

Life changes



Events such as the death of a loved one, divorce or a son or daughter leaving home are often referred to as *critical* life events because they require a major transition in our lives. As such they can be a major source of stress.

Research on life changes

In order to test the idea that life changes are related to stress-related illnesses such as anxiety and depression, Holmes and Rahe (1967) developed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, or SRRS (see right). This contains items which are ranked them in terms of how much readjustment would be needed by the average person. This yields a total number of life change units (LCUs) for an individual over a given period.

When Rahe *et al.* (1970) tested a military version of the SRRS on men aboard three US Navy ships, they found a small but significant positive correlation between the men's LCUs over the previous six months and their illness over the same period. As there are both positive and negative events in the SRRS, this appears to indicate that it is not whether a change is considered negative that is important, but the amount of energy required in order to deal with the event that creates stress, and potentially illness.

Problems with a 'life changes' explanation of stress

Positive and negative events

Research using the SRRS appears to indicate that *any* life-changing event has the potential to damage health because it requires significant readjustment. This suggests that pregnancy and the death of a close friend would have the same impact on the individuals. Some critics argue that only undesired, unscheduled and uncontrolled changes tend to be *really* harmful.

A spurious relationship?

Most studies in this area have yielded correlational data only, failing to demonstrate a *causal* relationship between life events and stress-related illness. It is possible that a third variable affects both, e.g. people with high levels of anxiety report more negative life events *and* are more prone to illness.

Individual differences

There are huge individual differences in the impact of life events such as pregnancy, retirement and even relatively minor events such as Christmas or the annual holiday. Because the impact of these events varies from person to person it becomes hard to predict illness from SRRS scores alone.

Life changes and daily hassles

Major life changes are relatively rare in most people's lives, so relatively minor daily hassles are more likely to be a significant source of stress. DeLongis *e al.* (1988) found a significant relationship between health and daily hassles but not for life events.

SRRS

The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)	
Example items	
Rank	Life Event (LCU)
1	Death of spouse (100)
2	Divorce (73)
4	Jail Term (63)
6	Personal injury or illness (50)
7	Marriage (53)
8	Fired at work (47)
10	Retirement (45)
12	Pregnancy (40)
17	Death of a close friend (37)
22	Change in responsibilities at work (29)
23	Son or daughter leaving home (29)
25	Outstanding personal achievement (28)
27	Begin or end school (26)
28	Change living conditions (25)
30	Trouble with boss (23)
33	Change schools (20)
36	Change in social activities (18)
41	Holiday (13)
42	Christmas (12)
43	Minor violations of the law (11)

HOW SCIENCE WORKS

Validity – there are concerns over the accuracy of people's memories for life events. For example, people who are unwell may feel a need to provide an explanation for their illness and so are more likely to report stressful events that might have caused it.

Reliability – there are also issues over the consistency of retrospective reports, with Rahe (1974) finding that test-retest reliability varies depending on the time interval between testing.

