

LIFE CHANGES AND DAILY HASSLES AS SOURCES OF STRESS

Introduction

Whether something is stressful or not depends on how we appraise it. The term '**primary appraisal**' refers to our assessment of whether or not something is a threat to our well-being. If something is not appraised as being a threat to our well-being, then we don't experience stress. However, if it is appraised as being a threat to our well-being, then we engage in '**secondary appraisal**'. This involves us deciding whether we can deal with the threat. If we decide that we can deal with it, we don't experience stress. However, if we decide that we can't deal with it, then we *do* experience stress. So what is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another because of differences in how we appraise the same thing. However, there do seem to be some things which are perceived by *everyone* as being stressful. Two of these things are '**life changes**' and '**daily hassles**'.

Life changes as a source of stress

Research into the role played by **life changes** (or **major/critical life events**) and stress was first conducted by **Holmes & Rahe (1967)**. They argued that any major life event, be it a desirable or undesirable one, requires some kind of **effort to adjust**. Major life events include things like **marriage, divorce, and the death of a loved one**. Because the effort to adjust is stressful, and stress is linked to illness, major life events could therefore be the cause of illness.

Holmes and Rahe examined the hospital records of 5000 patients. They noticed that in the months before being admitted to hospital, people appeared to have undergone some kind of major life event, such as losing their job or getting divorced. The researchers identified the 43 most common of these events, and used these to devise the **Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)** as a way of measuring the life events a person has undergone in a pre-defined time period.

Each of the 43 items on the SRRS has a 'stress score' (Holmes and Rahe call it a **Life Change Unit**) assigned to it. Participants are asked to put a tick next to any of the life events they have experienced within the past year. The scores associated with each event the participant has ticked are then added up to give a total Life Event score:

SOCIAL READJUSTMENT RATING SCALE*

LIFE EVENT	LIFE-CHANGE UNIT
Death of one's spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital Separation	65
Jail Term	63
Death of a Close Family Member ¹	63
Personal Injury or Illness	53
Marriage	50
Being Fired ²	47
Retirement ³	45
Pregnancy	40
Change in One's Financial State	38
More Arguments with One's Spouse	35
Change in Responsibilities at Work	29
Son or Daughter Leaving Home	29
Trouble with In-Laws ⁴	29
Beginning or Ending School	26
Change in Living Conditions ⁵	25
Trouble with One's Boss	23
Change in Work Hours or Conditions	20
Change in Eating Habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas	12

Selected items on Holmes & Rahe's (1967) SRRS

In one study, **Holmes & Rahe (1967)** found that of those who scored 200-300, 50% suffered some sort of illness in the following year, whilst of those that scored more than 300, 80% suffered some sort of illness in the following year. The researchers concluded that because life events 'absorbed psychic energy' (i.e. people had to try and adapt to them) they were stressful, and because they were stressful, this led to people developing an illness. In other words, Holmes and Rahe believed that life changes cause illness.

In another study, **Rahe et al (1970)** asked 2,500 American sailors to complete the SRRS, indicating how many of the events they had experienced in the previous six months. Records were then kept of the sailors' health status during a six month tour of duty. The researchers found a correlation of +0.12 between Life Change scores and illness scores, and concluded that because the correlation was statistically significant, life changes could be used to *predict* the likelihood of a stress-related health breakdown.

Positive correlations have also been found by researchers other than Holmes and Rahe. Examples include **Stone et al's (1987)** study of married couples, and **Michael & Ben-Zur's (2007)** study of recently divorced or widowed men and women.

Evaluation of life changes research

Most of the research in this area has shown only a *small correlation* between a person's SRRS score and the likelihood of them developing an illness, so the SRRS can't really be used in a predictive way. Moreover, even though it *might* predict the likelihood of a person developing an illness, it doesn't identify the *type* of illness they might develop.

One feature of the SRRS is that it is a very simplistic measure, which uses **arbitrary scale values**. For example, 'Going on vacation' (Item 41) has a scale value of 13. However, this doesn't take into account a person's perception of this life event - some people find vacations extremely stressful and certainly more than 13 stress units. The same can be said about 'Christmas' (Item 42).

The researchers assume that it is the life event itself which leads to illness because it is stressful. However, it could be argued that it is the behaviour changes which are associated with the life event, rather than the life event, which lead to illness. A good example here would be 'Change to a different line of job'. It might be that it is behaviours *associated* with the job that lead to health problems rather than the stressful nature of the job itself.

The researchers also make the assumption that because life events and ill health are correlated, life events **cause** ill health. However, as we have noted elsewhere, just because two variables are correlated, it does not necessarily mean that a change in one is causing the other. The two variables could be accidentally related. Alternatively, if there is a causal connection it could be the other way round. Instead of life events causing illness, it could be that illness causes a life event. A good example here would be 'Being fired at work' (Item 8). Thus, the life event could be a **result** of illness rather than a cause of it.

Holmes and Rahe also claim that any life event is stressful. Research contradicts this, and shows that whilst negative life events are correlated with ill health, positive life events are not. Research also indicates that it is not the major life events that are stressful, but '**common life stressors**', such as family finance and children.

Daily hassles as a source of stress

In connection with the above, some research has suggested that 'life events' are not as stressful as "*the irritating demands that characterise our everyday transitions with the environment*". Researchers call these 'irritating demands' '**daily hassles**'.

There are many studies indicating that daily hassles are correlated with stress. These studies, which use either **Kanner et al's (1981) Hassles Scale** or **the diary method**, have been conducted on nurses (**Gervais et al, 2005**), students (**Bouteyre et al, 2007**), and the general public (**Delonghis et al, 1982**).

The exact mechanism that causes daily hassles to be stressful isn't known, but it's widely accepted that as more and more of them affect us, we lose the ability to *cope effectively*. The odd hassle here and there can be easily dealt with, but a lot of hassles in quick succession quickly erodes our ability to cope. Some researchers believe that serious conditions such as depression could be a consequence of the cumulative effects of daily hassles.

Whilst daily hassles seem to be a feature of 21st century life, good things occasionally happen to us as well. These can be measured using Kanner et al's **Uplifts Scale** or **the diary method**. Research shows that uplifts are rewarding, and to a degree can moderate the negative effects of daily hassles.

Evaluation of daily hassles and uplifts research

As noted above, the idea that daily hassles may be more important than life events is supported by many research studies, so research in this area has high reliability. The same can be said for uplifts research.

However, it is a weakness of this area of research that the exact mechanism by which hassles might exert a negative effect and uplifts a positive effect is not understood. Additionally, the conclusions that can be drawn in this area of research are severely weakened by the fact that the research is correlational, which does not allow us to talk about daily hassles *causing* stress or uplifts *causing* a reduction in stress.

There are also important *cultural differences* in how daily hassles impact on people. For example, some research shows that in cultures where there are strong *social support networks*, the impact of daily hassles is much reduced.