

Adjustment and stress

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1. Adjustment, frustration, conflict and sources of stress
2. Stress reactions, coping and stress management

1 Adjustment, frustration, conflict and sources of stress

Adjustment is the continuing process of balancing one's needs against the demands of the surroundings; when a need is blocked we feel frustration, when two incompatible motives pull at once we face conflict (Lewin's types), and any demand that exceeds our ability to cope is felt as stress, which comes from physical-environmental, psychological and social stressors, from big life events and from small daily hassles. Stress reactions, coping and stress management are in PSY-ST-02; appraisal, Yerkes-Dodson and Type A are in MAB-EI-02.

Core facts

- **Adjustment:** the process by which a person tries to meet his or her **needs** while dealing with the **demands of the environment** (other people, work, rules), keeping a harmonious balance. It is continuous, not a one-time state.
- **Maladjustment:** a lasting failure to strike that balance; shows as persistent anxiety, poor relationships, failure at work or study, and unhealthy defences.
- **Frustration:** the feeling that arises when a **motive or goal is blocked**. Sources (Morgan and King):
 - **environmental:** an outside barrier (a bus that does not come, a rule, a natural disaster);
 - **personal:** one's own limits (lack of ability, a physical handicap, unrealistic aims);
 - **conflict:** the blocking comes from another motive inside oneself.
- **Frustration-aggression hypothesis: Dollard, Miller and colleagues (1939):** frustration leads to some form of **aggression**. Other reactions to frustration: **regression**, **withdrawal / apathy**, **fixation** (repeating a failed response), **displacement** of anger, or constructive problem solving.
- **Conflict:** a state in which a person faces **two or more incompatible motives (needs or goals)** at the same time; satisfying one blocks the other. Conflict is a **psychological** stressor.
- **Kurt Lewin** described three basic conflicts (field theory, 1935); **double approach-avoidance** was added later by other researchers (Hovland and Sears, 1938):

Conflict	Choice	Example
Approach-approach	two attractive goals	two good job offers
Avoidance-avoidance	two unpleasant goals ("devil and deep sea")	study for an exam or fail it
Approach-avoidance	one goal with good and bad sides	a well-paid post in a far-off place
Double approach-avoidance	two goals, each with good and bad sides	choosing between two colleges, each with merits and drawbacks

- **Stress** (the definition APPSC used in 2023): the **pattern of responses** an organism makes to a stimulus event that **disturbs its equilibrium** and **exceeds a person's ability to cope**.
- **Stressor:** the event or demand that causes stress. **Stress** is the reaction.

- **Hans Selye**, the "father of stress research", defined stress as the **non-specific response of the body to any demand**. He split it into **eustress** (positive, useful stress, the level that energises and helps performance) and **distress** (harmful, excessive stress).
- **Three types of stress / stressors** (NCERT):
 - **Physical and environmental**: physical demands (overwork, lack of sleep, poor diet, illness) and environmental conditions (**noise, crowding, pollution, heat or cold, natural disasters**).
 - **Psychological**: generated in our own mind: **frustration, conflicts, internal pressures, social pressures**.
 - **Social**: arise from interaction with others: **death or illness in the family, strained relationships, trouble with neighbours**, a break-up, social events such as parties.
- **Three sources of stress** (NCERT): **life events, hassles** and **traumatic events**.
- **Holmes and Rahe (1967): Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)**, 43 life events scored in **life change units**; death of a spouse is highest (100). Details and scoring are in MAB-EI-02.
- **PSLES (Presumptive Stressful Life Events Scale)**: the **Indian** life-events scale, **Singh, Kaur and Kaur (1984)**, 51 events rated for Indian adults; **death of a spouse** again stands at the top, and **sudden accidents or trauma** rate higher than routine events such as examinations.
- **Daily hassles**: small, everyday irritations (traffic, queues, misplaced things, quarrels at home). **Hassles Scale: Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer and Lazarus (1981)**, who also listed **uplifts** (small pleasant events). Hassles predict health problems **better** than major life events.
- **Traumatic events**: extreme events (accidents, fires, violent crime, earthquakes) whose effects can last long and may lead to post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Explained

1. What a well-adjusted person shows

Feature	What it looks like
Awareness of own strengths and limits	realistic goals, accepts self
Flexibility	changes plans when the situation changes
Balance of needs and demands	meets duties without denying own needs
Good relations	gets along with family, peers, seniors
Problem-solving outlook	faces difficulties instead of escaping them

Adjustment has two sides: changing **oneself** to fit the surroundings (accommodation) and changing the **surroundings** to fit oneself. Adjustment is judged against age, culture and the situation: behaviour that is adjusted in one setting may not be in another.

2. Frustration in daily life. A student who misses a rank by two marks (personal source), a farmer whose crop fails in a drought (environmental source), a young man who wants to marry by choice but also wants his parents' approval (conflict source). The feeling is the same (blocked goal), the source differs.

Reactions to frustration

Reaction	Meaning	Example
Aggression	attack on the barrier or someone else	shouting at the conductor
Displacement	anger turned on a safer target	angry at the boss, scolding a child
Regression	going back to childish behaviour	an adult sulking or crying like a child
Withdrawal / apathy	giving up, losing interest	dropping out after repeated failure
Fixation	repeating the same failed response	pushing a jammed door again and again

The 1939 hypothesis was later softened (Miller, 1941): frustration creates a **readiness** for aggression, but other responses are possible, and aggression has causes other than frustration.

3. Lewin's conflicts, which is hardest?

- **Approach-approach** is the **easiest** to solve: once one goal is chosen, the other loses pull.
- **Avoidance-avoidance** is the most **unpleasant**: the person tends to vacillate or try to escape ("leave the field") instead of choosing.
- **Approach-avoidance** produces **vacillation**: as the goal gets near, the fear grows faster than the attraction, so the person moves forward and then backs off (Miller's gradients: the avoidance gradient is steeper than the approach gradient).
- **Double approach-avoidance** is the common real-life form: most choices carry gains and losses on both sides.

4. Psychological stressors in detail (NCERT's four)

Stressor	Meaning	Example
Frustration	a need or goal is blocked	failing an interview
Conflict	two incompatible needs or motives	career vs family wishes
Internal pressures	our own beliefs and expectations of ourselves	"I must top every exam"
Social pressures	demands from people around us	relatives pushing for marriage or a job

Do not confuse **"social pressures"** (a psychological stressor: the pressure we feel inside) with **"social stress"** (a stressor from interaction: a death in the family, a quarrel with neighbours). **Crowding** and **noise** are **environmental**, not social.

5. Life events vs daily hassles

	Life events	Daily hassles
Size	major changes, both good and bad	small, frequent irritations
Scale	Holmes-Rahe SRRS (1967); PSLES (India, 1984)	Hassles Scale (Kanner and others, 1981)
Logic	any change needs readjustment, so even marriage or promotion counts	the wear and tear adds up day after day

	Life events	Daily hassles
Health link	weaker than expected	stronger; hassles predict symptoms better

Life-event scales add up the scores of events in the past year: the higher the total, the higher the risk of illness. Western scores do not fit every culture, which is why Indian researchers built PSLES with Indian events and ratings.

6. Stress is personal. The same event stresses people differently. What matters is how the person **appraises** it (a threat or a challenge) and whether he or she believes resources are enough to cope (Lazarus; see MAB-EI-02). This is why the definition says "exceeds a person's ability to cope", not "a bad event".

7. Example. "A probation officer has to choose between a transfer to Visakhapatnam with promotion (but away from family) and staying in Guntur without promotion." Which conflict? *Solution.* Each option has a gain and a loss: **double approach-avoidance**. If the question gave only "a promotion in a distant place", it would be **approach-avoidance**.

Common traps

✗ "Stress is the event that troubles us." ✓ The event is the **stressor**; stress is the **pattern of responses** to it.

✗ "Conflict arises from compatible needs or excessive social demands." ✓ Conflict arises from **incompatible motives** present at the same time.

✗ "Crowding is a social stressor." ✓ Crowding and noise are **physical / environmental** stressors; social stressors come from relationships (illness in the family, quarrels with neighbours).

✗ "Conflict is a social stressor." ✓ Conflict (like frustration, internal and social pressures) is a **psychological** stressor.

✗ "Approach-avoidance means choosing between two bad things." ✓ That is **avoidance-avoidance**; approach-avoidance is **one goal with both good and bad sides**.

✗ "Lewin gave four conflict types." ✓ Lewin gave **three**; **double approach-avoidance** was added later.

✗ "All stress is bad." ✓ Selye's **eustress** is positive; only **distress** harms.

✗ "Only unpleasant life events count on the Holmes-Rahe scale." ✓ **Any change** counts, including marriage and outstanding personal achievement.

✗ "PSLES is the American life-events scale." ✓ PSLES is the **Indian** scale (Singh, Kaur and Kaur, 1984); the American one is the **SRRS** (Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

✗ "Major life events predict health problems better than daily hassles." ✓ **Daily hassles** are the better predictor.

Quick revision

- Adjustment = balancing own needs with the environment's demands; maladjustment = lasting failure to do so.
- Frustration = blocked goal; sources: environmental, personal, conflict.
- Dollard and Miller 1939: frustration → aggression; also regression, withdrawal, fixation, displacement.
- Conflict = incompatible motives at the same time.
- Lewin: approach-approach, avoidance-avoidance, approach-avoidance (+ double approach-avoidance later).
- Stress = responses to an event that disturbs equilibrium and exceeds ability to cope.
- Selye: eustress (good) vs distress (bad).
- Types: physical-environmental (noise, crowding), psychological (frustration, conflict, internal and social pressures), social (family illness, neighbours).
- Sources: life events, hassles, traumatic events.
- SRRS: Holmes and Rahe 1967; PSLES: Singh, Kaur and Kaur 1984 (India); Hassles Scale: Kanner and others 1981.

2 Stress reactions, coping and stress management

Stress shows itself in emotional, physiological, cognitive and behavioural reactions; Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (alarm → resistance → exhaustion) explains how long stress wears the body down and weakens immunity; coping is the conscious, changing effort to manage stress (task-, emotion- or avoidance-oriented), unlike unconscious defence mechanisms; and stress is managed by relaxation, meditation, biofeedback, creative visualisation, cognitive-behavioural techniques and exercise, backed by life skills, social support and resilience. Sources of stress are in PSY-ST-01; appraisal, problem- vs emotion-focused coping and empathy are in MAB-EI-02.

Core facts

- **Four kinds of stress reactions** (NCERT):
 - **Emotional**: anxiety, irritability, mood swings, low mood, feeling of helplessness.
 - **Physiological**: release of **adrenaline and noradrenaline** and **cortisol**; faster heart rate, raised blood pressure, slower digestion, tense muscles.
 - **Cognitive**: poor concentration, forgetfulness, confused or negative thinking, poor decisions.
 - **Behavioural**: disturbed sleep and eating, more smoking or drinking, absenteeism, withdrawal.
- **Fight-or-flight response**: **Walter Cannon** (1915, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage*); the sympathetic nervous system and the adrenal medulla prepare the body to fight or run.
- **General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)**: **Hans Selye** (1936; *The Stress of Life*, 1956), from experiments on rats; the body's response to **any** prolonged stressor is the same (non-specific). Three stages, in order:
 1. **Alarm reaction**: the stressor is noticed; the body mobilises (adrenaline, fight-or-flight); resistance briefly drops (shock), then rises.
 2. **Resistance**: the body adapts and keeps up its defence while the stressor continues; **cortisol** stays high; resources are used up.
 3. **Exhaustion**: resources run out; resistance collapses; **illness** (Selye's "diseases of adaptation") becomes likely.
- **Stress and health**: long stress raises cortisol, which **suppresses the immune system**.
- **Psychoneuroimmunology** (**Robert Ader**: the field grew from Ader and Cohen's 1975 experiments; the term from his 1981 book) studies the links among mind, nervous system and immunity.
- **Psychosomatic (psychophysiological) disorders**: real physical illnesses made worse by stress: **hypertension, peptic ulcers, asthma, coronary heart disease**, migraine.
- **Burnout**: physical, emotional and mental exhaustion from long work stress (**Maslach**: exhaustion, depersonalisation, reduced accomplishment).
- **Coping**: a **dynamic, situation-specific reaction to stress**; **Lazarus and Folkman (1984)** call it the **constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts** to manage demands that tax or exceed a person's resources.
- **Three coping styles**: **Endler and Parker (1990)**:

- **Task-oriented:** get information, plan, **schedule time better**, set priorities, act directly on the problem.
- **Emotion-oriented:** reduce the upset feeling: talk it out, vent, hope, fantasise, blame oneself, preoccupation.
- **Avoidance-oriented:** deny or play down the problem; distract oneself (watch TV, sleep, go out with friends).
- **Defence mechanisms:** **unconscious** ways the ego protects itself from anxiety by **distorting reality** (Sigmund Freud; listed and systematised by **Anna Freud, 1936**). They reduce anxiety for a while but do not solve the problem.
- **Defence mechanism vs coping:** coping is **conscious** and deliberate; a defence mechanism is **unconscious**. **Identification** and **projection** are defences, **not** stress-management techniques.
- **Stress-management techniques** (NCERT list):
 - **Relaxation: Progressive muscle relaxation (Edmund Jacobson, 1929):** tense and release muscle groups one by one; it **starts from the lower part of the body** (feet) and moves up to the **facial muscles**.
 - **Meditation:** learned attention control; focusing on a word, the breath or an object, with detachment from passing thoughts.
 - **Biofeedback:** monitoring a body function (heart rate, muscle tension, skin temperature) on an instrument and **learning to control it**.
 - **Creative visualisation:** building a calm, vivid **mental image** (a quiet beach) to relax or rehearse success.
 - **Cognitive-behavioural techniques:** changing the thoughts that create stress; **Stress Inoculation Training (Donald Meichenbaum, 1985):** replace negative self-talk with positive, coping self-statements.
 - **Exercise:** aerobic activity (walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, yoga) burns off arousal and improves health.
- **Life skills:** abilities for adaptive, positive behaviour that help us deal with everyday challenges (WHO). NCERT's set for meeting life challenges: **assertiveness, time management, rational thinking, improving relationships, self-care, overcoming unhelpful habits** (perfectionism, avoidance, procrastination).
- **Factors that promote positive health:** **diet, exercise, positive attitude, positive thinking, social support**.
- **Resilience:** the ability to **bounce back** from adversity. **Hardiness (Suzanne Kobasa, 1979):** **commitment, control, challenge** (the "3 Cs").
- **Social support:** the perceived comfort, care and help from others; kinds: **tangible** (material help), **informational**, **emotional**.

Explained

1. The four reactions in one person. A young probation officer has a heavy caseload and a court deadline. **Emotional:** she is irritable. **Physiological:** headaches and a racing heart. **Cognitive:** she forgets case

details. **Behavioural**: she skips meals and sleeps badly. A question naming any one of these asks which **kind** of reaction it is.

2. GAS at a glance

Stage	What happens	Body	Example (exam season)
Alarm	danger noticed, body mobilised	adrenaline, fight-or-flight	panic on seeing the timetable
Resistance	body adapts, keeps fighting	cortisol high, energy spent	weeks of late-night study
Exhaustion	reserves used up	immunity falls, illness	falls ill after the exams

Selye's point: different stressors (cold, injury, worry) all produce the **same** bodily pattern. Critics later showed that appraisal matters: the same stressor does not trigger GAS equally in everyone (Lazarus).

3. Coping styles compared

Style	Aim	Example	Usual result
Task-oriented	change the problem	making a timetable, asking for help	best in the long run when the problem can be changed
Emotion-oriented	change the feeling	crying it out, talking to a friend	useful when nothing can be changed
Avoidance-oriented	escape the problem	denying it, watching films all day	short relief, problem stays

Lazarus and Folkman's own two-way split was **problem-focused** vs **emotion-focused** (MAB-EI-02). Endler and Parker added **avoidance**. "Approach-oriented" is not one of Endler and Parker's three.

4. Common defence mechanisms (MAB-EI-02 explains six; the rest are added here)

Mechanism	Meaning	Example
Repression	painful memory pushed out of awareness	no memory of an accident
Denial	refusing to admit a reality	"My son never steals"
Projection	own unacceptable feeling seen in others	a hostile person sees everyone as hostile
Displacement	feelings vented on a safer target	angry at the boss, kicking the dog
Rationalisation	a good-sounding excuse for failure	"The paper was out of syllabus"
Reaction formation	showing the opposite of the real feeling	excessive politeness to someone one dislikes
Regression	going back to an earlier stage of behaviour	a 6-year-old bed-wetting after a sibling's birth
Sublimation	urge turned into a socially valued activity	aggression into boxing
Identification	taking on the qualities of an admired person	a boy copying a film hero

Mechanism	Meaning	Example
Compensation	making up for a weakness by excelling elsewhere	a weak athlete becoming a top scholar
Intellectualisation	discussing a painful event coolly, without feeling	describing one's own illness like a case study

5. How the techniques work

- **Relaxation** lowers the arousal of the sympathetic system. In Jacobson's method the person learns the difference between a tense and a relaxed muscle, group by group, from the feet up to the face. Deep breathing is often added.
- **Biofeedback** has **three stages**: developing **awareness** of the body response; learning to **control** it in quiet conditions; **transferring** that control to everyday life. Used for tension headache, high blood pressure and anxiety.
- **Meditation** trains attention; regular practice lowers heart rate and blood pressure and reduces anxiety. Yoga combines posture, breathing and meditation (more under applications of psychology).
- **Creative visualisation** works best when the mind is quiet; the person imagines the scene with all senses.
- **Stress inoculation training** has three phases: **conceptualisation** (understand one's stress), **skill acquisition and rehearsal** (relaxation, positive self-statements), **application and follow-through** (use them in real situations, like a vaccine of small doses).

6. Life skills in NCERT's list

Skill	In practice
Assertiveness	saying "no" or stating a need clearly without hostility
Time management	planning, prioritising, not taking on more than one can do
Rational thinking	challenging distorted thoughts ("I always fail")
Improving relationships	listening, expressing feelings, avoiding needless arguments
Self-care	healthy diet, sleep, exercise, breathing well
Overcoming unhelpful habits	dropping perfectionism, avoidance, procrastination

WHO (1997) lists ten core life skills: decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, coping with stress.

7. Example. "When I schedule my time better to avoid stress, I am using which coping strategy?" *Solution.* Acting on the problem itself = **task-oriented** coping (Endler and Parker). Talking to a friend about the worry would be emotion-oriented; going to a film to forget it would be avoidance-oriented.

Common traps

✗ "GAS stages: alarm, exhaustion, resistance." ✓ **Alarm** → **resistance** → **exhaustion** (Selye).

X "Fight-or-flight was described by Selye." ✓ Fight-or-flight = **Walter Cannon**; GAS = **Hans Selye**.

X "Coping is a fixed personality trait." ✓ Coping is a **dynamic, situation-specific** reaction; the efforts **keep changing**.

X "Defence mechanisms are conscious coping strategies." ✓ Defences are **unconscious**; coping is **conscious**.

X "Identification is a stress-management technique." ✓ It is a **defence mechanism**; exercise, biofeedback and creative visualisation are techniques.

X "Scheduling time better is emotion-oriented coping." ✓ It is **task-oriented**.

X "Endler and Parker's three styles include approach-oriented coping." ✓ The three are **task-, emotion- and avoidance-oriented**.

X "Progressive relaxation starts from the head." ✓ It starts from the **lower part of the body** and moves up to the **face** (Jacobson).

X "Biofeedback means a doctor gives feedback on behaviour." ✓ It is feedback from an **instrument** about a body function, used to learn to control that function.

X "Stress inoculation training was developed by Lazarus." ✓ It was developed by **Donald Meichenbaum**.

X "Hardiness: commitment, confidence, courage." ✓ Kobasa's 3 Cs: **commitment, control, challenge**.

Quick revision

- Stress reactions: emotional, physiological, cognitive, behavioural.
- Cannon: fight-or-flight; Selye: GAS = alarm → resistance → exhaustion.
- Long stress → cortisol → weaker immunity (psychoneuroimmunology); psychosomatic disorders: hypertension, ulcers, asthma.
- Coping = dynamic, situation-specific, constantly changing efforts (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).
- Endler and Parker 1990: task-, emotion-, avoidance-oriented coping.
- Defence mechanisms = unconscious (Anna Freud 1936): repression, denial, projection, displacement, rationalisation, reaction formation, regression, sublimation, identification.
- Techniques: relaxation (Jacobson; feet → face), meditation, biofeedback (awareness → control → transfer), creative visualisation, cognitive-behavioural (Meichenbaum SIT), exercise.
- Life skills (NCERT): assertiveness, time management, rational thinking, relationships, self-care, overcoming unhelpful habits.
- Positive health: diet, exercise, positive attitude, positive thinking, social support.

- Hardiness (Kobasa 1979): commitment, control, challenge; resilience = bouncing back.