

1f. Stress - Lazarus & Folkman

Transactional model of stress and coping

A stressor is any person, object, situation or event that produces stress.

- An *internal stressor* originates within the individual; for example, a personal problem that causes concern about the potential consequences.
- An *external stressor* originates outside the individual from situations and events in the environment; for example, having too much homework

Stress is a state of physiological and psychological arousal produced by internal or external stressors that are perceived by the individual as challenging or exceeding their ability or resources to cope.

- If we believe we can cope, these events may be perceived as difficult or 'unsettling' experiences, but not necessarily as stressors.
- As such, it is a *subjective experience* and therefore depends on our personal interpretation of a potential stressor.

Psychological determinants of stress:

- Prior experience with stressors and stress responses
- Attitudes
- Motivation
- Level of self-esteem
- General outlook on life (e.g. optimism versus pessimism)
- Personality characteristics
- Coping skills
- Perception of how much control we have over a stressful situation or event.

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) developed the transactional model of stress and coping, which focusses on 2 key psychological factors that determine *the extent to which an event is experienced as stressful*:

1. The meaning of the event to the individual
2. The individual's judgement of their ability to cope with it

The model proposes that stress involves an encounter (*'transaction'*) between an individual and their external environment, and that a stress response depends upon the individual's interpretation (*'appraisal'*) of the stressor and their ability to cope with it.

- When there is an imbalance between a person's appraisal of the demands of the situation and their estimation of their ability to meet those demands, then they will experience a stress response.

Appraisal:

- Not always conscious process
- Subjective
- Highly personal
- Individuals may assess the same potential or actual stress differently

1. Primary appraisal: we evaluate, or 'judge', the significance of the situation.

If we decide the situation is stressful then either:

- Harm/loss—which involves an assessment of how much damage has already occurred (e.g. 'I have lost my job')
- Threat—which involves an assessment of harm/ loss that may not have yet occurred but could occur in the future (e.g. 'I mightn't be able to afford the rent'), and

- Challenge—which involves an assessment of the potential for personal gain or growth from the situation (e.g. 'I'll get any other job I can and will learn to budget and save money').

2. Secondary appraisal: we evaluate our coping options and resources and our options for dealing with the stressful situation.

- The coping options and resources available may be internal (e.g. strength and determination) or external (e.g. money and support from family or friends).

Reappraisal: we determine the extent to which additional resources are needed to cope with the situation.

Involves two processes:

1. Reappraising the situation while taking account of the coping resources that are available.
 2. Reappraising the coping resources while taking account of the reappraised threat.
- If coping demands are perceived as being far greater than the resources available, we are likely to experience a stress response.

Example:

Stressor: Parents are getting a divorce → **Primary appraisal:** 'Yes, this matters to me and affects me a lot. Maybe it's my fault? Maybe I caused their break-up?' →

Stressful → **Threat:** 'I might not be able to cope with this or choose who I live with'

→ **Secondary appraisal:** 'What can be done about this? Nothing! I am so

embarrassed this is happening, and maybe it's my fault, so I can't talk to my friends

about it. I can't tell anyone how I really feel.' → **Coping Strategy:** 'I try to focus on my

schoolwork to take my mind off things; I try to pretend it isn't happening, that it's

happening to someone else and that I don't care (but it's not working!) - **STRESS**

Strengths & Weaknesses of this model:

Strengths	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● It used human subjects in developing the model● It used a cognitive approach to stress with a focus on how people cope with psychological stressors● It took both mental processes and emotions into account when examining how an individual interprets a situation as stressful or not.● It considers cognitive approaches as opposed to fight-flight-freeze, GAS (controlled by Autonomic NS)● It's a dynamic model — i.e. it factors in the ability for the individual to change their appraisal and thus their response● It caters for individual differences i.e. the manner in which we appraise and cope with stressor varies enormously.● Identifies alternative methods for managing psychological responses to stressors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The greater focus on psychological factors meant that less emphasis was placed on the physiological elements of the stress response.● It did not include cultural, social or environmental factors in looking at how individuals perceive a stressful event.● Lack of empirical evidence● Overlap of primary & secondary appraisals (they are interdependent)● Difficulty to label factors that determine stress