

Study finds when a stressful situation is perceived as a threat, health and well-being suffer

January 30 2024, by Vittoria D'Alessio



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

People who tend to view stressful situations as a threat are more likely to experience health and well-being problems, both mental and physical,

than those who see them as a challenge, according to new research from the University of Bath.

The research, [published in the journal *Stress and Health*](#), explored stress appraisals, health and well-being of 395 sport performers through an online survey. The researchers believe the results of their study apply equally to non-athletes.

"We found a convincing link between mental and physical ill-health, and the way a person typically views [stressful situations](#)," said study co-author Dr. Lee Moore from the Department for Health at Bath. "The more you're able to appraise a stressful situation as a challenge, the more likely you are to report good health and well-being."

The negative health and well-being consequences of repeatedly viewing stressful situations as a threat include a higher risk of mental health problems such as depression, [physical illnesses](#) like colds and the flu, and suboptimal well-being or happiness, probably as result of constantly feeling overwhelmed or from a suppressed immune system.

Dr. Moore, who co-leads the Stress Anxiety Resilience and Thriving (StART) Research Group at the University of Bath, hopes the study's findings will help doctors better identify individuals who are at greater risk of developing stress-related health problems. He believes people who tend to view stressful situations as a threat can be taught coping strategies to help them view such situations more favorably—as a challenge rather than a threat—which could have a positive bearing on their future health and well-being.

The Bath study, which formed part of a research project run by Dr. Ella McLoughlin, a former Ph.D. student at the university, is believed to be the first of its kind to examine in depth the link between the way a person typically appraises stressful situations and health.

Dr. Moore, who supervised the project along with Dr. Rachel Arnold, also from the Department for Health, said, "Researchers have speculated for the past 15 years that people who repeatedly believe they don't have the resources to cope in stressful situations are putting their health at risk, but we believe this is the first time the theory has been properly tested, leading to us finding a link between stress appraisals and health."

There are usually two ways an individual will appraise a stressful situation, Dr. Moore explains: either they will perceive it as a threat that exceeds their ability to cope, resulting in [poor performance](#) and health (for instance, in sport), or they will view it as a challenge they can manage and grow and develop from, culminating in good performance and health.

He said, "Most people will fluctuate in the way they appraise a situation, depending on the details of the specific situation, however, some people are far more likely to appraise all stressful situations as a threat, and this study shows that this tendency is associated with poorer health and well-being."

More information: Ella McLoughlin et al, The tendency to appraise stressful situations as more of a threat is associated with poorer health and well-being, *Stress and Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/smi.3358](https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3358)

Provided by University of Bath

Citation: Study finds when a stressful situation is perceived as a threat, health and well-being suffer (2024, January 30) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-01-stressful-situation-threat-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.