Stress & Appraisal

LEARN · RICHARD LAZARUS & THE TRANSACTIONAL MODEL

Why the same event can unsettle one person and energise another

Richard S. Lazarus

1922 – 2002 · University of California, Berkeley

Pioneer of appraisal theory, who showed that stress depends on how we read a situation.

- **1966** Puts appraisal at the centre of stress.
- **1981** Daily hassles predicted symptoms beyond major life events.
- **1984** With Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping.*
- **1991** *Emotion and Adaptation* extends appraisal to emotion.

01 Reading an event, from the inside out

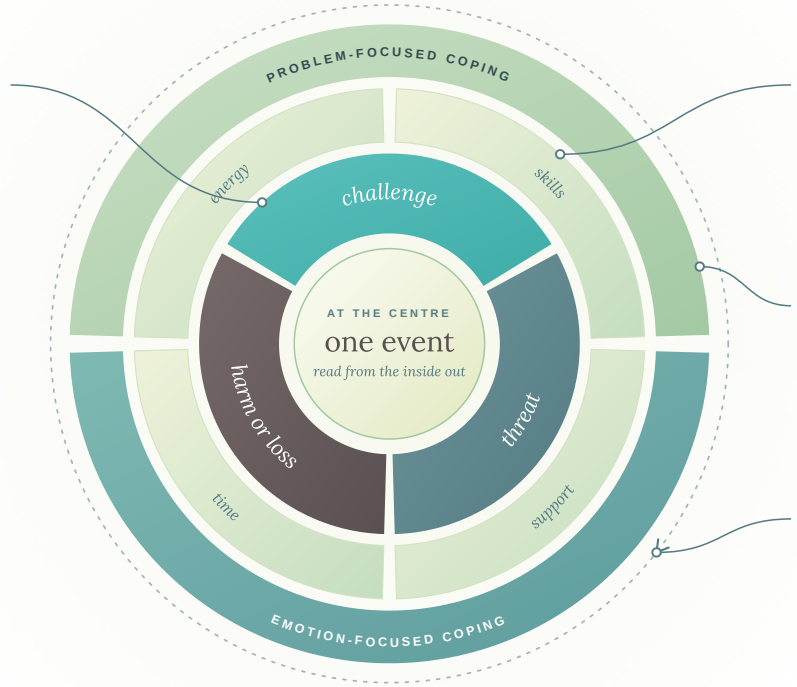
stress arises when demands seem to tax or exceed our resources

PRIMARY APPRAISAL

What's at stake for me?

Is this irrelevant, benign, or stressful? If stressful, it takes one of three shapes.

- **challenge** — a chance to grow or gain. *"I can rise to this."*
- **threat** — harm that may still come. *"What if it goes wrong?"*
- **harm or loss** — damage already done. *"Something has been lost."*



SECONDARY APPRAISAL

What can I do about it?

Weighing options and resources, and how much is open to change.

COPING

Efforts to manage it

Changing the problem, or caring for the feelings. Most situations call for some of both.

REAPPRAISAL

Looking again

New information and the results of coping change how the event is read, so the cycle keeps turning.

> **It isn't only what happens. It's what it means to you, and what you believe you can do about it.**
>
> The same event can be read as a threat by one person and a challenge by another, or by the same person on a different day.

02 Two ways to cope

match the strategy to what can change

CHANGE THE SITUATION

Problem-focused coping

Acting on the source of stress: planning, gathering information, asking for help, solving what can be solved. Often most useful when the situation is open to change.

"I'll email my manager and agree a new deadline."

CARE FOR THE FEELINGS

Emotion-focused coping

Managing the distress itself: seeking comfort, soothing the body, putting things in perspective. Often essential when the situation can't be changed, or not yet.

"I can't fix this tonight, so I'll call a friend and rest."

03 A quick appraisal check

choose one current stressor

How am I reading this?	What resources do I have?	What can I change, and what not?	Looking again…
what feels at stake for me	*skills, support, time, energy*	*problem- or emotion-focused*	*what's true, and what am I missing?*
challenge · threat · harm			

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

In a study of students facing an exam, emotions and coping shifted across the stages from waiting to results, and most students used both kinds of coping rather than one (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Reappraisal is not forced positivity: it keeps what is true while adding the evidence a stressed mind tends to miss.

SOURCES

Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1985). If it changes it must be a process: Study of emotion and coping during three stages of a college examination. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48(1), 150–170.

Kanner, A. D., Coyne, J. C., Schaefer, C., & Lazarus, R. S. (1981). Comparison of two modes of stress measurement: Daily hassles and uplifts versus major life events. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 4(1), 1–39.

Lazarus, R. S. (1966). *Psychological stress and the coping process.* McGraw-Hill.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation.* Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* Springer.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.