Social Psychology and Health

What is Stress?
- Stress refers to negative feelings and beliefs that arise when people feel unable to cope with demands from their environment.
- It is subjective perceptions of stress, more than objective stressors, that cause problems.
- The extent of stress is dependent on one’s appraisal of the stressful situation.

Dealing With Stress
- Stressors can be reframed as challenges instead of threats.
- We perceive stressors as challenges when we feel able to cope with them.
- We perceive stressors as threats when we feel unable to cope with them.
- Subjective perceptions of stressors as threats will lead to negative health outcomes.

Stress and Immune Function
- We are generally well-equipped to deal with short-term stressors.
- However, it is ethically questionable to induce long-term stress in participants.
- This is why human research on the impact of stress on health is often correlational.

Responding to Stress
- Alarm: The body prepares for conflict.
  - Adrenaline rush, heart rate and breathing increase, muscles get tensed.
  - Everything else (e.g., digestion) slows down.
- Resistance: The body remains on guard.
  - Hormones keep pumping, heart rate stays high, muscles stay tensed.
- Exhaustion: The body runs out of steam.
  - Hormones keep pumping, but other systems begin to steadily break down from overuse.

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Glaser et al. (1993)

- Took blood samples from healthy medical students that were seropositive for the Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) at two times:
  - One month before a block of examinations
  - On the last day of the block of examinations
- For both samples, examined memory T-cell proliferative responses to EBV polypeptides

Glaser et al. (1993)

- The proliferative response was significantly reduced in the ‘exam period’ blood samples
- The proliferative response was also reduced for participants who reported that they were seeking (i.e., didn’t have sufficient) social support
- This suggests that stress and inadequate social support can impact immune functioning

Stress and Immune Function

- Experimental research on animals provides direct evidence that long-term induced stress reduces immune function:
  - Wound healing takes longer
  - Susceptibility to weakened flu strains is higher
- Given that these animal findings match those from human research, we can be confident that stress is the major cause

Langer and Rodin (1976)

- Field experiment introducing perceived control for elderly residents of retirement homes
- Some patients were reminded of their personal responsibility for their health and welfare, given choices about activities and accommodations, and given a small house plant to care for
- Comparison patients were reminded of the staff’s responsibility for their health and welfare, given no choices about activities and accommodations, and given no plant to care for

Langer and Rodin (1976)

- Questionnaire measures showed improvement in the experimental group on measures of alertness, active participation, and subjective sense of well-being
- In a follow-up (1977), nurses’ ratings of health had increased and mortality had decreased for the experimental participants

Schulz (1976)

- Similar study, where retirement home residents were visited by undergraduates
- Four conditions:
  - Visits were predictable and controllable
  - Visits were predictable but not controllable
  - Visits were unpredictable and uncontrollable
  - No visits took place
- The first and second groups improved on indicators of physical and psychological health
Schulz and Hanusa (1978)

- When Schulz (1976) terminated the original study, the visits by the undergraduates stopped as well.
- This follow-up study showed that those individuals who had temporarily experienced control and/or predictability over the visits now had a much higher mortality rate than the other groups.
- This raises ethical questions about whether beneficial interventions need to be maintained.

Effects of Substance Intoxication

- We commonly observe that use of intoxicating substances is associated with undesirable or unhealthy behaviors.
- Disinhibition theory suggests that this is because intoxication (e.g., by alcohol) removes our inhibitions toward behavior.

Effects of Substance Intoxication

- However, various other behaviors are also associated with intoxication (e.g., acting very friendly or flirtatiously, rather than angrily or aggressively).
- Disinhibition theory has trouble predicting this wide variety of behaviors.

Alcohol Myopia Theory

- Alcohol myopia refers to a state of limited attentional capacity produced by alcohol intoxication ("myopia" = "short-sightedness").
- Under conditions of intoxication, people are simply unable to attend to all of the information in their environment.
- Therefore, they tend to focus on salient cues.
- These cues will tend to elicit associated behavior.

Alcohol Myopia Research

- Tara MacDonald and her colleagues have looked at the effects of intoxication and salient cues on behavioral intentions.
- This research has been conducted in the laboratory and in the field (at bars and pubs).

Alcohol Myopia Research

- The tendency is for intoxicated people to focus on salient cues when making decisions.
- For example, sexual attractiveness of potential partners is more likely to lead intoxicated people to forego safer sex.
- However, if inhibiting cues (e.g., promoting safe sex or warning against drunk driving) are salient, then drunk people actually behave more responsibly! (see MacDonald et al., 2000).
Using Social Psychological Principles to Improve Health

“Framing” a message refers to focusing on one aspect of an issue over others – it’s the spin put on a message

Rothman & Salovey (1997)
- Found that when trying to get people to detect the presence of disease, it is best to frame the message in terms of losses
- When trying to get people to prevent disease, it is best to frame the message in terms of potential gains

Rothman & Salovey (1997) Results

Using Social Psychological Principles to Improve Health

Cognitive dissonance can be used to get people to engage in health behaviors

Aronson et al. (1991) Condom use study
- College students composed a speech describing the dangers of AIDS and advocating the use of condoms “ever single time you have sex.”
- The speech was given into a camera, and supposedly would be shown to high school students
- Would this make students more likely to use condoms themselves?

Aronson et al. (1991) Results

- Students were more likely to use condoms – but only when made mindful of their own failures to use condoms.
- These students were most aware of their own hypocrisy – they were not practicing what they preached.
- These students expressed the greatest willingness to use condoms in the future and purchased more condoms that students in the non-hypocrisy conditions did.