

Chapter 1 THE STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AND COPING

What Is Meant by “Psychological Adjustment?”

- Health Psychology
- Clinical Psychology
- Other Relevant Fields of Inquiry

The Importance of Studying Psychological Adjustment

- The Study of Psychological Adjustment: An Inherent “Real World” Flavor

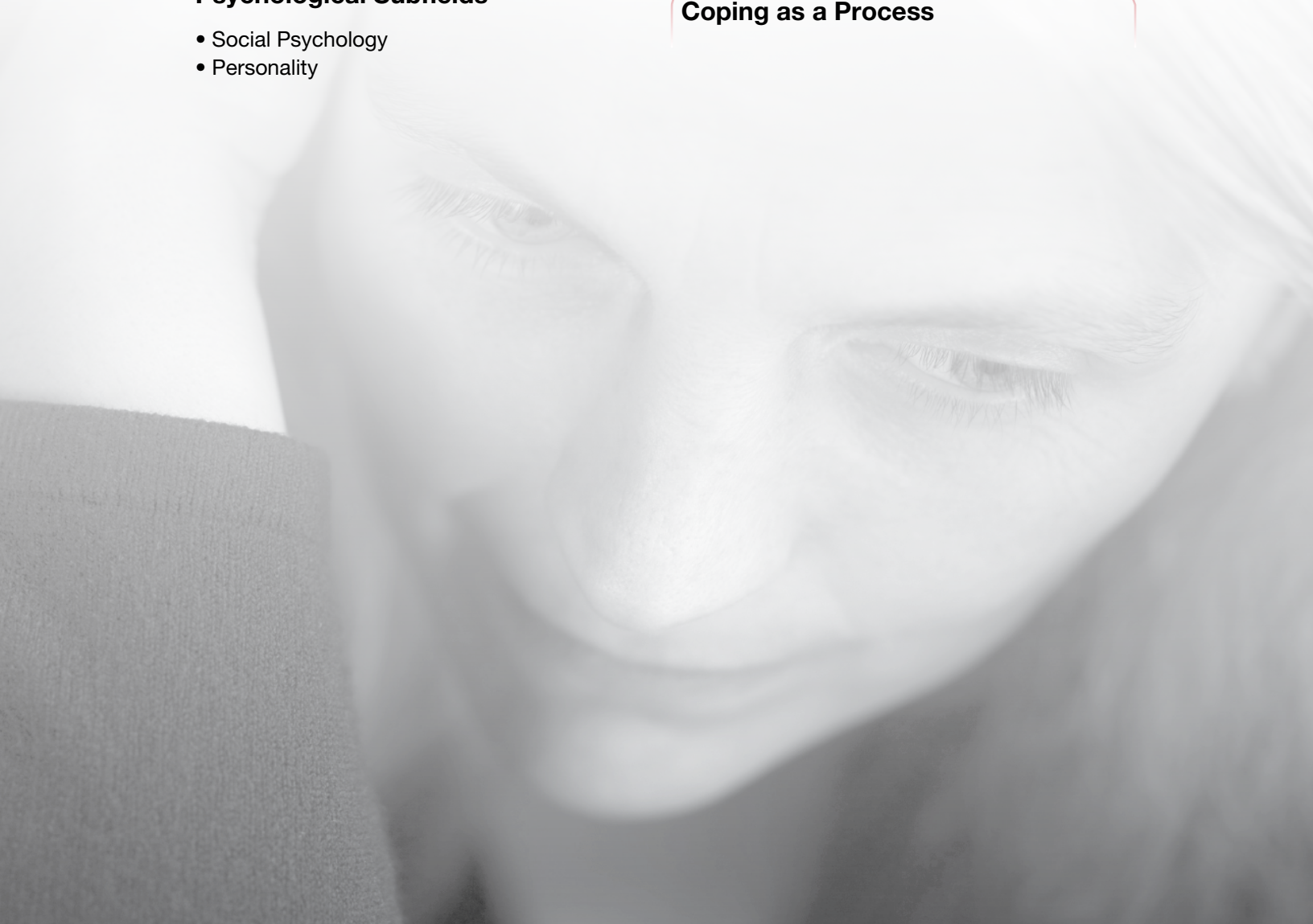
The Study of Psychological Adjustment: Linkages to Many Psychological Subfields

- Social Psychology
- Personality

Three Basic Themes in Adjustment Research

When Are We Adjusting to an Event as Opposed to Coping with an Event?

Coping as a Process





The economic recession that began in the U.S. in December 2007 has forced many individuals to adjust to new realities of life. Thankfully, as of yet, this economic crisis pales in comparison to the Great Depression of the 1930s, which caused even more despair and an even greater amount of adjustment for most individuals.

Starting around December 2007, the world entered a severe economic downturn or *recession*. The precise causes of this financial crisis are quite complex to detail, but in brief, this economic meltdown accelerated rather dramatically during the fall of 2008. During that time, many banks, particularly those associated with home mortgage loans, began to hemorrhage money due to faulty loan and lending practices. By mid-September 2008, the situation worsened even further when the prominent financial firm *Lehman Brothers* filed for bankruptcy. Noting the dramatic declines experienced by the American Stock Market and other world financial markets revealed the first sign of how this crisis was impacting individuals. Eventually, the ill effects of this financial crisis began to migrate from Wall Street to Main Street as several prominent retailers filed for bankruptcy or went out of business completely. To make matters worse, several instances of shocking greed were alleged in the cases of both financial organizations like A.I.G. (American International Group) and individuals such as Bernie Madoff.

At the height of the Great Recession, unemployment rates were steadily hovering at just under 10% of the American population. Several key markets in the U.S. and world economy (such as financial and banking agencies, automobile companies, and media agencies) faced very serious economic problems. These problems were trickling down and impacting the everyday lives of citizens around the world. Individuals and families were learning that it was imperative to make modifications to their previous lifestyles. Such demands were particularly critical when people faced the prospect of losing one's home or job.

Many are looking to earlier generations, especially those who survived the *Great Depression* of the 1930s and 1940s, to study how such individuals were able to live through even more gloomy times. These financial crises illustrate how certain events require some degree of psychological **adjustment** to occur. When we experience adjustment, we are reacting to circumstances indicative of life change.

There are countless experiences that we have, are, or will experience that might necessitate adjustment. Many of these events might be perceived as being either "positive" or "negative" in terms of their net effect. Yet individuals tend to classify economic downturns as negative events. However, what if the loss of your job led you to explore a different field of work that was actually more rewarding to you? Suddenly, this "negative" event takes on more "positive" connotations. The economic downturn and its consequences are a reminder that the study of psychological adjustment is a research area with perhaps some of the most profound linkages to the workings of our daily lives.

adjustment
reaction to
circumstances indicative
of life change

WHAT IS MEANT BY “PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT?”

The general idea that psychologists should strive to understand how *laypersons* view themselves and their worlds has been around for some time. Among others, Fritz Heider (1958), a distinguished social psychologist, actually used the term “*common-sense psychology*” to convey the notion that psychologists need to appreciate how it is that laypersons analyze and view their everyday lives. With that said, think about how *you* (and others) use the term *adjustment*.

When people use the term *adjustment*, they usually are doing so in the context of some change that has occurred in a given person’s life. Consider the following examples. In talking about her husband’s cancer and the consequences it has had for her family, a hypothetical woman might say, “This whole event has been an adjustment for us. We’re trying—and learning—how to adjust.” Alternatively, consider the following comments from a hypothetical freshman college student (who has moved from Rhode Island to Texas in order to attend school) to his mother: “Well, Mom, this move definitely will require a period of adjustment. Texas sure is different from Rhode Island!” Both of these examples deal with very different phenomena: One addresses the challenges (at both an individual and family level) of coping with a serious ailment, whereas the other suggests the difficulties one faces when moving (in this case, in order to attend college). What both of these examples share is the sense that something has happened to upset one’s regular routine: A change has occurred. Due to this change, one has to adjust the way one thinks or reacts to events or others in his or her life. It is even possible that such occurrences may cause an individual to reevaluate oneself due to the event. Both of these examples further reveal that adjustment tends to be a *process*, in the sense that we might find ourselves taking certain steps in order to deal with the situation at hand. The hypothetical woman whose spouse just been diagnosed with cancer may find herself having to care more regularly for her husband; this new responsibility may cause her to reevaluate her daily schedule and routine.

Before we discuss the term *psychological adjustment*, let us clarify what is meant by the term *psychology*. Generally speaking, **psychology** is considered to be the scientific study of behavior and mental processes where **behavior** refers to what we do and **mental processes** implies the examination of the workings of the mind and our thoughts. (Appendix A provides an overview of some of the basic scientific methods of psychology.) There is much to be gleaned from what we do. Our actions may help to define us as individuals. For instance, by showing the effort to regularly attend an 8:00 AM class, one might discern that you are a focused and responsible student. Your behavior stands for something. By contrast, what you think about in the privacy of your



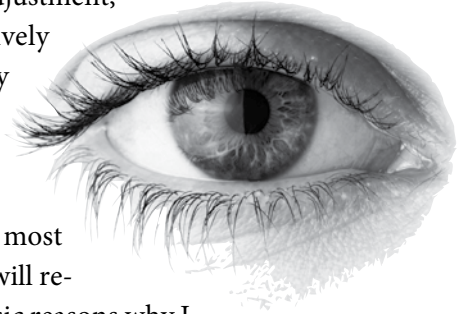
We experience changes in our lives that require different periods of adjustment. Moving to college can be one such change.

psychology
the scientific study of
behavior and mental
processes

behavior
what we do

mental processes
the examination of the
workings of the mind and
our thoughts

mind matters a lot also. Are you thinking that your class lecture is exciting or boring, or simply that you're looking forward to hanging out with friends tonight? This text will consider how our thoughts can influence our behavior and vice-versa. Returning to our relatively broad understanding of the term adjustment, one *could* make a case that we should extensively study issues such as *sensation* (how our sensory organs, such as the eyes, receive information) or *learning* (how experience can cause long-lasting changes in our actions or thoughts) in this text. While such topics would routinely be covered in most introductory psychology textbooks, these topics will receive little attention in this text. There are two basic reasons why I am fleshing out this particular point for you.



As discussed earlier in the preface, the field of the psychology of adjustment should represent more than a watered-down version of a prototypical, general psychology text. A definite challenge for the study of psychological adjustment is that, unlike most *other* well-established psychological subfields, the study of adjustment primarily borrows its ideas from other well-established psychological subfields. We will expand on this point a bit later in this chapter. The other key reason as to why *this* text will not focus on every possible example of adjustment is that it is essential to provide you with a sense of focus when studying the field of psychological adjustment. As such, this text emphasizes how psychological adjustment is significant for one's *health* or *well-being* (particularly mental health).

Remember our earlier examples about the hypothetical woman adjusting to her husband's cancer and the college student adjusting to new surroundings in Texas? They both had the theme of change—but, more specifically, these examples suggested that these were changes linked to one's *mental health* or *well-being*. How and whether we adjust to a given event can greatly impact our behaviors and mental processes. If the hypothetical college student reported to his mother that he was not adjusting well to the move and college life, then we would make the assumption that something was wrong (from the perspective of the student). We've been primarily talking about adjustment as a process, but now want you to consider that it can also be viewed as a *characteristic* of a given individual. For example, if you were to say, "One of the reasons I like my friend Suzy is due to fact that she strikes me as a well-adjusted person," then you are necessarily implying something about her mental health and well-being.

psychological adjustment

response to a situation that can impact our mental and/or physical well-being

To sum up, **psychological adjustment** pertains to the study of how change can impact our mental and well-being. We can adjust to any event or situation. Suppose you're at a vending machine and you desire iced tea, only to find that it is sold out. You have to adjust to this reality and decide whether to purchase another beverage or none at all. In all probability, such a decision will have minimal impact on your health and well-being. This is why the field tends to emphasize those experiences that can particularly shape health and well-being. What are some events or experiences in your life that may have produced change and impacted your health and well-being?

TO SUM UP ...

- The experience of adjustment is indicative of life change.
- Adjustment often is a process.
- Psychology is the scientific study of behavior, or what we do, and mental processes, or how our minds operate.
- Laypersons often use the term “psychological adjustment” as indicating one’s (mental) health or well-being.
- Psychological adjustment is the study of how change can impact our (mental) health and well-being.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

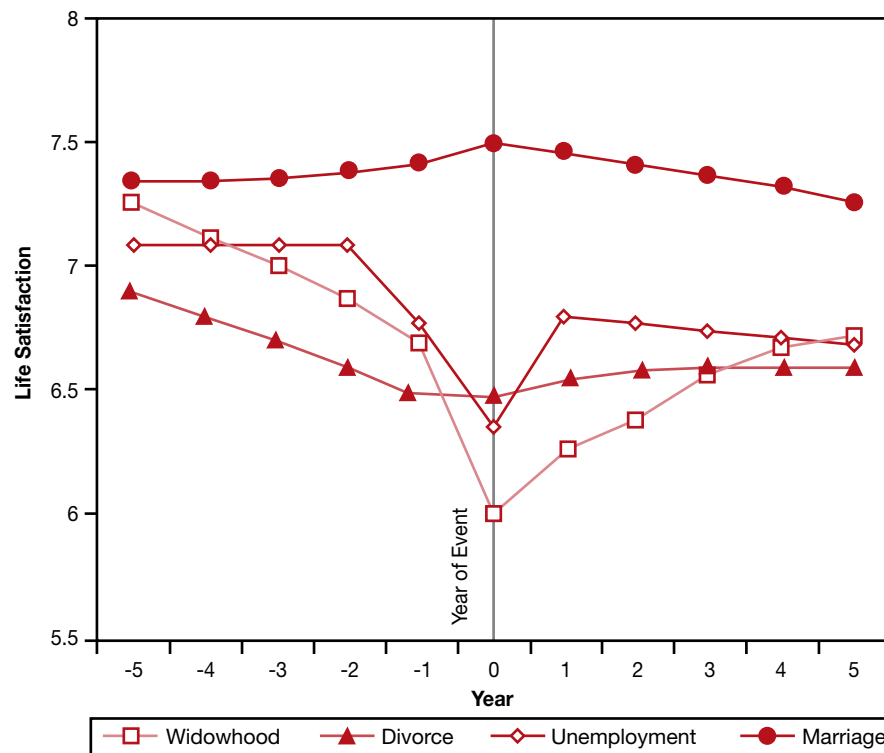
People are often fond of sayings or clichés. The problem is that many of these sayings are either incorrect or contradictory, such as *Opposites attract* and *Birds of a feather flock together*. Sometimes such sayings actually have credence in psychological research. Consider the cliché, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) studied individuals who experienced profound life changes—for the better (i.e., becoming a lottery winner) or the worse (i.e., becoming paralyzed in an accident). You may have assumed that lottery winners were forever happier with life whereas the accident victims were doomed with a perpetual state of gloom. Not so. While these individuals did temporarily feel either happier (the lottery winners) or sadder (the accident victims), eventually their emotional reactions basically reverted back to where they were before these events. This fundamental process describes the essence of Brickman et al.’s (1978) **adaptation level theory**: After experiencing a momentous event, we tend to psychologically revert back to our earlier life outlook. Part of the reason for this response may also be linked to the idea that, biologically speaking, our bodies can only handle so much emotional arousal and stress (Selye, 1956). Perhaps this physiological reality helps to ground us in realizing that we must reevaluate our reactions to life events. Even so, events themselves (and whether they are positive and negative) do still matter (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Figure 1.1 depicts how individuals mostly revert to earlier levels of well-being in the case of positive (e.g., marriage) or negative events (e.g., widowhood, divorce, or unemployment); yet, especially in regards to the negative events, individuals do not appear to return to these earlier rates in any absolute sense.

Humans have an uncanny ability to persevere in life—but it is not a given that we will do so. This text will explore both of these possibilities. Many well-intentioned and quite fine texts related to the field of adjustment emphasize the theme of *personal*



adaptation level theory

a theory that after experiencing a momentous event, a person tends to psychologically revert back to his/her earlier life outlook.

Figure 1.1 - Adaptation to Good and Bad Events

While most individuals do revert to earlier levels of well-being following positive and negative events, they may not do so in an absolute sense (especially with respect to negative events).

SOURCE: Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Scollon, C. N. Beyond the hedonic treadmill. *American Psychologist*, Vol. 61, p. 310. Published by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

growth (e.g., Corey & Corey, 2010). Fundamentally, such ideas are related back to the *humanistic tradition* in psychology, which presupposes that we all have the ability to improve our condition in life and no one is inherently bad. This text will address and even encourage you to look at events in your life—particularly those with a more negative core—and suggest ways to deal with them in a manner that is most beneficial to you. Again, there is no guarantee that all individuals will be able to experience personal growth in any given circumstance.

Consider another prominent saying about change: “The only thing that is certain in life is change.” There is some truth to this saying, also, in that aspects of your life will change, and sometimes not always for the better. Many scholars, such as the famed psychologist Erik Erikson (1959), have argued that we experience various life transitions or even crises at different points in our lives. Think about the sorts of concerns that may impact you now as a college student versus, say, when you were an eight- or nine-year-old. Some concerns may be remarkably similar, such as the desire to excel academically and to forge good social relationships with peers. There will likely be issues that were not of concern then but are much more pressing now, such as finding ways to support yourself, making the determination of what career to choose, and deciding how to run your social, personal, and family life. Recall the familiar saying, *Time waits for no one*. Indeed, it does not. Even if we wish we could stop the hands of time—or even turn them back—obviously we cannot do so. How we look at the world often

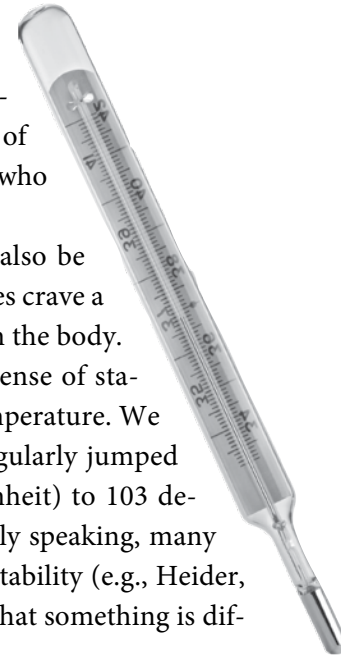
does depend on our age. You may not necessarily have the same set of concerns or life priorities at age 25 as you do at age 55. Actually, it isn't just age per se that impact us, but also the *life experiences* we endure as we age. As we rove the journey of life, each of us experiences unique situations and conditions that help define who we are. So, change is a reality of life.

Even though change is a reality of life, ironically, it can also be somewhat threatening to us. Physiologically speaking, our bodies crave a state of **homeostasis**, which refers to a constant environment in the body. The process of homeostasis allows our bodies to maintain a sense of stability for certain vital functions such as heart rate and body temperature. We would be in a very dire condition if our body temperature regularly jumped around from the normal temperature of 98.6 degrees (Fahrenheit) to 103 degrees and then to 97 degrees. In a parallel sense, psychologically speaking, many theorists have argued that humans have a need for order and stability (e.g., Heider, 1958). Change can seem unnerving to us since it often implies that something is different about our lives.

Change can also provide one with great new opportunities. As the earlier example about the student attending college for the time illustrates, moving up the academic ladder presents one with great possibilities for growth and learning both inside and outside of the classroom. For many children, kindergarten is the first foray into formal education; and it represents vast opportunities for intellectual, social, and emotional growth—as well as challenges. Though entering school can be replete with excitement, it can also be accompanied with the prospect of dealing with negative events such as the consequences of *bullying*, or aggressive behavior among youth (e.g., Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Change can represent a blend of both potentially positive negative consequences for an individual. The prolific writer, Judith Viorst (1986) in her best-selling book *Necessary Losses* suggests though that is a realistic expectation of life:

“As for our losses and gains, we have seen how often they are inextricably mixed. There is plenty we have to give up in order to grow. For we cannot deeply love anything without becoming vulnerable to loss. And we cannot become separate people, responsible people, connected people, reflective people without some losing and leaving and letting go” (p. 327).

While change may be a reality of life, it is not always welcome. Think about the individuals that you know who have lost their jobs or had to significantly alter their standard of living due to the economic recession that began in December 2007. Consider some even more severe cases of undesired change. Think about the lives of European Jews soon after the rise of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. Or, the thousands of individuals who kissed and hugged their loved ones good-bye before they left to go to work for the World Trade Center or Pentagon, or to board on four different planes on the morning of September 11, 2001. These events remind us that challenges, negative events, and tragedies are a part of life, too. Later in this text, we will consider how one can adjust following such events. The good news is that while it can be a great struggle



homeostasis
a constant environment
in the body

to recover from such events, it is indeed possible (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992). There is a growing assumption among scholars that seminal events, such as the death of a loved one, dissolution of a relationship, or personal illness can profoundly alter our identity (e.g., Harvey, 2000), and perhaps motivate us to pursue significant life change (Baumeister, 1994).

Frankly, the study of psychological adjustment is so very important because it is the study of the events and experiences that are often the most intimate of our lives.

The Study of Psychological Adjustment: An Inherent “Real World” Flavor

Though it may not always feel as though our lives are bombarded with change, our lives do indeed change with time. This realization alone can induce feelings of stress for in-

dividuals. While we can choose to make certain changes in our lives, many changes are effectively beyond our control. Let’s face it: Our worlds and selves are constantly changing. Events and circumstances regularly occur in the world that can and do impact us in some way.

Let us undertake the broad, thematic question of how adjustment has great relevance to our lives in the “real world” by posing a few trivia questions for you. Question 1 reads as follows: *Newsweek Magazine* highlighted some of the following global crises that awaited a newly inaugurated U.S. president. Following are some of the crises:

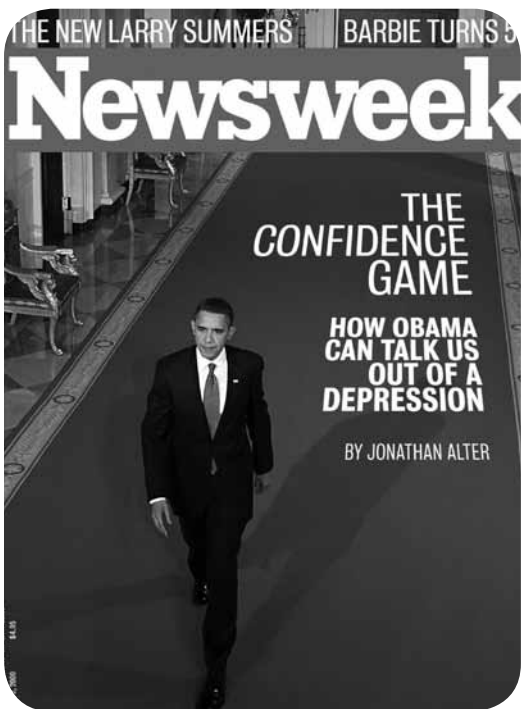
On Arabs vs. Jews: “It [is] a sharp reminder that the momentarily quiescent Middle East is never far from war ... [The new President] will try to use U.S. good offices to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.”

On Disarmament: “One technical but vital question that still blocks agreement: How many times could the international inspectors at these stations go out and investigate a suspicious blast?”

On The Backward: “Eyes hollow, ribs protruding, one more African child closed its eyes and died. It died, you may be sure, within the last five minutes, and, on the average, the next child will die within five more minutes from now.”

OK, so the precise question is which president did or does *Newsweek* believe did have or will have to face these global crises? Your choices: (A) Barack Obama in 2009; (B) George W. Bush in 2001; (C) Bill Clinton in 1993; or (D) None of the above.

Before I offer the answer for Question 1, let me give you another question to contemplate. When did *Time Magazine* first use the phrase “War on Terrorism” as a cover story where it described it as “a war that knows no boundaries?” Again, here are your choices: (A) In 1993, following the first attack on the World Trade Center; (B) In 2001, immediately following the 9/11 attacks; (C) In 2003, immediately following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq; (D) None of the above.



Even though it often seems that world problems are unique to a given time, our forebears often endured similarly daunting challenges.

Perhaps it is questions like these that make so many students loathe the ubiquitous “(D) None of the above” choice—because, believe or not, the answer for both of these items is (D) None of the above! How can that be? Let me clarify the correct answer choices. Incredibly, *Newsweek* outlined all of these “global crises” for the newly inaugurated U.S. President John F. Kennedy in 1961. With respect to the second question, *Time* first did a cover story on the “War on Terrorism” in 1977 following a West German raid on a skyjacked *Lufthansa* plane.

These questions are more than intriguing trivia. They serve as a reminder that, in so many ways, the echoes from the past truly reflect the reality of today. In other words, terrorism, Middle East conflict, nuclear proliferation, and African famine were issues facing the world in the 1960s and 1970s—just as we are facing them today. You may be tempted to recall the cliché, *The more things change, the more they stay the same*. When I learned of these magazine articles, I thought of the famed philosopher George Santayana’s quote: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Interestingly, if you read some of the specifics of these articles, you will find that some of the particulars surrounding these conflicts have changed although not necessarily for the best. Sadly, in a twisted way, the 1977 *Time* cover story on terrorism may cynically make one long for the “good old days” when governments could potentially negotiate with—or take action against—hijackers, rather than to witness them turning such planes into *de facto* missiles. With respect to *Newsweek*’s 1961 article, it discusses how the U.S. needed to face down Russia with the matter of nuclear disarmament—rather than countries such as North Korea or Iran. Speaking of Iran, this same periodical described it as a “pro-West monarch”—although, in discussing Iraq, it was apt for today just as it was in 1961, to being characterized as “unstable.”

Let’s face it: One could make the case that the start of the new millennium has not been particularly kind to our world. In fact, in November 2009, *Time* dubbed the first decade of the new millennium as “The Decade From Hell” (Serwer, 2009). Ever since (and arguably even before) the events of 9/11, we have witnessed many historic ravages of terrorism, war, economic crisis, international tensions, and environmental disasters. With all of the challenges facing our country and world, it might feel overwhelming to live as a citizen in our world nowadays (e.g., Lifton, 2005). In fact, 9/11 and its aftermath and related consequences—including the War on Terrorism and the Iraq War—are arguably still so far-reaching on our world (Lifton, 2005) that a significant portion of Chapter 3 has been devoted to this matter. Yet, it is also important to adopt a reality check on these threats. Individuals can help to improve their mental states by not overly focusing on crises impacting the world. This is not to suggest that it is advisable to ignore major happenings in the world. Rather, in such instances, it would be wise to limit our exposure to news media since it tends to exacerbate fears about crime and perceptions of the world as a threatening place (e.g., Romer, Jamieson, & Aday,



Since before the horrific events of 9/11 we have witnessed many historic acts of terrorism and war.

2003; Klein, 2003). In an age where we can instantaneously receive news from specialized news channels and Internet sites, it is even more important to monitor how much information we encode. Many researchers, such as Kraut and colleagues (2002), cite that increased Internet usage tends to foster depression because individuals are often more focused on the cyber-world than aspects of their own personal lives.

Let us be aware of our world and our personal surroundings, but let us also enjoy our life in the here and now. Certain media images may make it seem as though sometimes danger and tragedy are lurking everywhere. For most individuals, particularly Americans, we actually have much to be thankful for, including a relatively strong sense of security. Frankly, many argue that we would likely be happier in our lives if only we focused on those areas for which we should feel thankful (e.g., Gilbert, 2006).

Our ability to generally rebound soon after a crisis gives humans a clear adaptive

advantage. Ironically though, there is a potential downside to our ability to rebound so quickly. Following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the historically devastating 2005 hurricane season, there was much ballyhoo over a poll which found that 83% of adults sampled that were living along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts had not taken any steps to strengthen their homes for the 2006 hurricane season (Goodnough, 2006). This report included a quote from a Florida emergency management director as to why so many residents who may be at risk during hurricane season simply do not prepare for it. “It’s like a psychological issue—‘If I don’t think about bad things, bad things won’t happen’” (p. 2). There is much evidence to



When faced with threat, we often adopt a “hear no evil, see no evil, know no evil” attitude.

magical thinking

causal reasoning of an individual who believes that he or she can somehow exert thought control over the occurrence of certain events

optimistic bias

a clear desire to look at life in a positive manner

support such sentiments. Social psychologists have identified many errors we make when we engage in social thought. One such example is **magical thinking**, where an individual believes that he or she can somehow exert thought control over the occurrence of certain events (Subbotsky, 2005). The above quotation would be illustrative of magical thinking. Beyond that, individuals hold an **optimistic bias**, where we have a clear desire to look at life in a positive manner (e.g., Harris, Griffin, & Murray, 2008). Yet, we can only process so much information—particularly if it is negative—for a relatively limited period of time (Posner, Dwivedi, & Singh, 1991). The larger implication is that we are not always equipped to learn from past events and tragedies because it is not in our best interests to do so, cognitively speaking.

In this section, we have largely been focusing on events and situations that necessitated adjustment for a great number of individuals. The study of psychological adjustment, though, truly is an area of inquiry that examines aspects of our most personal selves and represents one of the most applied areas of study within a field that already has many palpable connections to “real world” phenomena. In fact, as you will quickly appreciate, the study of psychological adjustment is so intimately woven into the understanding of our personal lives that it is important to walk a fine line between the

personal and the *scientific* when discussing this matter. As such, let me offer the following suggestions to you, as I do for my own students in the classroom, regarding how to approach the study of psychological adjustment.

In the many times that I have taught a class on the psychology of adjustment, I have witnessed how the study of psychological adjustment can have profound relevance to our personal lives. Some of my past students have discussed such intimate matters as the experiences of becoming paralyzed, being sexually assaulted, and losing close others (including children and spouses). *Self-disclosure*, or the process of discussing aspects of oneself (especially to others), can hold many potential benefits. For instance, McCammon (1995) highlights some key benefits of self-disclosure (particularly of painful events) in the classroom: the role of providing testimony which furthers the coping and healing process; discussing the trauma which facilitates active coping; breaking the “secrecy conspiracy” about the experience, an opportunity for the affected student to receive validation and support; and a more heightened awareness of these issues for other students. Irwin and Melbin-Hilberg (1992) offer evidence to support many of these claims by noting that, compared with a control group, undergraduates in a grief counseling course showed a significant and sustained increase in cognitive confrontation of death and in the assimilation of these attitudes at an emotional level. McCammon (1995) also notes some of the potential risks associated with self-disclosure: the potential for not receiving support from others, the lack of a guarantee of confidentiality, the possibility that students (upon learning of someone else’s traumatic experience) will view their own loss experiences as relatively insignificant by comparison, and the negative emotional arousal (experienced by other students and faculty) that often accompanies self-disclosure. While these points do represent potential challenges, Harvey and Hofmann (2001) point out that loss experiences are not exotic in that most individuals experience a significant loss or trauma at some point in their lives.

Psychology of adjustment (and related) classes that deal with this subject matter often allow students to express their own inner pain (perhaps for the first time in their lives). You may question or ponder aspects of yourself while reading this text and participating as a student in your class. Hopefully, this experience (should it occur) will ultimately be beneficial to you. Be mindful, though, that this text should not be viewed as a “self-help” book. As I mention to my own students, should you feel that you have personal problems, then you should seek help of some sort (and we will discuss the matter of help-seeking in Chapter 9). While this text approaches the study of psychological adjustment from a *scientific perspective*, the point that these issues tend to have a very personal focus is a theme that will be emphasized, as well, in this text.



Acts of self-disclosure, or “opening up” to others can be fraught with some risks, but they can also bring many great rewards too.

TO SUM UP ...

- Consistent with adaptation level theory, individuals tend to revert back to the psychological state they were in prior to a major life event.
- The humanistic tradition assumes that personal growth is a key goal of existence.
- Physically and psychologically speaking, we tend to desire stability. Our bodies help to maintain such a state through homeostasis.
- Change can represent positive and negative consequences for an individual.
- The study of psychological adjustment has many implications for applied, or “real world” behaviors and settings. Yet, psychologists study psychological adjustment with a scientific perspective. In many respects, issues that our predecessors had to contend with in the past are often issues we face in today’s world also. Individuals are often able to adjust even in the wake of disaster.
- Some individuals may underestimate potential risks to their well-being due to certain errors in social thought such as magical thinking and an optimistic bias.

THE STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT: LINKAGES TO MANY PSYCHOLOGICAL SUBFIELDS

A unique challenge in studying the field of psychological adjustment is that this field encompasses research findings from many disparate, though interconnected, areas of psychology (and even some academic disciplines outside of psychology). This challenge is both difficult and exciting in certain respects. Let’s first consider why it is difficult. There are many psychological subfields (such as the ones listed below) that most any psychologist (or even an advanced student in psychology) could easily outline. For most of these given *subfields*, the basic types of research questions encompassed by these fields are apparent to knowledgeable others. This is not quite so for the study of psychological adjustment. While it is fairly accurate that most psychology of adjustment texts and courses feature goals of “taking charge” of one’s life (e.g., Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2011) or aspects of personal growth (e.g., Mayo, 2003), the specific content that is often incorporated in such materials can vary greatly. At best, scholars often have a broad sense of the issues this field should cover; at worst, the study of adjustment may be treated as a “watered down” introduction to general psychology.

Even though the study of psychological adjustment is not often viewed as one of psychology’s leading distinct subfields, this challenge is also a great strength in the sense that this field necessarily requires us to look at many different psychological subfields. By doing so, we are exposed to a diversity of perspectives that allow us to gain a deeper appreciation of what is meant by psychological adjustment. In order to effectively discuss the field of psychological adjustment, it is important to provide an overview of select established fields of psychology we will be drawing from.

This text will address the field of psychological adjustment by primarily borrowing information from four leading fields of psychology: *social psychology*, *personality*, *health psychology*, and *clinical psychology*. The study of psychological adjustment is an area that has particularly strong relevance for these fields. Let us take a closer look at the unique contributions of these fields and how they are relevant to the study of adjustment.

Social Psychology

Social psychology is the study of how social and environmental factors impact our lives. The field of social psychology is often further divided into two categories: **social cognition** and **interpersonal influence**. The term cognition refers to mental processes related to one's thoughts. Social cognition has to do with how we think about others in our social worlds and ourselves. As an example of social cognition, consider this classic social psychology study conducted by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959). Their research subjects were asked to spend quite some time doing a rather monotonous and boring task. Afterwards, the subjects were paid either \$1 or \$20, and then asked how much they enjoyed the study and whether they would tell their friends to participate in the study. You're probably assuming that those who were paid \$20 told the experimenters that this study was a delight to do. If so, you would be wrong! Actually, those who were paid \$1 enjoyed the study significantly more than those who were paid \$20. Those in the former group were experiencing cognitive dissonance, or an inconsistency between their thoughts and their behaviors. In order to minimize the gap between the two, subjects who were paid a dollar after undertaking this task effectively had a reason to "lie" to themselves and proclaim that this study was incredibly fun to do; those who were paid \$20 had no such reason to "lie." This experiment is a fascinating examination of how one's behavior can alter one's attitudes.

The study of interpersonal influence is equally important to the field of social psychology. Interpersonal influence considers the many ways that we affect and relate to others (for better and for worse). Topics as far ranging as why we fall in love with a given person as opposed to why we hate someone and why we may choose to help or hurt another person are examples of issues that fall under the broad domain of interpersonal influence. Consider this famous study conducted by Sherif and colleagues (1961), known as the *Robber's Cave* experiment, as an example of the power of interpersonal influence. This study involved recruiting preteen boys to a country summer camp and then randomly dividing them up into two distinct groups (*The Rattlers* and *The Eagles*) with different camp sites. Just as what typically happens when contestants are placed into distinct groups on the television show *Survivor*, these boys quickly began to bond with others within their group and to show great disdain for others

social psychology

the study of how social and environmental factors impact our lives

social cognition

how we think about ourselves and others and process social information

interpersonal influence

ways in which we affect and relate to others (for better and for worse)



The popular television reality show "*Survivor*" highlights many dynamics of interpersonal influences.

outside of their group. This phenomenon does reveal a basic reason why *prejudice* or interpersonal conflict occurs: Once individuals are segregated into distinct groups, such rivalries can develop. However, the story (and the study) does not end there. Sherif assumed that the boys would act in the manner that they did; what he was trying to determine was how to quell the dislike the boys had for the opposing groups. Quite cleverly, Sherif and his associates disrupted the water source that serviced both parts of the two camps. Soon all of the boys realized that they lacked water and were facing a dire problem that they needed to fix. In order to do so, they would have to work together; and, indeed they did. By working together to reach this common goal (also known as a *superordinate goal*), these boys actually began to establish liking for each other across the groups.

The study of social psychology and its two basic subfields have great relevance to our lives, including aspects of our psychological adjustment. For instance, how we see ourselves (e.g., do we like the type of person we are now or not) can greatly impact our mental health. When something happens to us, how we describe and make sense of that event has great consequences for our well-being, too. How we relate to others (and vice-versa) impacts so many facets of our lives. To be blunt, it is believed that the single-most important factor related to one's personal happiness is the nature and quality of one's close, interpersonal relationships (Myers, 1992). As such, we will be drawing heavily from social psychological findings throughout this text.

Personality

personality

particular combination of personal emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics

The study of **personality** refers to how it is that our personal characteristics impact our beliefs and behaviors. Unlike the study of social psychology, which presumes that social and environmental conditions can impact our thoughts and action, personality psychologists generally presume that we have traits, or personal qualities that are relatively stable and consistent. Historically, there has been some conflict between personality and social psychologists on this very issue of whether we even possess personal qualities that are

relatively stable and consistent. The *person-situation debate* explored the relative impact that personality traits versus social-environmental factors have on behavior (e.g., Houts, Cook, & Shadish, 1986). Most personality and social psychologists now agree that *both* personality traits and social-environmental factors are important in explaining our thoughts and behavior. In fact, a famed social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1946) believed that behavior fundamentally is a consequence of both the person and the environment.

Our personality impacts countless aspects of our adjustment. There are dozens of personality and individual difference dimensions that can affect or even predict our degree of adjustment. For instance, those who tend to show a consistently *negative mood* (also known as *negative*



Those who tend to show a more negative mood also tend to show more psychological distress in other areas of their lives.

affect or *neuroticism*) also tend to show much psychological distress in several facets of life such as marital satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Personality factors may represent the single-most important factor in health-related research (Marshall, Wortman, Vickers, Kusulas, & Hervig, 1994). We will discuss the many ways that personality impacts our adjustment and coping in the next chapter.

Health Psychology

Health psychology considers the variables related to promoting physical and mental health while treating and preventing illness (e.g., Baum & Posluszny, 1999). Health psychology represents one of psychology's newest subfields and, arguably, may share the greatest amount of overlap with the study of psychological adjustment. Many health psychologists take a *biopsychosocial* approach to the study of health in that biological, psychological, and social factors all contribute and interplay in predicting various health outcomes. While we'll directly examine how we adjust to physical and mental health challenges in Chapter 4, research from this field will be sprinkled throughout this book. One of the most quintessential health psychological research questions involves how we *cope* with *stressful* events. This represents an enormously important issue for the study of psychological adjustment.

The study of health psychology and psychological adjustment are not perfectly overlapping fields though. Many issues central to health psychology—such as pain management, health care policy, and the nature of how certain physical ailments and illness—are caused and (at best) tangential to the study of psychological adjustment. Likewise, it would not be completely accurate to suggest that all processes related to psychological adjustment have an obvious relationship to one's health.

Clinical Psychology

When most people think of a “psychologist,” they likely have a *clinical psychologist* in mind. **Clinical psychology** is a subfield that is concerned with the maintenance of our mental health and is generally divided into two divisions: *psychopathology* (also known as *abnormal psychology*) and *psychotherapy*. Psychopathology is the examination of mental disorders. The study of psychopathology explores the nature and symptoms of a given disorder, and how and why a given disorder occurs. In contrast, the study of psychotherapy evaluates the nature and effectiveness of various psychological treatments. The practice of psychotherapy (which necessarily should be predicated on the research of psychotherapy) involves delivering services to individuals who are striving to gain relief from various symptoms that they may have.

A significant theme of this text will involve discussing the balance between emotional reactions and behaviors that may be considered to be “normal” versus reactions and behaviors that perhaps are indicative of some form of psychopathology. While we will explore aspects of psychopathology and psychotherapy research in Chapters 4 and 9, respectively, these themes are not especially pronounced in this text. Instead, this text assumes that all of us experience processes related to psychological adjustment on a regular, daily basis. All of us have our own struggles and life difficulties. We may even feel quite sad or worried about an issue from time to time. These reactions are all perfectly “normal” and part of what makes us human. Just because someone is going

health psychology

science concerned with how physical, psychological, environmental, and cultural factors affect health—especially when treating and preventing illness

clinical psychology

a subfield that is concerned with the maintenance of our mental health

through a difficult life period does not, necessarily, mean that the individual is suffering from a form of mental illness and requires psychotherapy. However, should someone feel that he or she cannot function effectively due to life's stresses, or perhaps have a desire to kill oneself, we might be more apt to question aspects of an individual's mental health or perhaps whether he or she should seek professional help.

Other Relevant Fields of Inquiry

While this text primarily draws from the above-mentioned psychological subfields, we will occasionally sample research from other psychological areas such as **developmental psychology**. Developmental psychology examines changes that occur over the lifespan. After considering how adjustment is akin to the study of change, you may wonder why research from developmental psychology is not featured more prominently in this text. The rationale has to do with *how* change is being conceptualized. This text primarily focuses on how *adults* respond to happenings in their lives that may require them to change their thoughts or behaviors in some way. We are considering the idea of “change” in a somewhat more focused way than a developmental psychologist would in that this field would likely explore the biological, intellectual, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that occur from our prenatal (or before birth) experience up until our death. Unlike the focus of this text, much of developmental psychology focuses on the profound changes that occur in childhood and adolescence. Research from developmental psychology that highlights how adults adjust over time will be noted.

As was stated from the outset of this text, we are almost exclusively focusing on *adult* reactions to adjustment and coping. You should not infer from this that psychology is unconcerned with *child development*. On the contrary, Levinson (1986) suggests that psychology's past is replete with a fairly rich understanding of what occurs in the years leading to adulthood. He adds that psychology needs to pay as much attention to *adult development* that emphasizes the study of our **life course**, or how our life unfolds over the years. The roots of our cognitive, social, intellectual, and emotional selves are grounded in the experiences and changes we endure through childhood and adolescence.

Consistent with the broader themes and approach of this text, we are not explicitly focusing on these changes in any meaningful way. Traditionally, one of the most prominent and important contributions to the field of *developmental psychology* has been **Piaget's model of cognitive development**. Basing much of his model on direct observations of children, Swiss biologist Jean Piaget (1960) outlined four distinct stages that help to serve as benchmarks regarding how children's thinking skills develop. He suggested that these were four stages of development through which children had to progress in a sequential, orderly way; the culmination of cognitive development involved an ability to engage in **abstract thought**, where one is able to analyze some of the more subtle complexities of problems or challenges.

This text will even incorporate research findings and related scholarship from select academic disciplines outside of psychology. The study of psychological adjustment highlights the point that scholarship is often *interdisciplinary* in that it draws from many disparate academic fields such as other *health and social science* research from sociology and communication

developmental psychology

scientific study of changes that occur over the lifespan

life course

how our life unfolds over the years

Piaget's model of cognitive development

Jean Piaget (1960) theory that outlined four distinct stages that help to serve as benchmarks regarding how children's thinking skills develop

abstract thought

thinking that analyzes some of the more subtle complexities of problems or challenges



Swiss biologist Jean Piaget

Table 1.1 Key Psychological Subfields Relevant to the Study of Adjustment and Coping

Psychological Subfield	Basic Theme	Relevance to Adjustment and Coping
Social Psychology	How social and environmental factors impact our lives	How we see ourselves and others can greatly impact our well-being
Personality Psychology	How personal characteristics affect our beliefs and behaviors	Individual differences are extremely important predictors of how we respond to and cope with life events
Health Psychology	How to promote mental and physical health and treat and prevent illness	Our health is often impacted by how we cope with challenging events and deal with the stresses of everyday life
Clinical Psychology	How to understand the nature of mental illness and means to treat it	Much of our adjustment and coping is predicted upon an understanding of when individuals may be in need of help in managing personal reactions
Developmental Psychology	How behavior changes over one's lifespan	Psychological adjustment presumes that change is a regular part of human existence

studies. *Sociology* is a field of inquiry that studies the role and nature of groups and societies. *Communication studies* fundamentally looks at the many ways that we share information with each other. We will periodically incorporate some select writings, such as literature and religion, from humanities-based scholars. Chapter 9 will highlight many related health and human-service related fields (e.g., nursing, social work, physical and occupational therapy) that have much relevance to the study of adjustment and coping. The riddle of what is meant by psychological adjustment and coping can sometimes be answered by adopting a broader, interdisciplinary approach.

TO SUM UP ...

- While the study of psychological adjustment has linkages for many psychological subfields and related disciplines, we will primarily focus on research findings from the following areas: social, personality, health, and clinical psychology.
- Social psychology considers how social and environmental factors impact individuals. It is often divided into the sub-categories of social cognition, or how we think about our social worlds, and interpersonal influence, or how we impact and relate to others.
- Personality refers to our personal characteristics and how they affect our beliefs and behaviors.
- Health psychology focuses on variables related to promoting physical and mental health while treating and preventing illness.
- Clinical psychology considers both the study of mental disorders (psychopathology) and the treatment of such conditions (psychotherapy).
- The study of adjustment also considers developmental changes that occur throughout our lifespan.

THREE BASIC THEMES IN ADJUSTMENT RESEARCH

Throughout this text, you will be exposed to several theories and concepts that are relevant to a given issue within the study of psychological adjustment and coping. Before you immerse yourself in some of these particular ideas and concepts, it will be helpful to first consider three basic themes that help underlie all research in this field: (1) *Human*

life adjustment is an ongoing process. (2) *How we adjust depends on a variety of factors.* (3) *The scientific study of adjustment continues to explore new avenues of research.* Let us consider each of these three themes in greater depth below by using the example of the global financial crisis that began in 2007 as a backdrop.

Adjustment tends to be a subtle and ongoing process. We are continuously interacting with and trying to adapt to our environment. As the economic meltdown showed, we often need to cope with events that seemingly come out of nowhere. There are different perspectives that one could adopt in trying to understand why people sometimes have to contend with shocking events that appear to come out of nowhere. For instance, the prominent theologian Rabbi Harold Kushner (1981) argues that some things in life truly happen as a result of “trivial, unplanned decisions.” Even if we may not fully appreciate or understand why this crisis occurred, larger societal changes may come about as a result of the events. The reality is that all of us still must live with the aftermath of these events—or any other significant event that might occur in our lives.

Another critical theme of this field is that adjustment and coping can be impacted by a myriad of factors. Much of Chapter 2 will consider how *personal factors* (such as one’s age, gender, or personality) can impact adjustment. Several other chapters explore how *social* or *environmental* factors (such as the nature

of the event and the quality or nature of one’s social support) have a great impact on how we adjust to life events. Most people would relish having millions of dollars even in the midst of a severe economic downturn. However, one of the world’s richest men, German billionaire Adolf Merckle, committed suicide in January 2009, after losing roughly \$500 million dollars in the economic recession even though he was an incredibly wealthy individual. Merckle’s decision to commit suicide may have been predicated on his powerlessness to act once his financial empire began to crumble (Boston, 2009). This tragic case highlights how we adjust and cope to situations is very much dependent on a blend of personal, social, and environmental factors.

A third basic theme of this field is that, like any other subfield of psychology, the psychological study of adjustment and coping is an ever-changing area of inquiry. Psychologists do not know *everything* about the adjustment process—nor will we ever truly have a final, definite answer as to how humans adjust and cope with life situations. There are at least two basic reasons for this reality. One reason is that when researching



Lehman Brothers was just one of the companies that was affected by the 2007 financial crisis.

behavior and mental processes, psychologists sometimes find that previous assumptions about human behavior and thought are correct. Whenever we conduct any form of psychological research, we often need to modify or reject previous assumptions. This point is linked to the second basic reason why we will never have an absolute understanding of adjustment: this field is an ever-changing research area. As the economic crisis shows, sometimes events occur that demand our attention in terms of how they affect human adjustment. There are many other areas that illustrate how the field of adjustment continues to expand, such as the study of our reliance on the Internet as a means of communication and information (Teo & Lim, 1998). Prior to the mid-1990s, very few individuals had not even heard of the Internet. The sheer reality that humans are often bombarded with new events and circumstances, never experienced by previous generations, is a very significant reason why the psychological study of adjustment will always have new and unique issues worthy of investigation.

TO SUM UP ...

- Human life adjustment is an ongoing process.
- How we adjust depends on a variety of factors.
- The scientific study of adjustment continues to explore new avenues of research.

WHEN ARE WE ADJUSTING TO AN EVENT AS OPPOSED TO COPING WITH AN EVENT?

Up until this point, we have primarily considered how events and experiences are part of the human life cycle and can largely be thought of as consequences of living our everyday, routine existence. Even though unfortunate or tragic events such as the economic crisis or the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks may be shocking, the fact that we live in a world where great tragedies can occur should not be shocking. Remember that the term *adjustment* has to do with how we respond to life change. How we respond to the above mentioned events are examples of how we might react to life change. Let us focus our study of adjustment by considering ways in which we try to react to life change when it is proving to be more challenging than perhaps we had initially expected. Sometimes we find that we have to find ways to cope with the challenges of life. While we will elaborate on this definition in just a little bit, let it be noted that **cop**ing is widely defined as a means of using thoughts and behaviors to manage self-perceived *stressful* experiences and events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Many scholars (e.g., Hobfoll, 1989) emphasize the role that *resources* play in understanding stress and coping. As we'll review in Chapter 3, while some individuals might be likely

coping

a means of using thoughts and behaviors to manage self-perceived stressful experiences and events



Coping is widely defined as a means of using thoughts and behaviors to manage stressful situations.

to report feeling stress more regularly than others, most researchers view stress as being due to an event that has the potential to do physical and psychological harm to our well-being. Coping involves our responses to this threat so that we may overcome it. The notion of resources is significant in that when we feel “stressed,” we typically do not feel that we are capable of dealing successfully with a given situation. For instance, we may feel that we lack the ability to perform well on a given exam, find a romantic partner, or deal with a personal or family crisis that may come about. In all of these instances, we lack the resources to respond effectively. Once we do have the resources—such as learning effective study skills, enhancing our self-confidence, and trying to examine a situation rationally—we may be much better equipped to cope with each of these respective situations.

You may now be wondering, *When are we adjusting to an event as opposed to coping with an event?* Depending on which literature you consult and whom you ask, you are likely to receive one of three answers: (1) Adjusting and coping are fundamentally the same process. (2) Adjustment can be used as a means to understand one’s coping or vice-versa. (3) Coping is a process that occurs when we are faced with some sort of life challenge. Let us briefly explain each of these three possibilities.

Dunkel-Schetter and colleagues (1992) noted how “the coping literature was once described as a ‘three-car garage filled to the rafters with junk’ and badly in need of rigorous housecleaning.” As the coping literature has evolved, it continues to show more organization and precision as a field. This is not to say that the proverbial three-car garage has been completely tidied up. Some of the previous lack of organization may have been due to the tremendous growth shown in this field (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2006). This lack of past organization and precision may help to shed some light as to why the terms *adjustment* and *coping* have been used almost synonymously and without much distinction. Some of the earlier literature in the field suggested that one’s successes at coping with stressors were highly correlated with psychological adjustment (e.g., Manne & Sandler, 1984; Medalie, 1985; Tolor & Fehon, 1987; Ward, 1988). Such findings have lent further credence to the idea that these terms could be used interchangeably in both older and more recent studies (Shipley & Gow, 2006; Hampel & Petermann, 2006).

An important piece of the puzzle to appreciate the link between the concepts of adjustment and coping is to understand the nature of what is referred to as an **adjustment disorder**. As we’ll discuss in Chapter 4, mental health professionals make extensive use of a book called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, 2000)*. An adjustment disorder is one such condition listed on the *DSM-IV-TR*. Its chief characteristics include significant dysfunctions and distress in social, occupational, or academic functioning, following (within three months of the occurrence of) a stressor. A noteworthy exception to a stressor would be the experience of bereavement, or having lost a loved one due to death. This disorder has not been without its share of controversy. More recent research and analyses regarding the nature of adjustment disorder have led some to question whether it is even appropriate to view this condition as a disorder per se. For instance, Judy (2005) suggests that a personal crisis, which may appear to be adjustment disorder by some, may actually represent an individual’s desire for making a transition between life goals and

adjustment disorder

psychological response whose chief characteristics include significant dysfunctions and distress in social, occupational, or academic functioning following (within three months of the occurrence of) a stressor

what we want in our lives when faced with certain choices and challenges. Some have viewed the concept of an adjustment disorder as a medical solution to everyday problems of living (Casey, 2001). Given how an adjustment disorder has been characterized, it is easier to appreciate why many have viewed adjustment as a means to understand one's coping, or vice-versa. Through the years, many have argued that adjustment is a means of assessing well-being. If we are considering how your ability to adjust or change *predicts* the type of coping attained and its overall success rate, then *adjustment* tends to be conceptualized as an ability to adapt to change or to personally institute change in the course of dealing with life circumstances. Many studies have explored this very question (e.g., deRidder, Leseman, & de Rijk, 2004; Laubmeier, Zakowski, & Bair, 2004; Webb, 2003; Madden, Hastings, & Hoff, 2002).

There have also been those who have argued the reverse: Good coping is achieved if one shows successful adjustment. As similar as this may appear to what we've just considered, let us explore the subtleties between the two. In this case, we're trying to explore how your coping response *predicts* your degree of adjustment. As we've discussed, researchers sometimes conceptualize adjustment as a means of understanding your general state of *psychological functioning* and *well-being* as to how well you feel, your level of happiness in life, and general satisfaction with how things are proceeding in life (e.g., Jones & Ollendick, 2005; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Hack & Degner, 2004; Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2003). In this context, *adjustment* is a stand-in for your general state of being. In fact, many psychologists have regularly used the characteristic of being an "adjusted" individual (or simply being "adjusted" or "well-adjusted") to imply that one was showing an effective means of coping with a given condition or situation (e.g., Tucker, Ellickson, Collins, & Klein, 2006; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003; Kaminer & Lavie, 1991).

Then there is a final perspective that whereas adjustment is a far broader term encompassing how one reacts to life change, coping is a process undertaken in the wake of a personal challenge or crisis. Consider this summary by Brennan (2001), who is considering whether it more appropriate to look at adjustment to cancer as a form of coping or a *personal transition*:

"The term 'adjustment' is widely used in the ... literature ... [yet] the psychological mechanisms of adjustment have rarely been described. Rather than regarding it as the absence of psychopathology [or mental illness] or the end-point of coping ... adjustment refers to the psychological processes that occur over time as the individual, and those in their social world, manage, learn



Recent research has led some to question whether it is appropriate to classify bereavement as a disorder.

from, and adapt to the multitude of changes which have been [in the case of cancer] precipitated by the illness and its treatment. However, these changes are not always for the worse: sometimes they precipitate ‘healthy personal growth’ in a number of areas” (p. 1).

According to this view, there may be a fine distinction between the terms *adjustment* and *coping*. Adjustment is a process that truly is part of our everyday lives and experiences because dealing with the realities of life change should be expected.

However, in the course of dealing with life change, we may find that we are especially challenged. In order to contend with these events, we may have to find ways to *cope* with these events. While one *may* feel distressed at first when trying to contend with a challenging event, we should not assume that the path of coping is one mired in psychological distress. An individual may feel even better about one’s lot in life after coping with a very demanding set of circumstances. For instance, someone struggling to cope in a difficult economy may feel better about their lot by learning to simplify their lives and achieve happiness through strengthening personal relationships. Have you ever found yourself in such a situation where your need to cope ultimately marked a period of personal transition?

All things being equal, most of us—if given the choice—would rather experience a pleasant event over an unpleasant one. With that backdrop, it becomes a bit clearer as to why negative events are usually more challenging than positive ones and how such events may lead us to face different paths of adjustment. As further evi-

dence that negative events take their toll on the lives of individuals, briefly note the role of **resilience**, or one’s ability to bounce back from adversity and thrive under challenging circumstances (e.g., Garmezy, 1983; Miller, 2003a). The mere study of resilience is an implicit acknowledgment of the unique challenges that adverse events can pose. Even though we can use such events to motivate us to improve our lives, they can be downright unpleasant to deal with and even have the potential to create havoc in our lives. This anecdote is similar to the message put forth in Leo Buscaglia’s (1986) book *Personhood*. We do have a choice as how to respond to a negative event. Such responses can include being depressed over such an event or trying to put the event in its proper perspective. While we may not be able to pick and choose all of the life events we experience, our reactions and adjustment to them are largely within our realm.

After weighing the differences between the terms adjustment and coping, you might still be wrestling with the question that was posed earlier in this section: *When are we adjusting to an event as opposed to coping with an event?* Let me assure you that this was not intended to be a trick question! However, it is a tricky question to answer for the reasons that we just considered. In many respects, all three of the possibilities are potentially accurate. Let’s briefly review them. The notion that adjustment and coping are virtually identical terms may be the weakest of the three options to defend. Yet, the fact remains that many psychologists have used them interchangeably in the



Some may feel better about personal challenges by simplifying their lives.

resilience

one’s ability to bounce back from adversity and thrive under challenging circumstances

past and present. Indeed, the title of this particular text helps to affirm the notion that adjustment and coping are closely linked (at least). The second possibility was that adjustment could help to predict coping, and one's coping could help to predict one's adjustment; there is evidence to support this view. Finally, there is the perspective that whereas adjustment might be more centered round the study of everyday sorts of events and experiences, coping is more likely to occur during times of duress. To some extent, all three of these approaches are considered throughout this book. In order to give this text a greater focus, the latter perspective that has been particularly adopted for this text.

TO SUM UP ...

- Coping is widely defined as a means of using thoughts and behaviors to manage self-perceived stressful experiences and events.
- There is some confusion in the literature as to how the terms "adjustment" and "coping" differ, if at all. Some view them as the same basic process. Others view adjustment as a means to understand how one copes, or vice-versa. Some have further distinguished coping as a process that occurs when we are faced with a life challenge.
- Many psychologists classify those who have great dysfunction and distress in social, occupational, or academic domains in their life for at least three months with adjustment disorder. Bereavement is not typically included as a life event that triggers this disorder. It remains a somewhat controversial classification of the *DSM*.
- Adjustment often is viewed as how we deal with change in our life circumstances. Others use the term adjustment to represent whether one is coping well with life and one's problems (e.g., an "adjusted" individual is a happy, healthy person).
- Adjustment can be thought of as a process that occurs in our everyday lives, whereas coping occurs under particular circumstances.
- The study of resilience, or how one bounces back from adverse events, is an implicit acknowledgment that negative events pose unique challenges for our lives.

COPING AS A PROCESS

This section chapter marks a turning point in that we are shifting our focus from the study of how individuals adjust to important events in their lives, to how individuals cope with particularly challenging life events. Even though the theme of coping is implicit throughout most of this text, we outline specific coping strategies in the final third of this book. This section is meant to introduce you to how coping is often viewed as a general process.

The underlying theory and methodology by which psychologists have tried to understand how individuals cope with life's problems and challenges has shifted over time. Suls, David, and Harvey (1996) suggest that there are three key generations of theory and research that depicts this changing dynamic. They contend that the *psychodynamic* view, advanced by Freud and his followers, represented the first wave of thought about

transactional perspective

perspective that emphasizes coping as a process where a consideration of how the person and the environment influence and change each other is critical

internal resources

personally generated beliefs or attitudes that will allow you to attain a goal

external resources

sources of help generated from outside of yourself that promote assistance in attaining one's desired end result

this matter. According to this view, coping was akin to how and whether *defense mechanisms* were used to handle unconscious conflicts. As we'll consider in the next chapter, the psychodynamic view suggests that our *unconscious* mind (which operates out of any personal awareness) serves as a dumping ground for negative thoughts and emotions that were threatening to us in some way; as a result, we often made use of defense mechanisms in order to quell the thoughts and emotions stored in the unconscious. As the Freudian perspective fell out of favor and the *cognitive revolution* of the 1950s and 1960s helped to define modern-day psychology, a new perspective of coping was borne. Suls and colleagues suggest that from around the 1960s through the 1980s, the **transactional perspective** came into fashion. This perspective emphasized coping as a process where a consideration of how the person and the environment influence and change each other is critical. This particular section will largely focus on the transactional perspective. Chapter 2 will review what Suls et al. argue is the most current way of looking at the interface of personality and coping: the so-called "third generation" view which highlights the role of *personality* traits in coping.

In Chapter 3, we will detail how coping with stress is fundamentally about trying to find a healthier balance between our *demands* and our *resources* (e.g., Carpenter & Steffen, 2004). Ideally, in order to maximize the possibility that one will successfully cope with the situation at hand, one's resources should be *greater than* one's demands. Even though it is not necessarily possible to control all events in our lives, we do have considerable sway as to how we respond to life events. Even though coping is an ongoing process requiring much effort and attention, we should strive to increase our internal resources and external resources (Corbett, 2006). **Internal resources** pertain to personally generated beliefs or attitudes that will allow you to attain a goal, whereas **external resources** are sources of help generated from outside of yourself (such as social support) that promote assistance in attaining one's desired end result.

Let us first consider how internal resources can be used to as a means of coping by considering the case of a hypothetical individual. Suppose Jane just found out that

she has to go on a last-minute business trip even though she has two young children and an ailing father for whom she must care. What is she to do? She does have options in trying to manage this situation. Jane might want to take a look at herself: Are there steps that she can personally enact in order to make her preparation for this presentation much more palatable for herself and her situation? Perhaps Jane is a *perfectionist*; if so, she might do herself a world of good by lowering the pressure that she is placing on herself by lowering the expectations she is burdening herself with on a regular basis. There is much evidence that holding such perfectionist attitudes are often strongly correlated with depression (Flett, Besser, Hewerr, & Davis, 2007), and emotional distress and cognitive



Someone who is a perfectionist can relieve some of their stress by lowering the expectations that they place on themselves on a daily basis.

difficulties (Arpin-Cribbie & Cribbie, 2007). Perhaps Jane is feeling like she has to make the “perfect” presentation because “everyone” is going to be watching her and judging her. Gilovich, Medvec, Husted, and Savitsky (2000) have termed this phenomenon as *the spotlight effect* whereby individuals tend to overestimate the degree by which others are noting and critiquing their actions and appearance. This effect, where we often mentally internalize that we are under the glare of the proverbial spotlight by others, often harbors feelings of social anxiety that often precipitate inaction and later regret (Gilovich, Kruger, & Medvec, 2002). We can overcome this feeling by realizing that this is an inaccuracy in social judgment on our parts. In other words, even if we make a mistake when presenting—so what?

Returning back to Jane’s case, we should not downplay the prospect of mining external support. She might consider asking a colleague if he or she would help her prepare for the presentation. In turn, she would help her co-worker at a later point in time. Also some added support from her spouse or other family and friends might help her to care for her children and ailing father.

An important application of the role of resources in coping can be understood through the study of **major loss**. Harvey (1996) initially argued that a major loss represented a decrease in one’s (tangible or intangible) resources, such that these resources represent some significant emotional investment. A student may feel quite stressed about a given exam, but this does not necessarily constitute a *loss*. However, suppose that this failed exam caused a student to flunk out of school and then lose their job—in such case, arguably, this probably might be construed as a major loss. Then again, suppose upon reflection, that the student was not troubled about these events since it allowed him or her to change careers; now, this individual might *not* view these occurrences as a major loss. In order to further clarify this point, Harvey and Miller (1998) added to the definition of major loss such that there would usually be a *subjective indication* by the individual that he or she has experienced a “major loss”—and an *objective concurrence* by knowledgeable others. That is, most people (in a subjective sense) are able to almost instinctively realize whether a given event represents a “major loss” for their life, or not. Also, when a major loss does occur, those who are closest to this person are usually fairly able to easily recognize and realize that this person has endured a major loss.

major loss

a decrease in one’s (tangible or intangible) resources that represent some significant emotional investment

The balance of coping requires attention not just to our resources but also to our *demands*. Attempting to alter the nature or *source* of the demand can be much more challenging. As we’ll consider in the next chapter, jobs can be a tremendous source of stress for many individuals because of the demands that they place on individuals. Consider a very rewarding but also stressful career field such as nursing. Bennett, Lowe, Matthews, Dourali, and Tattersall (2001) note that nurses are more likely to show negative effects if they perceive poor management support, having to carry out duties outside the perimeter of their official duties, little recognition from superiors, and having to make decisions under intense time pressures. Trying to modify these demands can be extremely challenging. Indeed, jobs with high demands and little control tend to be particularly stressful (e.g., McClenahan, Giles, & Mallett, 2007). Some jobs and situations do potentially give us the autonomy or flexibility to alter the source of the demand, but many others do not. If we are not able to change the nature of the

Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ)

the premier scale, developed by Folkman and Lazarus, for measuring how people cope with stressors

problem-focused coping

copied strategy that involves trying to change or eliminate the source of the problem or stress

emotion-focused coping

copied strategies attempt to manage one's stress-related emotions

confrontive coping

strategy of aggressively and vehemently trying to change the situation at hand

seeking social support

ways that individuals try to receive emotional, informational, or tangible support from others

planful problem-solving

strategy that entails purposeful efforts to change the situation

distancing

effort to detach oneself from the situation

self-control

ability of an individual to regulate his/her feelings, behaviors, or desires

demand, we are faced with a choice: How should we cope with this situation? The decision to completely detach oneself from a stressful situation, such as a difficult job or family conflict, may sometimes appear to be a viable, attractive option. Ultimately, such choices may prove not be wise in the long-term. For instance, if you quit your job, the stresses associated with it may end—but new ones may begin as you struggle to find a new source of income.

If we are to consider coping as a process, we need to ascertain methods to measure such practices. Arguably, the best known general methodology developed in order to gauge how people cope with stressors is a scale developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1986, 1988) known as the **Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ)**. This scale fundamentally assesses **problem-focused coping** and **emotion-focused coping**. Problem-focused coping involves trying to change the source of the problem or stress in some way. Returning to our earlier example about stressful jobs such as nursing, a nurse might show problem-focused coping by talking with her supervisor about trying to modify some of the procedures at work in the hope of mitigating her stress. Emotion-focused coping, in contrast, involves attempts at managing one's stress-related emotions. This hypothetical nurse might choose to deal with her stressful job by learning how to reframe her feelings. While an individual might engage in both forms of coping simultaneously, there is evidence for eight basic distinct coping strategies; three of them primarily relate to problem-focused coping, whereas five are more illustrative of emotion-focused coping (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

Let us first examine the problem-focused coping measures. To begin, **confrontive coping** occurs when one aggressively and vehemently tries to change the situation at hand. An example of such coping would be, "I expressed anger to the person who caused the problem." **Seeking social support** involves ways that individuals try to receive emotional, informational, or tangible support from others. **Planful problem-solving** entails purposeful efforts to change the situation. For instance, those who show such a tactic might agree with a statement such as, "I knew what had to be done, so I doubled my efforts to make things work."

Here are the five main emotion-focused coping techniques identified by Folkman et al. (1986). **Distancing** involves an effort to detach oneself from the situation. An example of an item from the scale of Folkman and colleagues (1986) is, "made light of the situation; refused to get too serious about it." **Self-control** is another method where individuals attempt to regulate their feelings. Such coping might be represented by agreement with a statement such as, "I tend to keep my feelings to myself." Another way of coping is termed **accepting responsibility**, which is when one acknowledges his/her role in the problem, coupled with a determination to improve the situation. A representative item would be, "I made a promise to myself that things would be different next time." **Escape-avoidance** techniques involve wishful thinking (such as

hoping for a miracle) and behavioral efforts to escape or avoid the problem, such as the use of alcohol or drugs, avoiding others, and so on. The study authors note that escape-avoidance differs from distancing in that the latter suggests detachment, rather than a complete lack of acceptance about the nature of the problem. Finally, **positive reappraisal** takes place when individuals attempt to find meaning in their experience and focus on personal growth. An item such as “I came out of the experience better than when I went in” is representative of this coping strategy.

Some of these coping strategies have been found to either furnish an advantage or disadvantage in coping with a given situation. For instance, Dunkel-Schetter and colleagues (1992) found that seeking and using social support, distancing, and focusing on the positive were all predictors of positive emotional states in cancer patients. However, cognitive and behavioral escape-avoidance were predictive of negative emotional states.

Another clear theme of this text will be that *coping* with negative life events is far more complicated an issue than it may seem. Not all adverse events are the same in terms of their net impact on individuals. For instance, consider the experience of **victimization**, or suffering some form of physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse. As is the case with many adverse events, victimization can have *short-term* and *long-term effects*. While there is not necessarily an absolute time frame, short-term effects are those that typically occur soon after an event has occurred. Even so, how one responds in the hours following an event can be quite different from how one is feeling a month later. Salazar and colleagues (2004) stress that young African-American females who experience dating violence victimization often report greater depression, lowered self-esteem, and increased problems with body image; these young women can greatly benefit from interventions from friends, family, and community resources as soon as the victimization has occurred. Long-term effects are also critical to assess because we may have different reactions or behavioral consequences to an event that has occurred quite some time ago. Life events, like victimization, can be ones where a single, certain situation occurs or languishes on indefinitely. Whether the life event, such as victimization, has occurred for a relatively brief time or not may be critical in assessing one’s coping.

As you can see, there are a myriad of factors that might impact how we cope with a given situation, and we have a wide array of coping strategies that we can use. We will take a closer look at many of these strategies and the consequences of using them in the final third of this book. Before we do that, we will return to a more in-depth consideration of factors that influence adjustment in our everyday lives and how we interpret events that occur in our lives. We will also give some consideration to facets of our lives that can greatly impact our everyday adjustment and coping: our health, our relationships, and issues pertaining to death and dying.

accepting responsibility

a way of coping such that one acknowledges his/her role in the problem, coupled with a determination to improve the situation

escape-avoidance

wishful thinking and behavioral efforts to escape or avoid the problem

positive reappraisal

an individual’s attempt to find meaning in his/her experience and focus on personal growth individuals attempt to find meaning in their experience and focus on personal growth

victimization

the process of being victimized by suffering some form of physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse

TO SUM UP ...

- The transactional view of coping presents coping as a process of how the person and the environment influence each other.
- Fundamentally, coping is about holding a greater amount of resources in contrast to the demands of one's situation. Our resources can be generated from within (internal) or from outside help (external).
- A challenge to coping is the spotlight effect, or that we often assume others pay too much attention to our actions and appearance.
- Situations where demands are high and our control is low can be especially stressful.
- A major loss presents a decrease in one's resources such that they represent a significant emotional investment as well as a subjective and objective sense that such a loss occurred.
- The Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) is an important scale that measures problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.
- Problem-focused coping involves trying to change the source of the problem in some way. Examples of this form of coping include: confrontive coping, seeking social support, and planful problem-solving.
- Emotion-focused coping involves trying to manage one's stress-related emotions. Examples of this form of coping include distancing, self-control, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, and positive reappraisal.
- The experience of victimization illustrates how there are a myriad of factors that might impact how we cope with a given situation.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

What Is Meant by “Psychological Adjustment?”

- The experience of adjustment is indicative of life change.
- Adjustment often is a process.
- Psychology is the scientific study of behavior, or what we do, and mental processes, or how our minds operate.
- Laypersons often use the term “psychological adjustment” as indicating one’s (mental) health or well-being.
- Psychological adjustment is the study of how change can impact our (mental) health and well-being.
- Consistent with adaptation level theory, individuals tend to revert back to the psychological state that they were in prior to a major life event. The humanistic tradition assumes that personal growth is a key goal of existence.
- Physically and psychologically speaking, we tend to desire stability. Our bodies help to maintain such a state through homeostasis.
- Change can represent positive and negative consequences for an individual.
- The study of psychological adjustment has many implications for applied, or “real world” behaviors and settings. Yet, psychologists study psychological adjustment with a scientific perspective. In many respects, issues that our predecessors had to contend with in the past are often issues we face in today’s world also. Individuals are often able to adjust even in the wake of disaster.
- Some individuals may underestimate potential risks to their well-being due to certain errors in social thought, such as magical thinking and an optimistic bias.



- While the study of psychological adjustment has linkages for many psychological sub-fields and related disciplines, we will primarily focus on research findings from the following areas: social, personality, health, and clinical psychology.
- Social psychology considers how social and environmental factors impact individuals. It is often divided into sub-categories: social cognition, or how we think about our social worlds, and interpersonal influence, or how we impact and relate to others.
- Personality refers to our personal characteristics and how they affect our beliefs and behaviors.
- Health psychology focuses on variables related to promoting physical and mental health while treating and preventing illness.
- Clinical psychology considers both the study of mental disorders (psychopathology) and the treatment of such conditions (psychotherapy).
- The study of adjustment also considers developmental changes that occur throughout our lifespan.

(continues)

(continued)

Three Basic Themes in Adjustment Research

- Human life adjustment is an ongoing process.
- How we adjust depends on a variety of factors.
- The scientific study of adjustment continues to explore new avenues of research.

When Are We Adjusting to an Event as Opposed to Coping with an Event?

- Coping is widely defined as a means of using thoughts and behaviors to manage self-perceived stressful experiences and events.
- There is some confusion in the literature as to how the terms “adjustment” and “coping” differ, if at all. Some view them as the same basic process. Others view adjustment as a means to understand how one copes or vice-versa. Some have further distinguished coping as a process that occurs when we are faced with a life challenge.
- Many psychologists classify those who have great dysfunction and distress in social, occupational, or academic domains in their life for at least three months as having adjustment disorder. Bereavement is not typically included as a life event that triggers this disorder. It remains a somewhat controversial classification of the *DSM*.
- Adjustment often is viewed as how we deal with change in our life circumstances. Others use the term “adjustment” to represent whether one is coping well with life and one’s problems (e.g., an “adjusted” individual is a happy, healthy person).
- Adjustment can be thought of as a process that occurs in our everyday lives, whereas coping occurs under particular circumstances.
- The study of resilience, or how one bounces back from adverse events, is an implicit acknowledgment that negative events pose unique challenges for our lives.

Coping as a Process

- The transactional view of coping presents coping as a process of how the person and the environment influence each other.
- Fundamentally, coping is about holding a greater amount of resources in contrast to one’s demands. Our resources can be generated from within (internal) or from outside help (external).
- A challenge to coping is the spotlight effect, or that we often assume others pay too much attention to our actions and appearance.
- Situations where demands are high and our control is low can be especially stressful.
- A major loss presents a decrease in one’s resources such that they represent a significant emotional investment as well as a subjective and objective sense that such a loss occurred.
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- The experience of victimization illustrates how there are a myriad of factors that might impact how we cope with a given situation.

Key Terms

<i>TERM</i>	<i>PAGE #</i>	<i>TERM</i>	<i>PAGE #</i>
abstract thought	16	magical thinking	10
accepting responsibility	27	major loss	25
adaptation level theory	5	mental processes	3
adjustment	2	optimistic bias	10
adjustment disorder	20	personality	14
behavior	3	Piaget's model of cognitive development	16
clinical psychology	15	planful problem-solving	26
confrontive coping	26	positive reappraisal	27
coping	19	problem-focused coping	26
developmental psychology	16	psychological adjustment	4
distancing	26	psychology	3
emotion-focused coping	26	resilience	22
escape-avoidance	27	seeking social support	26
external resources	24	self-control	26
health psychology	15	social cognition	13
homeostasis	7	social psychology	13
internal resources	24	transactional perspective	24
interpersonal influence	13	victimization	27
life course	16	Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ)	26

TEST YOURSELF

Take these short quizzes to see how well you understand the material from this chapter. The answers will be found in Appendix B.

Part I: Modified True or False.

Determine whether the statement below is TRUE. If so, write the word “TRUE;” if NOT, then correct the word in boldface in order to make the statement correct.

1. Adjustment primarily pertains to the study of **mental illness**.
2. We generally consider psychology to be the scientific study of **behavior and mental processes**.
3. Themes pertaining to personal growth are often rooted in the **humanistic** tradition.
4. Jerry has just won a million dollars in a lottery. While he initially becomes quite elated, he eventually displays a mood more similar to that of how he acted before he won. This example illustrates **homeostasis** theory.

Part II: Who Am I?

Listed below are summaries of scholarly projects from hypothetical researchers. Based on the information provided, determine the MOST LIKELY area of research this hypothetical researcher is affiliated with.

1. I study how difficult situations can make us more likely to become physically ill.
2. I study how being part of a group can make an individual more likely to engage in behaviors that he or she ordinarily wouldn't.
3. I study the intellectual changes that develop in children prior to adolescence.
4. I study the effectiveness of different types of therapy for those who are depressed.
5. I study the impact of being a shy person on behavior.

Part III: Short Answer Questions: Answer the following questions.

You should be able to do so in no more than a couple of sentences.

1. State the three main ways that researchers have conceptualized the terms “coping” versus “adjustment.”
2. What are the basic characteristics of an adjustment disorder?
3. Suppose a researcher defines “adjustment” as your happiness in life for the purposes of a study. In this case, what does adjustment fundamentally represent?

Part IV: How Am I Coping?

Match the following coping strategies or related concepts with its most appropriate defining characteristics in the opposite column.

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. Planful problem solving | A. Looking at the benefits of a bad situation |
| 2. External resources | B. Regulating feelings |
| 3. Self-control | C. Detaching yourself |
| 4. Escape-avoidance | D. Purposeful efforts of change |
| 5. Positive reappraisal | E. Help from outside of yourself |
| 6. Distancing | F. Lack of acceptance |

Some Final Thoughts ...

- We have argued that the study of psychological adjustment has a particularly strong “real world” flavor in that it includes the study of issues that can have great relevance for our lives. As we begin this text and its corresponding course, what expectations do you have regarding how this material might impact how you view of your own life?
- Can you think of an issue related to the field of psychological adjustment that, given the opportunity, you might like to know more about? How might different psychological subfields (e.g., social, personality, health, and clinical psychology) view this issue?
- How do you interpret the difference between “adjusting to” versus “coping with” an event? In reflecting upon your response, think about events and experiences you have personally endured.