

How do individual differences influence stress levels?

The extent to which stress can affect a person is largely dependant on the type of personality they possess.

▲ An individual with a Type A personality is categorised as having aggressive tendencies combined with being a competitive high achiever with a fixation on time management. It is thought that these types of traits lead to increased stress levels and blood pressure, which in turn increase the possibility of developing coronary heart disease (CHD). This theory was tested by Friedman and Rosenman in the Western Collaborative Group Study (1960). They used around 3000 middle age men that lived in California, and tested them for indicators of CHD before assessing their personality. ▲ After eight years they found that twice as many participants diagnosed as Type A died of cardiovascular trouble than those diagnosed as Type B (personalities lacking in the traits characteristic of Type A). It was also found that Type As are more likely to smoke and had higher blood pressure and cholesterol levels, all of which are causes of cardiovascular problems.

This does show a correlation between this type of personality and stress related death, but not a definite cause and effect. The experiment also does not take into account that many Type As had a family history of cardiovascular problems, which is indicative of genetic condition that would make them more susceptible to heart attacks. ▲ Also when the participants were interviewed the interviewer deliberately tried to evoke Type A behaviour, so there is a possibility that the traits displayed were more of a reaction to that particular context. When follow up experiments were conducted they found no link between Type A behaviours and mortality (Ragland and Brand), and that certain aspects of the personality actually help to protect against stress, such as being in control and commitment.

One personality type that negates the effects of stress is the Hardy personality (Kubasa and Maddi). There are factors to this personality that allow it to do this, and they are that hardy people see themselves as being in control of their lives, they have a sense of purpose and they see challenges as an opportunity rather than a problem. ▲ An experiment into this was conducted by Lifton et al (2006), and the results showed that university students who scored low in hardiness were more likely to drop out than those who had high scores. This does show a relation between hardy personalities and stress levels, as stress would be a common reason for dropping out, but it fails to take into account the many individual differences in students that could cause this.

▲ A problem with the research into the link between personality and stress is that it is often done through questionnaires, which do not always provide reliable answers as people may feel pressured to give the most socially acceptable answer. There is also an alternative explanation to the Hardy personality, as the traits can be explained by negative affectivity (Watson and Clark). People with high negative affectivity show the same characteristics as those with low hardy personality scores, which means people who are considered hardy may just have low negative affectivity.

In conclusion the effects of stress are definitely modified somewhat by personality, as there is a conclusive link between cardiovascular problems and high stress levels and it has been proven that certain types of personality cope better with stress than others.