

# The age of stress: Science and the search for stability

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Today, many people consider stress to be part of life, yet most of us have little understanding of what the concept means or where it comes from. In his new book *The Age of Stress*, University of Exeter historian Professor Mark Jackson explores the history of scientific studies of stress and how stress became a buzzword of the modern world.

The book reveals how the science of [stress](#) and our experiences of [stressful life events](#) have both been shaped by a wide range of socio-political and cultural, as well as biological, factors. The book provides a history of changing understandings of stress since the late nineteenth century and an outline of its ever-widening application in the diagnosis of problems of individual disease, workloads, social change and international relations.

Professor Jackson said: "Historically, major life changes, such as divorce, economic debt, bereavement, moving house or changing jobs, were thought to generate instability and stress, with the risk of illness and [unhappiness](#). For this reason, stress has been seen as an unavoidable aspect of modern living. At the same time, the term stress operates as a metaphor, capturing the uncertainty and instability of families, communities and political regimes in a troubled world."

Although a link between stress and disease has been recognised for over 150 years, our modern understanding of stress can be traced to the work of the Hungarian scientist Hans Selye, whose theories provide a major focus for the book. During the 1930s and 1940s, Selye began to suggest

that the failure to cope effectively with stress might explain the appearance of many [chronic diseases](#), such as heart disease, cancer, [rheumatism](#) and asthma. Selye's theories were not always accepted by other scientists and clinicians but they rapidly became a popular way of explaining patterns of illness.

Clare Matterson, Director of [Medical Humanities](#) and Engagement at the Wellcome Trust, commented: "Mark's book will offer a rich resource for academics, as well as appealing to a wider audience interested in how our understanding of stress in its scientific and cultural contexts has developed throughout the past century. Tackling the subject from a historical perspective, the book promises fresh insights into something we can all relate to in today's stressful world."

**More information:** Link to the book page for more information:  
[ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199588626.do](http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199588626.do)

Provided by University of Exeter

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