices. These programs don't work if the employee is too stressed and overloaded with work to participate!

Some younger companies are going the extra mile to incorporate wellness into their culture and work environment. Google and Apple are headliners among organizations that offer their employees multiple choices in stress-burning activities throughout the day—like ping-pong tables, foosball, bowling alleys—and other perks that allow their employees to eliminate stress from their lives, such as free meals and free rides to work. Masseuses, available for booking during work hours, and family-room like areas where employees can relax and put up their feet go a long way toward employee stress relief and comfort. These are great examples of companies taking a cue from the ways individuals pursue stress release and making some of those methods available in the workplace.

Companies can incorporate stress release into their benefits packages in other ways as well. Companies offering a nice paid-time-off package that features use-it-or-lose-it vacation time encourages their employees to step away from the office and enjoy time with their families. Discounted gym memberships can encourage employees to stay physically fit, and companies are starting to offer easy, direct-deposit college savings plans so that employees can more easily provide for the education of their offspring. Some companies have gone as far as providing on-site day care for employees, making child care convenient and cost-effective. Other companies have a dogs-allowed policy at the office, where people can bring in their pets and combat stressful situations with a furry hug.

Finally, mental health is an ever-present issue in today's society, and employers offer employee assistance programs (EAPs) for those employees who are struggling with issues at work or in their personal lives. Employee assistance programs offer short-term, confidential counseling to employees, complete with referrals, free assessments and follow up services. Where wellness programs and company benefits can't address mental health and wellbeing, employee assistance programs step in and make it easier for struggling workers to find help.

These wellness programs and benefits offerings are companies' responses to the individual needs of their employees and their ongoing quest for work/life balance. Not only do they foster excellent perception that they care about their employees, but they also address the very costly issue of stress in the workplace.

Summary

- There are three major contributing factors to stress experienced by employees in the workplace, these are individual, organizational, and environmental factors.
- Individual factors contributing to stress are family issues, financial issues, and personality.
- Organizational factors contributing to stress are task and role demands, interpersonal demands, organizational structure, leaderships, and organizational life stage.
- Environmental factors contributing to stress are economic and political environment and technology.
- The consequences of stress include absenteeism, burn-out, turnover, and workplace violence.
- Organizational approaches to addressing stress include job design and wellness programs.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of wellness programs? What are the drawbacks of wellness programs? How can companies/organizations develop effective wellness programs for their employees?
2. Discuss a job in which you experienced one of the consequences of stress (absenteeism, burn-out, turnover, violence). What conditions led to this outcome? What could your job have done to prevent this outcome?
3. Which factor (individual, organizational, environmental) do you think plays the biggest role in workplace stress? Why?

Remix/Revisions featured in this section

- Small editing revisions to tailor the content to the Psychology of Human Relations course.
- Added Burn-out section to [Sources of Stress](#) (Organizational Behavior – Lumen Learning).
- Replaced photos that were no longer available/had broken links
- Added photos with links to locations of images and CC licenses.
- Added doi links to references to comply with APA 7th edition formatting reference manual.

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