

YOU KNOW YOU HAVE MASTERED THE MAIN TOPICS IN THIS CHAPTER IF YOU ARE ABLE TO. . .

- ∞ Define stress and identify the external and psychological factors that influence an individual's experience of stress.
- ∞ Discuss the causes of stress.
- ∞ Describe the physical reaction to stress and the relation of this reaction to cognitive, personality, and social factors.
- ∞ Explain the methods used to cope with stress including those influenced by culture and religion.

RAPID REVIEW

Health psychology is a new area of psychology focusing on how physical activities, psychological traits, and social relationships affect overall health. **Stress** is the physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to events that are perceived as threatening or challenging. When a person's stress response is unpleasant or undesirable it is called **distress**, and when it is an optimal amount that helps a person function it is called **eustress**. The events that cause stress are called **stressors** and can be either internal or external events. Stressors can include external events such as catastrophes, major life changes, and hassles, along with internal experiences such as pressure, uncontrollability, and frustration. A **catastrophe** is an unpredictable event that happens on a large scale such as a tornado or flood. Catastrophes are one cause of an anxiety disorder known as **acute stress disorder (ASD)** in which an individual has recurring nightmares, sleep disturbances, and flashbacks of the event. When the symptoms of ASD last for more than one month, the disorder is then called **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. A number of researchers have suggested that any major life change, such as moving, getting married, getting a new job, would result in stress. Holmes and Rahe developed the **Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)** to measure the amount of change and thus stress in a person's life. Researchers have found a moderate correlation between scores on the SRRS and physical health. Alternate forms of the SRRS have been designed for specific populations such as the **College Undergraduate Stress Scale (CUSS)** for college students. A majority of the stressors that people have to deal with are the little daily annoyances, or **hassles**. Surveys that measure the number of hassles an individual has to deal with are actually a better predictor of short-term illnesses than the SRRS. The internal experience of **pressure** is also considered a stressor. Pressure is the psychological experience produced by demands and expectations from outside sources. Two additional internal causes of stress are **uncontrollability**, or a lack of control in a situation, and **frustration**, or being blocked from achieving a desired goal. Typical reactions to frustration include persistence and **aggression**, or actions meant to harm or destroy. **Displaced aggression** occurs when a person takes out his or her frustrations on less threatening, more available targets and is a form of **displacement**. Another possible reaction to frustration is **escape or withdrawal**.

An extreme reaction to stress is **suicide**, or intentionally taking one's own life. Statistics from the Office of the Surgeon General indicate that rates of suicide increase with age, men are more likely to complete a suicide than women, and the most common method of committing suicide is the use of a gun. Symptoms of suicide include feelings of hopelessness, lack of energy, irritability, and sleep disturbances, among others. Some of the ways to help someone who is contemplating suicide is to listen with true concern, stay with them, and call the police for emergency intervention.

Conflict is another source of stress and occurs when a person feels pulled toward two or more goals but can only achieve one of them. In 1935 a researcher by the name of Lewin defined three types of conflict. **Approach-approach conflict** occurs when an individual is attempting to choose between two desirable goals. **Avoidance-avoidance conflict** occurs when someone must choose between two undesirable goals. **Approach-avoidance conflict** describes a single goal that has both desirable and undesirable outcomes. An individual faced with two options in which each option has positive and

negative aspects is dealing with a **double approach-avoidance conflict**. If there are more than two options, the conflict is called a **multiple approach-avoidance conflict**.

Psychologist Hans Selye was a pioneer in the study of the physical consequences of exposure to stressors. He proposed that the body goes through a sequence of three stages he called the **general adaptation syndrome**. The initial stage is called **alarm** and represents the immediate reaction to stress mediated by our **sympathetic nervous system**. Typical alarm reactions include increased heart rate and blood pressure, and release of sugar into the blood stream. As the stress continues, the body enters the **resistance** stage during which time the sympathetic nervous system works overtime to give the body more energy. When the body's resources have been exhausted, the **parasympathetic nervous system** is activated and the body enters the **exhaustion** stage. Selye believed that it was the prolonged release of stress hormones during the resistance stage that led to the breakdown of the body's **immune system** and the onset of the stress-related physical conditions. Researchers in the field of **psychoneuroimmunology** who study the effects of psychological factors on the immune system have found that stress actually causes an increase in the activity of the immune system. High levels of stress have been linked to increased risk of heart disease. Also, stress has been shown to decrease the amount of **natural killer cells**, which are the cells responsible for fighting cancerous growths.

The **cognitive-mediational theory** of emotions proposed by Richard Lazarus states that the way people think about and appraise a stressor is a major factor in their stress response. The first step in appraising a stressor is called **primary appraisal** and involves estimating the severity of the stressor and classifying it as a threat, challenge, or loss. In **secondary appraisal**, an individual determines what resources he or she has available for dealing with the threat or loss. Personality has also been linked to stress-related health risks. In 1974, Meyer Freidman and Ray Rosenman published a book describing the **Type A** and **Type B** personalities and their link to heart disease. Based on studies of their own patients, Freidman and Rosenman proposed that individuals with Type A personality (a person who is competitive, ambitious, workaholic, with a constant sense of pressure) were more likely to develop heart disease than someone with a Type B personality. Several studies found that the specific trait of hostility in Type A individuals was the best predictor of future heart problems. A third personality type called **Type C** (in which a person holds in their emotions and tends to be pleasant) was later identified and is currently being investigated as to its possible link with cancer rates. Finally, research has suggested a fourth personality type, the **hardy personality**, which is associated with decreased illness due to stress. An individual with a hardy personality shows commitment, displays a sense of control, and sees stresses as challenges to be met and answered. In addition to personality, links have been found between an individual's attitude and his or her physical reactions to stress. Specifically, **pessimists** have been found to have significantly more stress-related health problems than **optimists**. One way to become an optimist is to recognize any negative thoughts you are having and to work to get rid of them.

Social factors also play a key role in the amount of stress an individual experiences. Living in poverty and job stress are two major sources of stress. A serious consequence of job stress is **burnout**, or negative changes in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors as a result of prolonged stress or frustration. **Acculturative stress** describes the stress an individual experiences when having to adapt to a new culture. The method of adaptation can affect the stress level. Some of the methods of adapting to a new culture include integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The effects of negative social factors on health can be minimized by a strong **social support system**, or network of family and friends who can offer help when a person is in need.

Coping strategies are actions that people take to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize the effects of stressors and include both behavioral and psychological strategies. **Problem-focused coping** occurs when a person tries to eliminate the source of stress or reduce its impact by taking some action, while **emotion-focused coping** involves changing the way you feel or react to a stressor. One example of emotion-focused coping involves the use of **psychological defense mechanisms**, such as denial, repression, rationalization, and projection, among others. Both **concentrative and receptive meditation** have also been found to be effective coping strategies. Culture and religion have also been found to affect an individual's level of stress as well as the strategies used to cope with that stress.