



Development of General Health Psychology

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Health psychology is the study of psychological and behavioral processes in health, illness, and healthcare. It is concerned with understanding how psychological, behavioral, and cultural factors contribute to physical health and illness. Psychological factors can affect health directly. For example, chronically occurring environmental stressors affecting the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, cumulatively, can harm health. Behavioral factors can also affect a person's health. For example, certain behaviors can, over time, harm or enhance health. Health psychologists take a bio psychosocial approach. In other words, health psychologists understand health to be the product not only of biological processes but also of psychological, behavioral, and social processes.

Psychologists who strive to understand how biological, behavioral, and social factors influence health and illness are called health psychologists. Health psychologists use their knowledge of psychology and health to promote general well-being and understand physical illness. They are specially trained to help people deal with the psychological and emotional aspects of health and illness. Health psychologists work with many different health care professionals (e.g., physicians, dentists, nurses, physician's assistants, dietitians, social workers, pharmacists, physical and occupational therapists, and chaplains) to conduct research and provide clinical assessments and treatment services. Many health psychologists focus on prevention research and interventions designed to promote healthier lifestyles and try to find ways to encourage people to improve their health. For example, they may help people to lose weight or stop smoking. Health psychologists also use their skills to try to improve the healthcare system. For example, they may advise doctors about better ways to communicate with their patients. Health psychologists work in many different settings including the UK's National Health Service (NHS), private practice, universities, communities, schools and organizations. While many health psychologists provide clinical services as part of their duties, others function in non-clinical roles, primarily involving teaching and research. Leading journals include *Health Psychology*, the *Journal of*

Health Psychology, the *British Journal of Health Psychology*, and *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*. Health psychologists can work with people on a one-to-one basis, in groups, as a family, or at a larger population level.

By understanding psychological factors that influence health, and constructively applying that knowledge, health psychologists can improve health by working directly with individual patients or indirectly in large-scale public health programs. In addition, health psychologists can help train other healthcare professionals to apply the knowledge the discipline has generated, when treating patients. Health psychologists work in a variety of settings: alongside other medical professionals in hospitals and clinics, in public health departments working on large-scale behavior change and health promotion programs, and in universities and medical schools where they teach and conduct research.

Although its early beginnings can be traced to the field of clinical psychology, four different divisions within health psychology and one related field, Occupational Health Psychology (OHP), have developed over time. The four divisions include clinical health psychology, public health psychology, community health psychology, and critical health psychology. Professional organizations for the field of health psychology include Division 38 of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Division of Health Psychology of the British Psychological Society (BPS), the European Health Psychology Society, and the College of Health Psychologists of the Australian Psychological Society (APS). Advanced credentialing in the US as a clinical health psychologist is provided through the American Board of Professional Psychology.

Recent advances in psychological, medical, and physiological research have led to a new way of thinking about health and illness. This conceptualization, which has been labeled the bio psychosocial model, views health and illness as the product of a combination of factors including biological characteristics, behavioral factors, and social conditions.

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