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Stress definitions are different as a result of different scientific approaches.

It can be seen as:
- an external stimulus
- as a body reaction
- as an interaction between the person and the environment.

So, we have:
- Physiological and endocrine definitions – based on clinical and laboratory research: they see stress as a body reaction to external stimuli
- Psychological definitions – which postulate that stress comes from subjective feeling of inefficiency
- Sociological definitions – which attribute stress to environmental causes
Nowadays the term «stress» has two accepted meanings:

- Situation or stimulus which give the human organism a state of tension;
- The organism’s state of tension itself, through which it mobilizes all it’s resources, as a reaction to a physical or psychological aggression.

The resulting equilibrium from interaction of 4 components determines if a certain situation is stressful or not:

- external environmental solicitations,
- internal needs and values,
- self coping resources,
- external help.
Physiological theories of stress

+ H. Selye considers that stress is an innate characteristic of living beings, lack of stress being equivalent to death.

+ Selye introduced the distinction between:
  + Eustress – “good stress”
  + Distress – “bad stress”
In 1983 and identified three stages in stress dynamics, which he called “The general adjustment syndrome” (GAS):

- The alarm reaction
  - The first reaction of the organism, which has two phases:
    - The shock phase, characterized by hypotension, hypothermia, nervous depression etc.
    - The counter-shock phase, when the hyper-reactivity of the cortico-suprarenals occurs
- The resistance phase – when a series of auto-regulatory mechanisms are being activated
- Exhaustion phase – very similar to the alarm phase but when, due to prolonged exposure to harmful factors the body’s capacity of adaptation is overwhelmed.
Sociological theories of stress

These theories identify stress with stressors (stress factors), that are mainly seen as a result of social structures and relations.

Stress factors are harmful agents or psychological stimuli that have a very strong affective significance.

Their multitude has imposed certain classification criteria:
- Regarding their number, these stressors can be:
  - Single
  - Multiple
- By the number of affected people, they can be classified as:
  - Stressors with individual significance
  - Stressors with group significance (familial or professional ones)
  - Stressors with general significance
- By their nature:
  - Physical, chemical, biological stressors
  - Psychological stressors
- By significance to individual life in general
  - Peripheral stressors
  - Central stressors
We can also speak about a classification regarding the conflictual nature of stressors:

- Familial conflicts
  - Between child-parents’ authority
  - Conflicts between brothers
  - Couple conflicts
  - Loses
- Professional conflicts
- Social conflicts
- Intimate life conflicts
Transactional theories of stress

- This current has been postulated by R. S. Lazarus, who changed the focus of stress-research from the physiological to the psychological domain.

- The theory of Lazarus (1966, and developed for the next 30 years), consists of 4 aspects:
  - Interaction or transaction, seen as the bidirectional relation between environment and the individual, meant to keep an equilibrium between the environmental pressures and requests on one side and the individual goals on the other side;
  - The cognitive system – the permanent evaluator of the situation and of the person’s resources;
Transactional theories of stress

Evaluation – there are two types:

+ The primary evaluation, which appreciates the potential stressing significance of a situation. It monitors:
  + The stressor’s severity
  + The nature of the stressor (as much more ambiguous a stressor is, the greater the stress reaction will be)
  + The moment of impact (imminence is more stressful than a delay)
  + The probability of happening (uncertainty is more stressful even than the imminence of confrontation)

+ The secondary evaluation, which appreciates the personal resources of a subject.

Coping – seen as a modulation between the primary and secondary evaluations, resulting in lowering the emotional cost of stress.
Coping

Lazarus si Folkman – the complex of cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed at reducing, controlling or tolerating internal or external demands that threaten or overcome the individual’s resources.

Classification:

Lazarus and Folkman:
- Problem centered coping
- Emotion centered coping

Miclea:
- Behavioral coping
- Cognitive coping
- Biological coping
# Coping

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Neurobiological</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Behavior aimed at eliminating the stressor, e.g.:</td>
<td>Processing the information related to the stressor with priority, e.g.:</td>
<td>Prevention of the biological reaction to stress or the direct attack of the stressor, e.g.:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• optimist action,</td>
<td>• Logical analysis of the problem,</td>
<td>• Catatony,</td>
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<td>• looking for social support.</td>
<td>• Increased attention to the stressful details,</td>
<td>• Medicines</td>
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<td>• Rumination on the theme</td>
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<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Escape behavior, e.g.:</td>
<td>Blocking the processing of negative information or selectively working through it, e.g.:</td>
<td>Neutralizing the effects of the biological stressor, e.g.:</td>
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<td>• Running away,</td>
<td>• Ignoring warning signs,</td>
<td>• Synthetic glucocortocoids in inflammation</td>
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<td>• Drug abuse</td>
<td>• Regression</td>
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<td>• Delaying confrontation</td>
<td>• Rationalization</td>
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M. Sillamy defines the defense mechanisms as unconscious processes used by the individual to decrease the anxiety generated by the interior conflicts between instinctual demands and the moral and social rules.

Vaillant describes defenses as metal processes used for the restoration of psychological homeostasis. He groups them into 4 categories, defined based on their adaptive character during adult life:

- Psychotic defenses: delusional projection, distortion and psychotic refusal
- immature defenses: projection, schizoid phantasy, hypochondria, passive aggression, acting-out, dissociation
- Neurotic or intermediary defenses: isolation of affect, refluation
- Mature defenses: altruism, sublimation, repression, anticipation, humor
Defense mechanisms

- DSM IV (1996) lists that the defense mechanisms are automatic mental processes that protect the individual from anxiety, perception of some dangerous factors or stress factors. It is also clearly underlined that the individuals are not aware of the existence of these mechanisms until they are activated.

- DSM IV offers an exhaustive 7 level classification for them:
  - Level of high adaptability: defenses that allow for an optimal adaptation to the stress factors, increase of the gratification feeling, acknowledgement of feelings, ideas, consequences and ensure an optimal equilibrium between conflictual motivations (e.g.: anticipation, altruism, humor, sublimation, repression)
  - Level of mental inhibitions: defenses that keep outside of the field of conscience ideas, feelings, memories, wishes or fears that might be threatening (e.g.: disociation, refluation, retroactive cancelling)
Defense mechanisms

- DSM IV offers an exhaustive 7 level classification for them (cont.):
  - Level of minor distortion of image: defenses that operate minor distortions of the image of self, body image, image of others, aiming at regulating auto-appreciation (e.g. Depreciation, idealization, omnipotence)
  - Level of denial: defenses that keep outside of the field of conscience stress factors like impulses, affects or feelings related to responsibility, that are unpleasant or unacceptable, attributing them to external causes (refusal, projection, rationalization)
  - Level of major distortion of image: autistic daydreaming, projective identification, clivage of self image or of the image of others)
  - Level of action: defenses that entail action or withdrawal in the presence of stressors (activism, apathic withdrawal)
  - Level of defensive dysregulation: represents the sign of failure of defenses in face of stressors and it brings about a rupture from objective reality (delusional projection, psychotic refusal, psychotic distortion).
# Coping / Defense mechanisms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defense mechanisms</th>
<th>Coping mechanisms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focused on blocking internal instinctual pulsions</td>
<td>Focused on controlling internal and external stressors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-affective</td>
<td>Can be triggered in any phase of the stress reaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hierarchical organisation</td>
<td>Situational efficiency</td>
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<td>Block affective expression</td>
<td>Allow affective expression</td>
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<td>Rigid, ritualized</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
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<td>Focused on the past</td>
<td>Focused on the present and future</td>
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<td>Involve automatisms</td>
<td>Entail a purpose and perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distort reality</td>
<td>Allow confrontation with reality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are produced at the interface between id and ego</td>
<td>Produced in contact with reality</td>
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<td>Unconscious processes</td>
<td>Conscious or sub-conscious processes</td>
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Conclusions

- Stress represents a normal and necessary aspect of life, which man cannot elude.
- It can generate a temporary discomfort and also can induce long-term consequences.
- While too much stress can alter somebody’s health and well-being, some amount of stress is undoubtedly necessary for survival.
- Stress can diminish normal body functioning and even induce disease, but it also helps a person in danger and also improves learning.