

Nature, Types, and Sources of Stress

Life is a continuous process of adjustment in which individuals are constantly required to deal with changing circumstances, demands, and pressures. These demands often emerge in the form of challenges, which may be physical, psychological, or social in nature.

Stress arises when such challenges disturb the equilibrium of the individual and exceed their perceived ability to cope.

However, it is important to recognise that stress is not inherently harmful. In fact, a certain level of stress is necessary for optimal functioning. Moderate stress, often referred to as *eustress*, enhances alertness, mobilises energy, and improves performance.

In contrast, excessive stress, known as *distress*, can impair functioning and lead to adverse consequences. Thus, stress may be understood as a double-edged phenomenon that can either facilitate or hinder human performance depending on its intensity and management.

The concept of stress has its roots in the Latin words *strictus* (tight) and *stringere* (to tighten), reflecting the feelings of tension and constriction experienced under stress.

Psychologically, stress is defined as a pattern of responses that an organism makes to a stimulus event that disturbs equilibrium and taxes or exceeds coping resources. It is not merely a stimulus or a response, but a dynamic process involving continuous interaction between the individual and the environment.

Events that produce stress are called *stressors*, while the individual's reaction to these stressors is termed *strain*.

Although Hans Selye defined stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand, this view has been criticised for overlooking individual differences. In reality, stress responses vary depending on how individuals perceive and interpret a situation.

This brings us to the cognitive appraisal approach proposed by Lazarus, which emphasises that stress is largely determined by an individual's subjective

evaluation of events. According to this perspective, stress involves two levels of appraisal.

The first is *primary appraisal*, where an individual evaluates whether an event is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. Stressful events may further be categorised as involving harm (damage already done), threat (potential future damage), or challenge (opportunity for growth and gain). T

he second level is *secondary appraisal*, which involves an assessment of one's coping resources and abilities. These resources may include physical strength, psychological resilience, social support, and material assets.

When individuals perceive that they have adequate resources to deal with a situation, they are less likely to experience stress. Thus, stress is a highly subjective and dynamic process shaped by past experiences, perceived control, and self-efficacy.

Stressful experiences also differ along several dimensions, including intensity, duration, complexity, and predictability. Acute, low-intensity, and predictable stress is generally less harmful, whereas chronic, high-intensity, complex, and unpredictable stress tends to have more severe consequences.

Individual differences further influence the experience of stress. People with better physical health, stable personalities, and strong support systems are generally more resilient, whereas those with poor health or limited resources are more vulnerable.

Stress can be broadly categorised into three interrelated types: physical and environmental stress, psychological stress, and social stress. Physical stress refers to demands that affect the body, such as fatigue, illness, injury, or lack of sleep. Environmental stress arises from external conditions such as noise, pollution, crowding, and extreme weather.

Psychological stress originates within the individual and includes factors such as frustration, conflict, internal pressures, and unrealistic expectations. For example, frustration occurs when a desired goal is blocked, while conflict arises when an individual faces incompatible choices or motives.

Internal pressures often stem from perfectionistic tendencies, whereas social pressures arise from expectations imposed by others. Social stress, on the

other hand, results from interactions with other people and includes events such as loss of a loved one, strained relationships, and interpersonal conflicts. These types of stress are closely interconnected and often occur simultaneously.

The sources of stress are varied and can be classified into three major categories: life events, daily hassles, and traumatic events. Life events refer to significant changes in an individual's life, such as marriage, relocation, illness, or failure in examinations.

Both positive and negative events can be stressful because they require adjustment. Daily hassles are minor but frequent irritants, such as traffic congestion, noise, and work pressure. Although seemingly insignificant, these hassles can accumulate over time and have a substantial impact on psychological well-being.



The banner features the UniDrill logo at the top right. The main text reads 'CUET UG Preparation Starts Here' in large, bold letters. Below this, a smaller line of text says 'Mock Tests | PYQs | Strategy | Subject Notes'. The central illustration shows a young man and woman sitting at a desk, studying together. The man is looking at a laptop displaying charts, while the woman is writing in a notebook. The background is a vibrant, abstract design with a blue and orange color scheme, featuring a large upward-pointing arrow and a stylized building in the distance. At the bottom, a yellow button with a hand cursor icon says 'Visit www.unidrill.in'.

Traumatic events are extreme and often sudden occurrences, such as accidents, natural disasters, or violent incidents. These events can have long-lasting psychological effects, including anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and emotional disturbances.

In sum, stress is a complex, multidimensional process that arises from the interaction between individuals and their environment.

It is shaped by cognitive appraisal, individual characteristics, and the nature of stressors. Understanding the nature, types, and sources of stress

is essential for developing effective strategies to manage life's challenges.

Effects of Stress on Psychological Functioning and Health

Stress exerts a profound influence on an individual's psychological functioning and overall health. The effects of stress are multifaceted and can be broadly classified into emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural domains.

These responses are interrelated and collectively determine how an individual copes with stressful situations.

At the emotional level, stress is associated with a range of negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, anger, and depression. Individuals experiencing stress may exhibit mood swings, irritability, and emotional instability, which can strain interpersonal relationships. Prolonged emotional distress may lead to more serious psychological problems, creating a vicious cycle of declining self-confidence and increasing stress.

Physiologically, stress triggers a series of bodily changes mediated by the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system. When confronted with a stressor, the hypothalamus activates the adrenal glands, leading to the release of hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.

These hormones prepare the body for the "fight-or-flight" response by increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and energy supply, while temporarily suppressing non-essential functions such as digestion.

While these changes are adaptive in the short term, prolonged activation can damage the body and increase vulnerability to illness.

Cognitive effects of stress include impaired attention, reduced concentration, and difficulties in decision-making.

Individuals under stress often experience mental overload, leading to poor judgment and reduced problem-solving ability. Memory, particularly short-term memory, may also be adversely affected, further compromising performance in academic or occupational settings.

Behaviourally, stress may lead to unhealthy coping patterns such as increased consumption of alcohol, smoking, or drugs. Individuals may also exhibit disturbed sleep patterns, irregular eating habits, and decreased productivity.

Such behaviours not only reflect stress but also contribute to its intensification, creating a cycle of maladjustment.

The relationship between stress and health is well established. Chronic stress can lead to a state of physical and emotional exhaustion known as *burnout*, characterised by fatigue, irritability, and feelings of helplessness.

Stress has been implicated in a wide range of physical illnesses, including cardiovascular disorders, hypertension, ulcers, asthma, and headaches. It is estimated that stress plays a significant role in a majority of physical illnesses

Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) provides a biological framework for understanding the body's response to prolonged stress. According to this model, stress involves three stages.

The first stage, the alarm reaction, is characterised by the activation of the fight-or-flight response.

The second stage, resistance, involves efforts by the body to cope with the stressor and restore balance.

If the stress continues, the individual enters the third stage, exhaustion, where the body's resources are depleted, increasing susceptibility to illness.

Although the GAS model highlights the physiological aspects of stress, it has been criticised for underestimating the role of psychological factors.

Stress also affects the immune system, which is responsible for defending the body against infections. The field of psychoneuroimmunology examines the interaction between psychological processes, the nervous system, and the immune system.

Research indicates that stress reduces the effectiveness of immune responses, particularly by lowering the activity of natural killer cells that combat infections and cancer. Individuals experiencing high levels of stress, such as students during examinations or people undergoing bereavement, are more prone to illness.

Lifestyle plays a crucial role in the relationship between stress and health. Stress often leads to unhealthy behaviours such as poor diet, lack of exercise, and substance abuse, which further compromise health.

Conversely, a healthy lifestyle characterised by balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and adequate rest can enhance resilience and buffer the effects of stress.

In conclusion, stress has wide-ranging effects on both psychological functioning and physical health. Understanding these effects is essential for recognising the importance of effective coping strategies and maintaining overall well-being.

Coping with Stress, Management Techniques, and Positive Health

Coping with stress is a dynamic and ongoing process that involves cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage the demands of stressful situations.

It is not the presence of stress alone, but the manner in which individuals cope with it, that determines their psychological well-being and health. Coping strategies vary across individuals and situations, reflecting differences in personality, experience, and available resources.

One classification of coping strategies identifies three main types: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented coping.

Task-oriented coping involves actively addressing the problem through planning, information seeking, and decision-making.

Emotion-oriented coping focuses on managing emotional distress through strategies such as expressing feelings or seeking reassurance.

Avoidance-oriented coping involves evading the stressor through denial, distraction, or withdrawal. While all three strategies may be used, task-oriented coping is generally considered more effective in dealing with stress.

Lazarus and Folkman further categorised coping into problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused coping aims to modify the stressor itself by taking practical steps to resolve the issue.

Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, seeks to regulate the emotional response to the stressor. Both forms of coping are important, but their effectiveness depends on the nature of the situation.

Given the pervasive impact of stress, various stress management techniques have been developed to enhance coping. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, help reduce physiological arousal and promote a sense of calm.



Meditation involves focused attention and leads to an altered state of consciousness, reducing mental clutter and enhancing clarity. Biofeedback enables individuals to gain control over physiological processes by providing real-time feedback on bodily functions.

Creative visualisation uses mental imagery to achieve desired outcomes and build confidence. Cognitive behavioural techniques focus on identifying and replacing irrational thoughts with rational and positive ones.

Regular physical exercise serves as an effective outlet for stress by improving physical fitness and enhancing mood.

Promoting positive health involves not only managing stress but also developing resilience and adopting a healthy lifestyle. Individuals with stress-resistant personalities, characterised by hardiness, exhibit three key traits: commitment, control, and challenge.

Such individuals view life as meaningful, believe in their ability to influence outcomes, and perceive changes as opportunities rather than threats.

Life skills play a vital role in coping with stress and maintaining well-being. Assertiveness enables individuals to express their thoughts and feelings confidently. Time management helps in prioritising tasks and reducing pressure.

Rational thinking involves challenging negative beliefs and adopting a balanced perspective. Building and maintaining healthy relationships provides emotional support and enhances coping capacity.

Self-care practices, such as maintaining physical health and relaxation, strengthen resilience. Overcoming unhelpful habits like perfectionism and procrastination is essential for effective stress management.

Positive health is a holistic concept encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being. It is supported by factors such as balanced diet, regular exercise, positive attitude, optimism, and social support.

A positive attitude involves realistic perception, acceptance of responsibility, and openness to new experiences. Optimism, or positive thinking, is associated with better coping and improved health outcomes.

Social support, including emotional, informational, and material assistance from others, acts as a buffer against stress and enhances well-being.

Resilience is a key component of positive health, defined as the ability to adapt successfully in the face of adversity. It involves a combination of internal strengths, external support, and problem-solving skills. Resilient individuals are able to “bounce back” from stress and lead meaningful lives despite challenges.

In conclusion, effective coping and stress management are essential for maintaining health and well-being.

By developing life skills, adopting healthy behaviours, and fostering positive attitudes, individuals can transform stress into an opportunity for growth and lead balanced, fulfilling lives.