

CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE 1.1:

The Evolution of the Definition of Stress

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CONCEPT

This activity will help students see how psychologists have changed how stress is defined over time, and how our appraisal of stress plays a role in how we experience stress. In the stress and health unit, students will need to understand the sources of stress, as well as the stress reaction. In order for students to be able to do this, they need to have an understanding of exactly what stress is, and how we have come to understand stress.

MATERIALS

The Evolution of the Definition of Stress Worksheet

INSTRUCTIONS

- This activity/discussion will take about 5-10 minutes.
- Have students read through the four definitions of stress, and respond to the questions.
- When they are finished, discuss their responses and specifically how stress is no longer viewed as a stimulus or response, but also includes the importance of our appraisal and perceived ability to cope.

THE EVOLUTION OF STRESS STUDENT WORKSHEET

Directions: Look over how various psychologists have defined stress. Then answer the following questions.

- Walter Cannon (1929) defined stress as physical and psychological “disturbances” that threaten homeostasis (the body’s state of balance).
- Hans Selye (1956) defined stress as a stimulus that produces a physiological response.
- Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) defined stress as occurring when a person determines they do not have the personal or social resources to respond to a perceived threat.
- Modern researchers define stress as the process by which we perceive and respond to circumstances that we appraise as threatening. This leads to a series of emotional (affective), behavioral, cognitive, and physiological changes.

Questions to consider:

How were Walter Cannon’s and Hans Selye’s definitions of stress similar?

What do Lazarus and Folkman mean that stress occurs when a person determines they do not have the personal or social resources to respond to a perceived threat?

How is this different from both Cannon and Selye?

According to modern researchers, how is stress currently defined?

How is this different from previous researchers?

Can you think of a time when the exact same situation was appraised differently by you, where in one circumstance you felt stress and in another circumstance you did not?

REFERENCES

Cannon, W. B. (1929). *Bodily changes in pain, hunger, fear, and rage*. Appleton.
Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984) *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
Selye, H. (1956). *The stress of life*. McGraw-Hill.