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[Home](#) > Stress and Cognitive Appraisal

Stress and Cognitive Appraisal

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by **Lazarus and Folkman**

The model "Theory of Cognitive Appraisal" was proposed by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984 and it explained the mental process which influence of the stressors.

According to Richard Lazarus, stress is a two-way process; it involves the production of stressors by the environment, and the response of an individual subjected to these stressors. His conception regarding stress led to the theory of cognitive appraisal.

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What is Cognitive Appraisal?

Lazarus stated that cognitive appraisal occurs when a person considers two major factors that majorly contribute in his response to stress. These two factors include:

1. The threatening tendency of the stress to the individual, and
2. The assessment of resources required to minimize, tolerate or eradicate the stressor and the stress it produces.

In general, cognitive appraisal is divided into two types or stages: primary and secondary appraisal.

See also: [Schachter-Singer Theory of Emotion](#) ^[1]

Primary Appraisal

In the stage of primary appraisal, an individual tends to ask questions like, “*What does this stressor and/ or situation mean?*”, and, “*How can it influence me?*” According to psychologists, the three typical answers to these questions are:

1. *"this is not important"*
2. *"this is good"*
3. *"this is stressful"*

To better understand primary appraisal, suppose a non-stop heavy rain suddenly pours at your place. You might think that the heavy rain is not important, since you don't have any plans of going somewhere today. Or, you might say that the heavy rain is good, because now you don't have to wake up early and go to school since classes are suspended. Or, you might see the heavy rain as stressful because you have scheduled a group outing with your friends.

After answering these two questions, the second part of [primary cognitive appraisal](#) ^[2] is to classify whether the stressor or the situation is a threat, a challenge or a harm-loss. When you see the stressor as a threat, you view it as something that will cause future harm, such as failure in exams or getting fired from job. When you look at it as a challenge, you develop a positive stress response because you expect the stressor to lead you to a higher class ranking, or a better employment.

On the other hand, seeing the stressor as a “harm-loss” means that the damage has already been experienced, such as when a person underwent a recent leg amputation, or encountered a car accident.

Secondary Appraisal

Unlike in other theories where the stages usually come one after another, the secondary appraisal actually happens simultaneously with the primary appraisal. In fact, there are times that secondary appraisal becomes the cause of a primary appraisal.

Secondary appraisals involve those feelings related to dealing with the stressor or the stress it produces. Uttering statements like, “*I can do it if I do my best*”, “*I will try whether my chances of success are high or not*”, and “*If this way fails, I can always try another method*” indicates positive secondary appraisal. In contrast to these, statements like, “*I can't do it; I know I will fail*”, “*I will not do it because no one believes I can*” and, “*I won't try because my chances are low*” indicate negative secondary appraisal.

Although primary and secondary appraisals are often a result of an encounter with a stressor, stress doesn't always happen with cognitive appraisal. One example is when a person gets involved in a sudden disaster, such as an earthquake, and he doesn't have more time to think about it, yet he still feels stressful about the situation.

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Links

[1] <https://explorable.com/schachter-singer-theory-of-emotion>

[2] <http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/students/stress.htm>