

Cognitive Theory of Stress

The stress process, based on the cognitive theory of stress propounded by Lazarus and his colleagues, is an individual's response to a stressful situation largely depends upon the events and how they are interpreted between two types of appraisal, i.e. primary and secondary.

Primary appraisal refers to the perception of a new or changing environment as positive, neutral or negative in its consequences. Negative events are appraised for their possible harm, threat or challenge. Harm is the assessment of the damage that has already been done by an event. Threat is the assessment of possible future damage that may be brought about by the event. Challenge appraisals are associated with more confident expectations of the ability to cope with the stressful event,

the potential to overcome and even profit from the event.

When we perceive an event as stressful we are likely to make a secondary appraisal. Secondary appraisal is the assessment of one's coping abilities and resources and whether they will be sufficient to meet the harm, threat or challenge of the event. These resources may be mental, physical, personal or social. If one thinks one has a positive attitude, health, skills and social support to deal with the crises we will feel less stressed. This two-level appraisal process determines not only our cognitive and behavioural responses but also our emotional and physiological responses to external events.

These appraisals are very subjective and will depend on many factors. One factor is the past experience of dealing with such a stressful condition. If one has handled

similar situations very successfully in the past, they would be less threatening for him/her.

Another factor is whether the stressful event is perceived as controllable, i.e. whether one has mastery or control over a situation. The stresses people

experience also vary in terms of intensity (low intensity vs. high intensity), duration (short-term vs. long term), complexity (less complex vs. more complex) and predictability (Unexpected vs. predictable). The outcome of stress depends on the position of a particular stressful experience along these dimensions.

Psychological characteristics like mental health, temperament, and self concept are relevant to the experience of stress. The cultural context in which we live determines the meaning of any event and defines the

nature of response that is expected under various conditions. The stress experience will be determined by the resources of the person, such as money, ~~to~~ social skills, coping style, support-networks etc. All these factors determine the appraisal of a given stressful situation.