

Stress and Anxiety

Counterpart Elements of the Stress/ Anxiety Complex



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KEYWORDS

- Stress • Anxiety • Nonlinear dynamical psychiatry • Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Belief revision • Escape/avoidance • Exposure/response prevention • A-B-C model

KEY POINTS

- Stress and anxiety are complementary aspects of an entire stress/anxiety complex, with environmental, physiological, psychological, and behavioral components.
- At our current level of knowledge, categorical definitions of stress and anxiety are not helpful. Rather than creating artificial distinctions between them, a transdiagnostic approach better describes their overlapping phenomenology and processes.
- When stress and anxiety are introduced into an organism's learning history, they can become conditioned responses to environmental stimuli.
- From a neurobiological standpoint, stress and anxiety involve autonomic protective alarm responses arising primarily from the sympathetic nervous system, and neurohumoral responses arising primarily from the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis.
- Stress and anxiety are evolutionary adaptations that deal with challenging circumstances an organism confronts in its environment. When overextended, the stress/anxiety complex has the potential to cause allostatic overload as the body attempts to regain homeostasis.
- When stress and anxiety exceed a person's adaptive capacity, or coping strategies are inadequate, a variety of physical and mental conditions can emerge or worsen. Anxiety disorders are the paradigm case of this phenomenon.
- The nature, degree, and persistence of stress are particularly important in anxiety disorders and other related psychiatric conditions. Catastrophic stress can produce posttraumatic stress disorder, even in genetically healthy people. Persons who are genetically predisposed can develop anxiety syndromes, even with a lower degree of stress. The degree and persistence of stress should become an important part of case conceptualization in anxiety and related disorders.

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- Stress and anxiety can be reconceptualized as components of a nonlinear dynamic brain process.
- This approach clarifies the relationships between environmental triggers, physiological alarms, cognitive appraisals, and resulting coping strategies.

Abbreviations

A-B-C model	Alarms-Beliefs-Coping Strategies model
CR	Conditioned response
CRF	Corticotropin-releasing factor
CS	Conditioned stimulus
dACC/dmPFC	Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex/dorsomedial prefrontal cortex
DSM-5	<i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> (Fifth Edition)
DSM-IV-TR	<i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> (Fourth Edition, Text Revision)
GAD	Generalized anxiety disorder
GAS	General adaptation syndrome
HPA	Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal
MDD	Major depressive disorder
mPFC	Medial prefrontal cortex
OCD	Obsessive-compulsive disorder
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
SAD	Social anxiety disorder
SOD	Superoxide dismutase
UR	Unconditioned response
US	Unconditioned stimulus

The terms stress and anxiety are ambiguous, and this has led to confusion from semantic, physiological, psychiatric, and behavioral perspectives. In this article the authors advocate that they are counterpart elements of an entire stress/anxiety complex. Because they occur on a spectrum or continuum, it makes more sense to regard them as variations of what essentially is the same phenomenon and components of the same response. This article reviews some of the common features of stress and anxiety, and conceptualizes them as intertwined dynamical brain processes. Dynamic implies not only that each strand unfolds longitudinally in time but also that they mutually influence and often exaggerate each other. The article concludes with a discussion of several intervention strategies, and suggestions for further research.

Each year the American Psychological Association conducts an annual survey, "Stress in America."¹ In 2013, 42% of adults reported their stress level had increased over the past 5 years; 36% reported it had not diminished. Whereas 61% of adults reported that managing stress was extremely or very important, only 35% reported they were doing an excellent or very good job at it. Forty-four percent of adults reported they were not doing enough or were not sure whether they were doing enough to manage their stress; 19% reported they never engage in stress-management activities. Money (71%), work (69%), and the economy (59%) were the most commonly

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