



# Adjustment

*A Life Process*

## Learning Objectives

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1. Explain what adjustment means in psychology and how it is determined in individuals.
2. Identify the different types of internal and external change that humans experience.
3. Describe various ways that individuals perceive change.
4. Discuss the two traditions in psychology that influence the study of adjustment.
5. Summarize the approach of each of the two parts of this text.

Mark had been looking forward to college for a long time. He remembered sitting in elementary school classes and hearing of the great things that awaited him in college. This was reinforced in high school. While most of his friends were not interested in more education, more time away from making money, more reading and writing and studying, Mark had that desire for more. He was not the traditional college student from the right neighborhood, the right high school, the right family. He worked his way into the opportunity, saving his money and living at home until one day he had enough. There were a few years of work between high school and college, but with loans, scholarships, his savings, and his steady job earnings, he went to college.

The college halls did not look like those in high school. The lawns and buildings were more manicured. Mark found course expectations to be different. In high school, attendance was important. In college, many of his professors did not take attendance. He was expected to be there. If he did not come to class, it was his responsibility to master the materials covered. When he asked the teacher for notes, he received a friendly but adamant no. It was up to him to generate the notes. While the professors were happy to help in many ways, the subtle shift in responsibility from teacher to student was clear. And in response, he found that he liked the responsibility. He was an active partner in his education. No more hiding in the back. No more sneaking out of class. It was his education to seek and to gain.

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Martha assumed she would go to college for as long as she could remember. Her parents were college educated, and their friends were college graduates. She started to collect college banners early in high school (University of Michigan, Yale University, UCLA, University of Hawaii, University of Washington, Arizona State University). She spoke with her parents about what to consider in school selection: size of the student body, geographic location, private or public, and liberal arts-oriented or a research university. By her junior year, she had a list of 20 possibilities and brochures for each school. She visited several campuses at the end of her junior year and into the summer. By the beginning of her senior year, she knew her preferred choices and her second choices. She applied for “early decision” but did not get accepted. When she did get into a university, she did not receive a large financial aid package. And given shifts in her parents’ employment, this meant that she would have to work to help pay for her expenses. While possible, this meant that she would have to struggle to include some of the college extracurricular activities on which she had planned or to forgo them if the time did not allow.

Martha went to college but found the experience to be different from what she expected. There were new friends to make. Classes were held at different times. The professor did not always teach the class session. So Martha found herself having to manage her time, balancing studies, work, and social activities. Because she lived on campus, her parents did not oversee her life. Instead, she had roommates her age with whom to relate. Some were neat and some were not. Differences in lifestyle became apparent very quickly. These things made for more changes in her life, and they were not easy.

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Throughout life, change and adjusting to change go hand in hand. Mark and Martha both experienced a period of **adjustment** to their new college surroundings. The transition from high school to college represents a normal activity within the range of lifetime events. While this change involves moving from one school setting to another, the differences in physical site characteristics, time schedules, expectations, and behavioral requirements (self-monitoring, appropriate pacing, focus, verbal and mathematical fluency, attention to deadlines) can be challenging. Students are able to adjust to these new settings, while others are not. Success or failure is related to a variety of factors, including skills (interpersonal, self-regulatory, task completion, study, social collaboration), motivation (vocational interests), and resources (general knowledge, technology-related knowledge, access to information helpful to career and educational decisions; American Institutes for Research, 2013; Camara, O'Connor, Mattern, & Hanson, 2015).

This chapter defines *adjustment* and examines the variety of ways adjustment can be achieved through a psychological lens. Adjustment assumes that the world is dynamic and ever changing. These changes may occur within ourselves or in the world around us. Therefore, we will explore how change comes to us throughout our lives and how we perceive these changes. The chapter briefly examines the traditions that have influenced considerations of adjustment. Finally, the book's outline and organization are explained, providing a mental map of what is to follow.

## Adjustment

The individual is in a continuous relationship with his or her ever-changing environment. This is a process of seeking balance between internal and external demands, between the needs for continuity and for adaptability to the new, and between the self and others in the larger community. Successful balancing leads to success in adjustment, finding meaning and purpose, learning the necessary skills, and being open to the benefits of compassion and emotion. You will know more about yourself and about others by the end of this book. This information should prove useful in finding balance.

### Defining Adjustment

*Adjustment* is defined as coping with the problems of normal, everyday life (Halonen & Santrock, 1997; Weiten, Dunn, & Yost Hammer, 2015). The Latin roots to the term are *ad jure* or "to bring or make right." Our lives are in continuous change, so our adjusting or making it right is a constant process.

Adjustment is like answering the question, how are you? The answer could be a simple "fine," but it could be a lot more complex. The complete answer depends on the depth and breadth of what is meant. For example, a more complete answer could be this: "I am physically fine for now, but I have not slept well for the past few days, my relationship with my significant other is in a delicate position, my job seems overly demanding, I am wondering about the purpose of my life, and my financial position has just taken a very positive advance in the last few days." All of these responses are legitimate and cover different areas of our life. Table 1.1 lists some of the questions addressed in studying adjustment. The questions have a consistent theme: how well we are doing with living a normal life, experiencing everyday challenges, and doing what most people do.



"How are you?" "Do you want the long answer or the short answer?"

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**Table 1.1** Questions Addressed in Adjustment

What makes us attractive?
Friends or lovers?
Does practice make perfect?
What is really important in life?
What really makes us happy in life?
Money: How is it important? How is it unimportant?
What is the best way to study for a test?
Does helping others help us?

Many students study psychology with the expectation that they can find answers to their questions about themselves and their lives. How do humans function? How do relationships work? What in life really matters? These questions are typical to students of psychology. Adjustment attempts to address some of these questions. We will explore some of these questions in this text.

### Determining Adjustment in Individuals

Given that adjustment has to do with coping with everyday life, how might an adjusted person look? There are a number of ways we might determine an individual is adjusted. Psychology has provided several models for examining this determination.

#### Goodness of Fit

The dictionary definition of *adjust* is to “arrange, compose or harmonize; adapt oneself or get used to changed circumstances” (Adjust, 1993, p. 27). A given situation dictates appropriate and expected behavior. An example using a physical environment is wearing a warm set of clothing in Alaska in the winter. In contrast, a setting like Hawaii or Tahiti would not call for such clothing.

Our behaviors must adapt to our setting or, more specifically, to the environmental conditions. These conditions can be physical, like temperature, or they can be social, like norms and expectations. In a similar way, as clothing choices are dependent on temperature, social behaviors that are acceptable in high school might not be acceptable in college. Examples might include trading notes, skipping class, having meals with teachers, talking with instructors during office hours, volunteering an answer, or initiating a line of questioning in class. Mentioning how much one has been studying may be rewarded in one social **context**, and noting how much one has not been studying may be rewarded in another. This matching context with behaviors is known as **goodness of fit**.

Goodness of fit results when the properties of the environment and its expectations and demands are in accord with the organism’s own capacities, characteristics and styles of behaving. When consonance between organism and environment is present optimal development in a progressive direction is possible. (Chess & Thomas, 1999, p. 3)



Studying adjustment provides an opportunity to reflect on life.

This definition speaks to the importance of context as well as personality in determining successful **pathways**. The fit of a person to his or her environment is an **ecological** way of understanding adjustment. An ecological view examines the relationship of an organism to its environment. The context must be understood as well as the individual (Barker, 1965; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Kelly, 1966, 2006; see Figure 1.1).

Consider how a new student fits into her college setting. She might read differently, dress differently, or come to think differently. In fact, that is what is expected of her. Or consider what happens when two friends attend different colleges. Meeting over Christmas break, they might find that one refers to the *New York Times* and the other the *Wall Street Journal* or their manner of speaking may be affected—one slower and the other faster, one more animated and the other more level. The assumption is that they have been shaped by their environmental context.

Context shapes our personality, our developmental direction, and the manifestation of any genetic predispositions (Chess & Thomas, 1991; Lerner, 1983; Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011). The importance of context will be further discussed in Chapter 3. For now, the individual's work for a good fit between himself or herself and the environment is important to understanding adjustment and the process of adjustment. In our opening stories, both of the college students had to change. Their situations required them to deal with their college circumstances. Some of these were financial, some were social, and some were academic. In both examples, the students had to acquire new behaviors in order to adjust to their new environments—that is, to fit in.

### Lack of Problems

Adjustment is usually assumed when an individual is not experiencing any problems. A lack of problems suggests a level of success in dealing with the environment. Given psychology's historical focus on pathology and problems (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the lack of mental illness symptoms seems to be a good way to define adjustment.

However, psychopathology is more likely to develop at a particular age. "Half of all lifetime cases start by age 14 years and three fourths by age 24 years" (Kessler et al., 2005, p. 593). The average age of onset of depression is the mid-20s, and the average age for generalized anxiety is 30 (Kessler et al., 2005). If problem pathology is related to age, then one is left to wonder about the biological bases to these problems or to the particular demands of the developmental period.

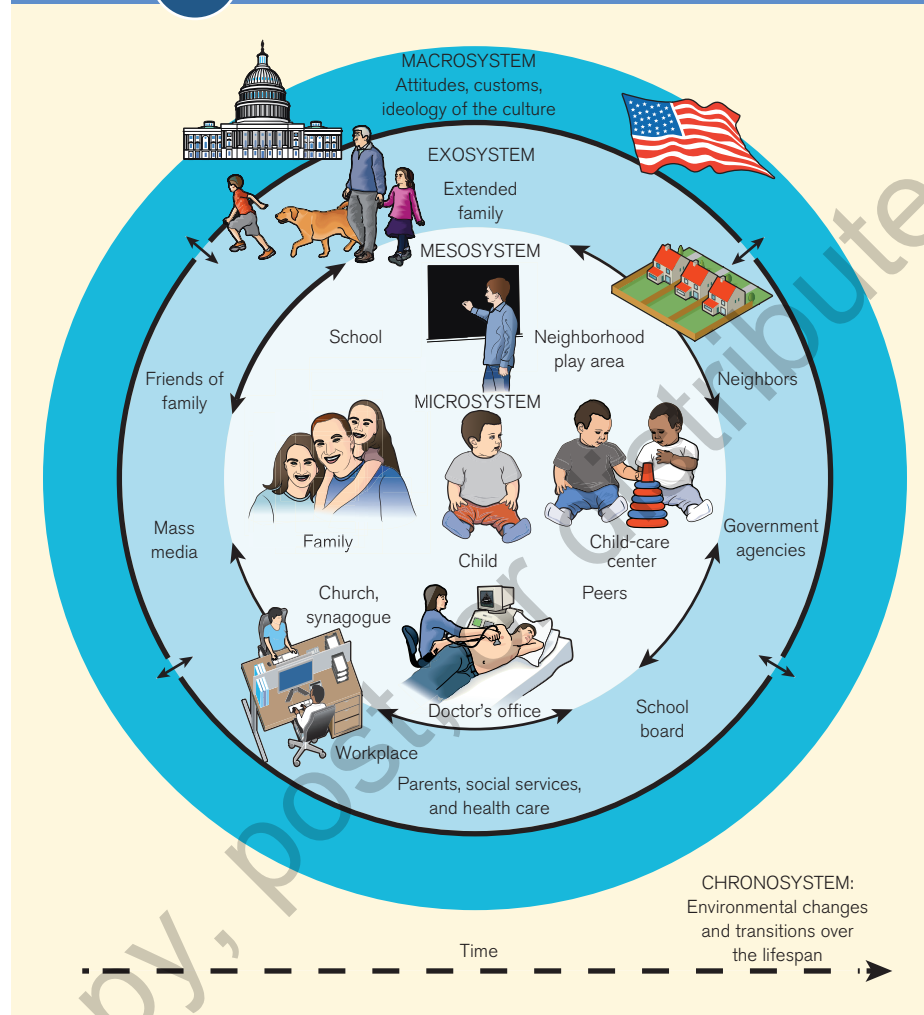
Problems, or the lack thereof, are dependent on multiple factors and are discussed in Chapter 13. The latest research models support a varying mix of environment and genetics to be factors in psychopathology (Gottesman, 2001; Silberg, Maes, & Eaves, 2010; Sue, Sue, & Sue, 2013). An overview of the genetic studies of depression still cites the interaction of biological vulnerabilities with environmental events (Lohoff, 2010), and there is ample research pointing to the social factors also at play in risk of pathology (Hames, Hagan, & Joiner, 2013).

There are critics of this approach to viewing the human experience. In particular, by definition, problems in living are termed *abnormal*—that is, outside the range of normal. This pathologically based definition also ignores the positive aspects of our



What is appropriate for one setting is not for another.

**Figure 1.1** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model



Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006).

lives and the potential for growth and development (Cowen, 1998; Jahoda, 1958; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Adjustment is more than a lack of disease and problems. Though psychology has traditionally focused on the pathological, or the lack of the pathological (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), there is more to life than avoiding problems. The enhancement of life is important, which is what the next definition of adjustment entails.

### Positive Life Experiences

Enjoying the company of friends, feeling satisfied with the achievement of some difficult task, or realizing the solution to a problem are examples of positive life experiences. While psychology has been criticized for focusing on people's problems—as far back as 1958—there has been a coherent scholarly argument for an alternative. In 1958, Marie Jahoda first wrote of **positive mental health**. She noted that the lack of pathology was not health. Pathology has to do with what has gone wrong, while health has to do with what is going right.

Jahoda (1958) reviewed the psychological literature and recommended several ways for defining *mental health*. They included an accurate and empathic perception of

reality; mastery of skills in love, work, and play; a balanced sense of self; self-regulatory skills; and an investment in living, growth, and actualization. We will discuss many of these topics over the course of this text. These topics provide a good summary of adjustment beyond having no problems.

Cowen (1994), many years later, argued for health-promoting processes to help develop the positive mental health attributes defined by Jahoda (1958). Specifically, Cowen described the pathways to psychological well-being. These conditions included having wholesome attachments, being provided with opportunities to learn appropriate skills and competencies for life tasks and for dealing with stressors, and having settings that encouraged adaptation and fostered a sense of empowerment.

Masten and Tellegen (2012) summarized several decades of work on competency-building communities. They believe such communities are positive and encouraging, nurturing, and competent. In these settings, skills in self-control and good decision making are taught and rewarded. The communities promote hope and the development of a sense of a meaningful life. And lastly, in such communities, one would find helpful friends, partners, and social systems (such as schools and police) to aid the development of competencies. The goal is a **competent individual**, one who has “the ability to be effective, given the situation of one’s age and the demands of the setting” (Masten & Coastworth, 1995, p. 724). The competent individual deals with the ever-changing challenges from the environment and continually learns to navigate new territories.

Stepping beyond the traditional, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) believed that psychology usually ignored the positive aspects of our psyche. Much research and theory has focused on problems and pathology and ignored the positive aspects of our experience and lives. A solution to this negative orientation was to attend to our virtues. This shift has brought attention to the admirable qualities in human beings. Table 1.2 lists some of the topics in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2001) and the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Altmaier & Hansen, 2011). As shown in the table, there are an ample number of topics. Adjustment could be defined as the development of such positive aspects to our existence.

This list is not exhaustive, but it is certainly a good set of examples of the admirable qualities that humans can possess. Psychology is now actively investigating various aspects of this positive psychology. There is even a journal devoted specifically to positive psychology (*Journal of Positive Psychology*). This movement might recommend adjustment to look at how we can be positive, well-functioning, and competent and contribute to the growth of ourselves and those around us. So “being all we can be” in the positive sense might be a way of defining *adjustment* that goes beyond the mere lack of problems.

### Mind–Body Health

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the relationship between our psychological well-being and our physical well-being. That leads us to our last way of defining *adjustment*: a holistic definition that argues the integration of mind and body.



Examples of emotional and physical health appear all around us.

**Table 1.2** Positive Psychology Topics

Subjective well-being	Authenticity
Resilience	Humility
Flow	Compassion
Positive affect	Forgiveness
Self-esteem	Gratitude
Emotional intelligence	Love
Creativity	Empathy and altruism
Mindfulness	Morality
Optimism	Social support
Hope	Meaningfulness
Curiosity	Humor
Wisdom	Spirituality

Research in psychology and in medicine has found clear evidence of mind–body interaction. Rather than representing two separate parts of one person, there are demonstrable linkages between the physical and the psychological.

In the early 1900s, Walter Cannon's (1915, 1929) research on stress and the fight-or-flight reaction pointed to the influence of the environmental experience (threat detected) and the physical response (body activates, getting ready for fight or flight). Being startled or scared creates body reactions that accompany action (rapid breathing, heart rate acceleration, activation of sweat glands). A **general adaptation syndrome (GAS)** describes the sequence of physiological arousal in response to an environmental stressor (Selye, 1955, 1956). Given this sequence, if the organism is unsuccessful in dealing with the stressor, the body would become exhausted and vulnerable to illness.

Fagundas and Way (2014) reported on the linkages between early childhood stress and later adult vulnerability to inflammation within our bodies. This vulnerability is believed to relate to illnesses such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, arthritis, and some cancers (Ershler & Keller, 2000).

Epel et al. (2004) found that chronic stress negatively influences the cell's ability to replicate. **Telomeres**, protecting cellular information used in reproduction, were found to be shorter in those suffering chronic stress. This meant that reproduction was less accurate and more distorted over time.

Stress and the mind–body linkages to health will be described in depth in Chapter 6. For the purposes of this definition of adjustment, it may be best to note that prolonged stress decreases our body's ability to fend off infection (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004) and damages the cell's ability to reproduce itself (Epel et al., 2004).

A psychological refinement to stress theory found that the environmental stressor was “in the eye of the beholder”



Stress can make us vulnerable to illness.



and that it was the appraisal of the event that really mattered (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Research since the 1980s has continued to reaffirm the importance of our thoughts in the stress process (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; Lazarus, 1993). What we think (the psychology) impacts how our body reacts. In turn, our body's reactions influence how we think. Pressman, Gallagher, and Lopez (2013) have found this connection between emotion and health in global data. The relationships were even stronger in other, less economically developed parts of the world.

An excellent example of this linkage at a personal level can be found in sleep and memory. Sleep is necessary to clear biochemical elements that build up during a person's awakened state. Without sleep, the waste of the day remains and interferes with memory functions. This is a case of the body influencing the mind (see Adjustment in Practice: Sleep Matters).



## ADJUSTMENT IN PRACTICE

### Sleep Matters

We've been told that getting enough sleep is important. Researchers have started to find the reasons why sleep is a physical necessity. Studies on mice have found that while they slept, the space between cells grew as much as 60% allowing for extraneous particles, such as plaque, to be removed from the intercellular spaces. This allows for better brain functioning during the awake state (Xie et al., 2013). Other work has found sleep deprivation and disruption of our sleep cycles decreased metabolism and the ability to handle sugar, increasing diabetes risk and weight control. This disruption took 9 days to correct metabolically (Buxton et al., 2012).

Memory studies underscored sleep serves to facilitate learning before it occurs and after (Walker, 2009a, 2009b). Before, it allows for better apprehension of information in the memory system (called encoding), and after learning, it helps to consolidate our memories, fitting the events of the day into a meaningful framework.

To get a good night's sleep, experts recommend the following:

1. Build a routine into your sleep habits. Your body can then anticipate sleep to come.
2. Start the process of sleeping into a gradual shift, rather than assuming your body will be at your command to instantly do as you want. So that means less excitement, calming signals, and no bright flashing lights. Ideal temperature seems to be around 60 to 67 degrees.
3. Have a place you can readily associate with sleeping—for most, a bed—so that you are signaling sleep behavior to come. For example, sleeping in a given location helps. Some might always sleep on the couch. They have learned the couch is for sleeping.

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4. Get physical exercise during the day.
5. Treat sleep as a rhythmic activity. Bright lights signal awake, and dim lights and darkness signal sleep. Try to go to sleep at the same time every night.
6. If you can't sleep, go elsewhere until you feel sleepy again. You want to associate bed with sleep or sex, not with work.

Suggestions adapted from National Sleep Foundation, Healthy Sleep Tips (n.d.).

### Reflection Questions

1. When was the last time you had trouble sleeping?
2. Do you remember how you felt the next day? Your thinking? Your mood?
3. How did you feel to get a good night of sleep after that?
4. What were some ways that helped getting to sleep?

In the opposite direction, there are growing numbers of studies showing how we consciously control what were considered **autonomic nervous system** functions (autonomic standing for uncontrolled), which has been demonstrated by decades of research on the practice of biofeedback (see Researching Adjustment: Biofeedback).

## RESEARCHING ADJUSTMENT

### Biofeedback

Paying attention to our body and the signals it gives us allows us to gain some control over those reactions. Kimmel (1974) and later Miller (1978) described the human ability to gain control over visceral body functions and summarized a growing body of findings to support this. Among the classic types of body responses studied were brain waves (Kamiya, 1969), heart rate (Lang, 1974), muscle tension, and skin conductivity (Prokasky & Raskin, 1973).

Using a simple device, people have learned to relax by paying attention to the amount of moisture on their fingertips. This moisture is measured by a small, undetectable electrical current running between two fingers. Since moisture is a better conductor of electricity, a device signals when the electrical current is weaker or stronger. The participant then consciously tries to bring the signal under his or her control. The latest extension of this biofeedback technology is called neurofeedback (Wyckoff & Birbaumer, 2014). Research indicates the possible effective use of

neurofeedback on an issue such as attention deficit disorders (Arns, Heinrich, & Strehl, 2013; Steiner, Frenette, Rene, Brennan, & Perrin, 2014).

Biofeedback gives the individual the power to regulate their very basic physiological reactions. Self-regulation is seen as a part of general self-control, which has been found to be predictive of future health, lack of problems with substance abuse, higher income level, and lower risk of criminal offense (Moffitt et al., 2011). While biofeedback deals with a simple and direct form of self-control, it provides a basis for regulating physical–emotional reactions that are so important in dealing with our environments.

### Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of an example of calming down?
2. What are some advantages of responding in a calm and quiet emotional state?
3. When could this skill be helpful?

The ancient Greeks and Chinese may have had it right when they thought that a healthy mind and a healthy body are intricately related. As the saying goes, “A sound mind in a sound body” (attributed to several authors: Juvenal, Thales of Miletus, or John Locke).

Adjustment is dictated by the way we deal with different situations. It can be determined by goodness of fit between the person and the environment, a lack of psychological problems, a developed and healthy life experience, or a combination of physical and psychological well-being. Now, let us consider the situations to which we must adjust.

## Types of Change

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You can never step into the same river; for new waters are always flowing on to you.

Heraclitus

Change is an inevitable part of life. It occurs personally, throughout our development, and externally, in our surrounding world.

## Change Throughout Human Development

Physical aging brings about many physiological and psychological changes. One need only look at typical growth charts to see one of the indicators of this type of change. No one expects us to be the same in kindergarten and then later in high school. Biologically, we typically grow larger in mass; change in muscular development; experience hormonally driven shifts in physiology; and evolve in terms of personality, behavioral tendencies, motivations, and interests. See *Researching Adjustment: Erikson's Psychosocial Development—College to Midlife*.



## RESEARCHING ADJUSTMENT

### Erikson's Psychosocial Development— College to Midlife

Erik Erikson's theory is one of the most influential theories in the field of human development. His stages of development are included in most introductory psychology textbooks and are a central focus of chapters in . . . human development textbooks. (Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009, p. 13)

Erikson believed the important psychological developments in our life were the result of interactions with our external social world (Erikson, 1950). His theory and research looked at *psychosocial development*. The social environment and the individual's psyche moved the individual in a "natural" progression through eight stages related to life tasks (Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009). Successfully dealing with these life tasks laid the foundation for the tasks to come. Notably, these issues were not left behind when new issues arose but continued to be a part of the person's development (Whitbourne, Sneed, & Sayer, 2009).

A study of psychosocial stage development of college students, conducted with two different groups (starting in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s) and then followed for 30/30+ years found changes in the different psychosocial issues as the group grew older (Whitbourne et al., 2009). Industry (learning how to accomplish work tasks) is usually attributed to elementary school years. Yet industry was found to be an issue at age 17 and continued to grow as an issue until people's late 40s. Intimacy (the establishment of close relationships) is an issue that is typically focused on those in their late teens and early 20s. But intimacy progressed from age 17 into the late 30s and leveled off there. Those who were lower on intimacy in their teens usually accelerated through their 20s and caught up with the others by their 30s. A third area of psychosocial development, called *generativity* (making a contribution to society and preparing the next generation for life), has been attributed to those in their 30s or older. Generativity was found in low levels among the teens and showed a slow, steady increase over time. These findings illustrated the continuing nature of the tasks and issues across the lifetime and that development was not always toward more and greater, such as in the leveling off of intimacy and industry.

While many study Erikson's psychosocial stages as a set of eight age-specific stages, this is not as the theorist intended (Erikson, 1950; Whitbourne et al., 2009). Rather, they are issues identified as important to individuals over the course of their life. These issues don't go away but develop over time in ways that correspond to social pressures.

### Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think industry continues to be important and grow beyond college?
2. Why might it level off?

3. What about intimacy?
4. What does it mean that those low in intimacy catch up with those who are high in intimacy?
5. And why does intimacy level off in people's late 30s?

A map of these developmental trends is described for us by our society and our culture (Lerner, 1991). Though there is wide variation in these trends, there are the typical stages that most people experience during their development. Erik Erikson (1950) provided the classic description of psychosocial development where both psychological needs and social demands resulted in conflicts and subsequent resolution of those conflicts. The resolution of these issues direct how people perceived their world and how they interacted with that world. Following Erikson's organization, our personal qualities of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom are determined by the resolution of these developmental issues (see Table 1.3). It is not so surprising to note that many of these qualities relate to areas identified as strengths and values under positive psychology (see Researching Adjustment: Positive Psychology).

**Table 1.3** Positive Human Qualities From Erikson's Theories of Development

Age	Virtue Resulting From Successful Resolution of Issues
0–2	Hope
2–4	Will
4–5	Purpose
5–12	Sense of competence
12–19	Fidelity
19–39	Love
39–65	Care
65–death	Wisdom

## RESEARCHING ADJUSTMENT

### Positive Psychology

A wave tossed Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (known for his work on the existential psychology and on “flow”) onto the shore of the rocky Kona coast on the Big Island of Hawaii. He was greeted by a sympathetic stranger who

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offered to help him get to the infirmary. This stranger turned out to be Martin Seligman (known for his work on *learned helplessness* and on *optimism*; Csikszentmihalyi, personal communication, 2014). From this harrowing chance meeting grew a series of serious discussions on the state of the field of psychology. Their families combined vacations, offering the men an opportunity to discuss mutual concerns over the direction of the field. What emerged from these conversations was an organized response to psychology's illness and pathology focus.

Rather than studying what is wrong with humans, they proposed a "positive psychology," which emphasized the admirable qualities to our humanity. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) defined *positive psychology* as the "science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits and positive institutions. . . (seeking) to articulate a vision of the good life. . . (and) what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities" (p. 5). This eventually led to a special issue in the journal *American Psychologist*, the field's premier publication. Over the next 16 years, specially targeted journals, research centers, grants, and other institutional agencies have come to support this focus on a positive psychology. Research on hope, gratitude, patience, compassion, and wisdom have grown from this repositioning of psychology. Another way to understand adjustment would be to look at the ways in which we develop and use these positive tendencies. You will see ample references to these topics throughout this text.

### Reflection Questions

1. What do you see as your positive qualities?
2. How do people react to the expression of these qualities?
3. What are some of the positive qualities you appreciate in others?
4. Do these make it easier to live life?

Research findings support the importance of our social interactions from infancy to early adulthood on our adulthood relationships (Englund, Kuo, Puig, & Collins, 2011). The successful engagement of our social environment brings resources to help us in the present and into the future.

While Erikson (1968/1993) emphasized one critical issue for each of his stages, there are many tasks that must be learned and resolved (McCormick, Kuo, & Masten, 2011). Some of these tasks are common to us all (finding food, drink, and shelter) and some are specific to a culture (table manners, polite conversation, and hunting). While the attainment of the skills may not be set to an exact age, the acquisition of these skills is ultimately important to our success in a society. Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, and Specht (2014) presented a list of some of the tasks of adulthood (see Table 1.4).

In both McCormick et al.'s (2011) and Hutteman et al.'s (2014) life tasks, the commonality is the need for the individual to adjust to the social environment and his or her

**Table 1.4** Developmental Tasks of Adulthood

## Early Adulthood (18–30)

## Establishing

- Romantic Relationship (Dating, Decisions on Intimacy, Criteria)
- Family Life (Partnership, Marriage, Tasks, Responsibilities, Children)
- Job Life (Career Choice, Internships, First Jobs)
- Social Life (Friendships, Activities, Interests)

## Middle Adulthood (30–60)

## Maintaining and developing

- Romantic Relationship (Investment of Time and Emotions)
- Family Life (Partnership, Money, Raising Children, Priorities)
- Job Life (Survival, Advancement, Development)
- Social Life (Deepening of Friendships)
- Adjusting to Physical Changes (Flexibility, Weight)

## Old Adulthood (60+)

## Adjusting to further changes in

- Romantic Relationship (Intimacy, Physicality)
- Family Life (Empty Nest, Shift in Family/Work Balance)
- Job Life (New Directions, Retirement)
- Social Life (Deal with New Relationships, Passing of Old Friends)
- Physical Aspects (Changes in Strength and Endurance)

Source: Hutteman et al. (2014).

place in the child to adulthood development. These tasks are continually changing as we continue to age. If these changes in maturation, societal demands, or culture are not successfully dealt with, we will have problems. Notably, the resolution of these task demands may have an even greater impact later in life in what is called the *cascading effect*, in which earlier events impact later events (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Sameroff, 2000). To quote Masten and Cicchetti (2010), “developmental cascading refers to the cumulative consequences for development of the many interactions and transactions occurring in developing systems that result in spreading effects” (p. 491).

## Societal Change

Change occurs externally as well. For example, our social and cultural worlds can shift demographically. In the United States, Asian and Hispanic populations are increasing proportionally more than the rest of the nation (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

Technologically, cell phones and the Internet have changed our way of communicating. When was the last time you spoke to someone on a landline? Do you still take pictures with a camera? What is this tweeting all about? News comes in newspapers less and less and more over the Internet. We'll explore some of these topics in later chapters.



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What societal changes have been most notable over our parents' and grandparents' lifetimes?

What is notable is that change occurs. You might ask your parents or grandparents about the changes they have seen during their lifetimes. You may also note the changes in fashion, music, modes of transportation, and people's attitudes toward sexuality.

## Perceptions of Change

While there are various types of change that occur throughout the life span, there are even more perceptions of change. Some individuals welcome change, while others fight against it. Change has the potential to be stressful, particularly in negative or unplanned situations, but with the right outlook and coping mechanisms, it can be a positive, healthy experience.

### Change Can Be Stressful

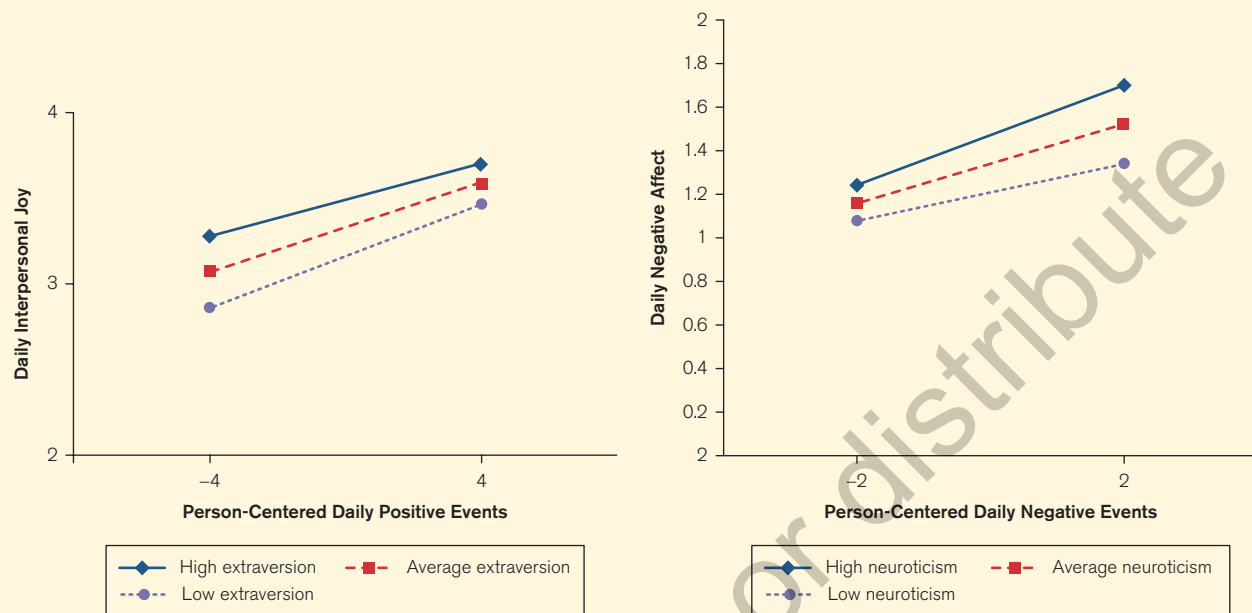
We will describe and discuss change in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 7 when we cover *impermanence* and *stress*, but it is notable that in the early days of human stress event research, change in and of itself was considered stressful (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale presented a list of changes in life that were scored according to their impact on one's life. Included in this list were both positive (winning a large amount of money) and negative (sickness in the family) events. Change was believed to be the variable at work. The more change one experienced, the higher the risk of problems. Therefore, change was not seen as healthy for us. While change brings us challenges, research has shown this negative characterization of change to be too broad.

We will explore in the later chapters the work on stress, of which change is but one part. What is of interest to us at this time is that change need not be stressful. It is determined by the individual's interpretation of change and his or her reactions to it.

### Positive and Negative Change Events

The positive or negative nature of change makes a difference (Block & Zautra, 1981; Zautra, 2003; Zautra, Affleck, Tennen, Reich, & Davis, 2005). They are different experiences and not just the opposite ends of one feeling dimension with positive at one end and negative at the other. Additionally, the positive or negative evaluation of the change is very subjective and individualized. People differ in how they see life events. For example, one person might like a change of residence and another person might not want to move. When physically compromised individuals (suffering from a variety of medical complaints) were asked to rate interpersonal events as positive or negative, the positive



**Figure 1.2** Distributions of Daily Positive Event and Negative Event Scores

The graph on the left shows that more positive events are related to more joy in life, while the graph on the right shows that more negative events are related to more negative affect.

Source: Wiley; *J. Pers.* 2005 Dec; 73(6): 1511–1538. doi: 10.1111/j.0022-3506.2005.00357.x. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2577560/>

events were predictive of well-being, while the negative events were predictive of more physical and mental problems (Parrish, Zautra, & Davis, 2008; see Figure 1.2).

These differential effects for positive and negative events occur in small, everyday events in a normal population as well, where the negative events clearly led to problems, while the positive uplifts had more mixed effects (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Research on the effects of negative events has been extended to a wide range of topics, including workplace health and problems (Silva & Caetano, 2013), sexual functioning and satisfaction (Hamilton & Julian, 2014), and shifts as a function of aging (Aldwin, Jeong, Igarashi, & Spiro, 2014). Our interpretation of such change events affects our health and well-being.

### Planned and Unplanned Change

Researchers in organizational psychology have examined the cognitive and emotional processes in change. In particular, making sense of a change—that is, how people come to understand the change and how it fits with their existing ways of comprehending their world—has been found to be particularly important (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). Some individuals may anticipate the effects of these changes and set up effective coping mechanisms in anticipation of the shifts. This allows them to feel more in control of these events and to make sense of what the events mean.

On the other hand, unplanned changes are, by definition, not anticipated. No forethought can be given to what happens or how to deal with the events as they unfold. Coping must be determined as the changes occur. One can feel out of control and confused by what is happening. In a variation of our considerations of change, we might also consider earlier research on predictable and unpredictable events.

Predictability makes unpleasant events less adverse. When they can be anticipated, the strain of the transition seems to ease (Koolhaas et al., 2011). We can learn new ways to behave, and we can plan. When things are uncertain, we feel anxious (Bordia, Hohman, Jones, & Callan, 2004; Schuler, 1980) because we feel vulnerable and insecure about the situation (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007).

## Comprehensibility of Change

Antonovsky (1987, 1998) reported that a **salutogenic**, or healthy understanding of a situation, helps in dealing with challenging life events. This salutogenic orientation in life is a strong sense of predictability. Antonovsky called this a *sense of coherence*—that is, a feeling that one can comprehend or understand his or her world. While this sense of coherence is explored in detail in the next chapter, it is notable here in determining adjustment. Understanding what is happening buffers the individual from environmental events.

Change may require new ways of understanding our world and coping with it. Yet change is first viewed from our old ways of seeing things, and only gradually do the changes make for new ways of thinking and acting (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Important to this process is how we understand change in the context of growth and development, which is to be expected in terms of individuals as well as organizations (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Sensemaking at the organizational level converges with the research on coherence in one's personal life.

## Traditions Contributing to Adjustment

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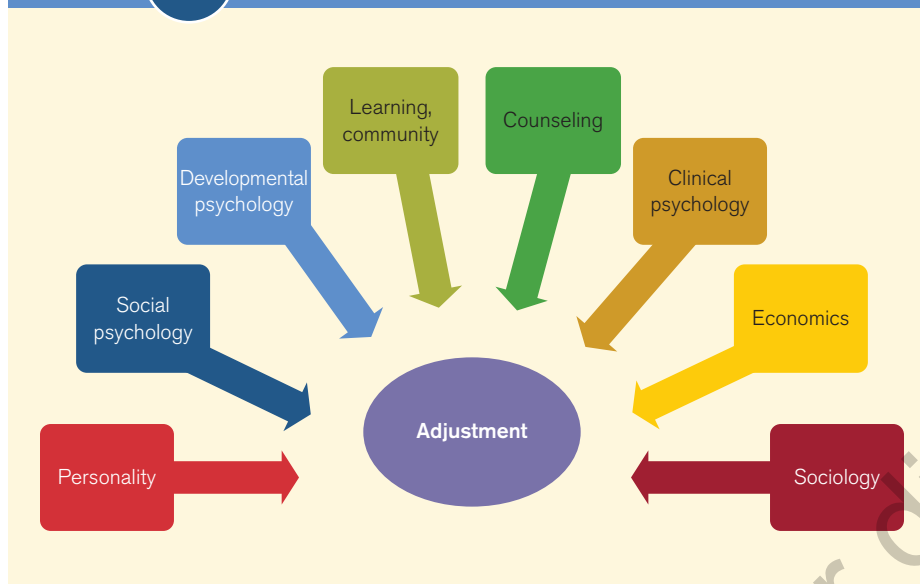
Where does this area called adjustment come from? Adjustment comes from two traditions in psychology: interdisciplinary approaches and **psychoeducation**.

### Interdisciplinary Approaches

The first tradition that contributes to adjustment comes from interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the human experience. Rather than isolated topics in specialty niches, this tradition takes a broad perspective on the factors that affect living. An example comes from Dollard and Miller and their colleagues. Their backgrounds were in sociology (Dollard), laboratory studies of learning (Miller), and psychoanalysis (both). They wrote on aggression (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), human learning (Miller & Dollard, 1941), and personality and psychotherapy (Dollard & Miller, 1950). Another example from the more recent literature is the Western writings on compassion in the early 21st century. The disciplines of psychology, philosophy, religion, economics, neuroscience, history, and Buddhist religious perspectives combined to give us a sense of what Buddhist compassion is (Davidson & Harrington, 2001).

Interdisciplinary perspectives help to explain the complexity of our communities and ourselves (Kelly, 2010) and how to intervene in meaningful and effective ways in those communities (Hall, Feng, Moser, Stokols, & Taylor, 2008; Maton et al., 2006; Stokols, 2006; Stokols, Hall, Taylor, & Moser, 2008). This text draws on research, theory, and practices from personality, social psychology, developmental psychology, learning, community, counseling, and clinical psychology as well as aspects of economics and sociology.

Personality contributes existential psychology and the importance of meaning. Social psychology provides research on conformity and social norms. Developmental psychology brings life tasks at various stages in our life, research on aging, and infancy to seniority. Learning describes how we acquire behaviors, thoughts, and emotions from our interactions with the world. Community psychology provides the importance of understanding contexts. Counseling brings descriptions of everyday challenges and the

**Figure 1.3** Interdisciplinary Approach

understanding of school and education. Clinical psychology adds the work on psychopathology and therapy. Economics brings the work on our understanding of money. And sociology contributes studies of societal level variables' influences on behavior and the experiences of individuals in those societies. These are all to be found in our study of adjustment (see Figure 1.3).

### Psychoeducation

The second tradition from which adjustment grows is psychoeducation. Psychoeducation is the provision of useful psychological information to help people understand themselves and how to live their lives. Understanding human emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and physical reactions can help people better control their own lives. It empowers them.

Psychoeducation is a type of prevention program for psychological problems or a promotion program for healthy living. These kinds of programs have a clear history in psychology (Morgan & Vera, 2011). The roots of prevention and promotion programs can be traced to the psychology of Alfred Adler (Ansbacher, 1990; Watts, 2000) or to the traditions of community psychology (Felner, Jason, Moritsugu, & Farber, 1983; Moritsugu, Vera, Wong, & Duffy, 2013; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). Adjustment is a part of that tradition of empowerment, promotion of health, and prevention of disorders.

### Organization of This Book

This book focuses on adjustment in terms of the normal experiences with which people contend. Life brings change, and with that change comes the need to learn and grow in order to adapt. Lewin (1936/2008) has argued that understanding a person's behavior requires knowledge of both the person and his or her environment—that is, the forces of our inner and our outer realities. Better control of this adjustment process comes through understanding what it is and how our studies of the human experience relate to that adjustment.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, called Perspectives and Processes, examines the various areas that influence how adjustment occurs. These topics deal with the general nature of adjustment and the factors that contribute to adjustment.

**Chapter 1.** This chapter provides an introduction to adjustment and presents the framework of the book. In this chapter, *adjustment* is defined, and change is explained as a part of normal development and growth.

**Chapter 2.** Here the focus is on how finding meaning in life and understanding that life is impermanent is important to living life. The individual's role in these processes is emphasized.

**Chapter 3.** The role of the environment in a person's ability to adjust is examined in this chapter. Situations and settings play an important part in determining how we think, feel, and act. Adjustment, by definition, is an effort to cope with the changes in a person's contexts and environmental demands placed on the individual.

**Chapter 4.** The text examines the role that learning plays in adjustment. The learning process begins with making basic connections between concepts, like honey is sweet, to more complex connections, like on a green light to go, to even more complex things, such as how one successfully argues a point. All of these behaviors are important to adjustment.

**Chapter 5.** This chapter looks at mindfulness and openness to the present as a part of the adjustment process. Meditation is a method to achieve or heighten this mindfulness and openness. The growing body of research on this topic is explored.

**Chapter 6.** Stress is described as a normal process in adaptation and adjustment. Knowing what goes into that process provides possible solutions to stress and its outcomes, including both meditation and exercise.

In the second part, called Applications, the text analyzes adjustment topics in life, including relationships and intimacy. It also includes topics like money, school, work and vocation, and the aging process.

**Chapter 7.** Given humans are social beings, relationships are important. What goes into friendships and how they are maintained? And what of loneliness? These questions are explored in this chapter from a psychological perspective.

**Chapter 8.** Relationships are explored further. What of intimacy? What of sex? What of love? The research on healthy intimate relationships can help to answer these questions. The chapter also addresses intimacy problems and the ending of relationships since these are potential problem areas in life adjustment.

**Chapter 9.** School is a major social institution. This chapter examines what goes into successful school adjustment, including the importance of school experiences from early school up to college. Research has found that early successes are the building blocks for later successes. This chapter answers the question as to what is important and why it is important.

**Chapter 10.** This chapter explores the topic of work and vocation, which are important to being a mature adult in our society. Society assumes adults contribute to the life of the community. Work skills are important to adjustment in this area. Decisions as to why and how we work are important to our sense of well-being.

**Chapter 11.** Money is a resource for accessing many other experiences. Research has demonstrated that a certain amount is necessary to survive. While the addition of more money improves the quality of life, there is a point at which money does not add

to life satisfaction. Here we examine the research on money and its importance in life adjustment and happiness.

**Chapter 12.** Aging is inevitable. Different phases in aging bring about shifts in thinking and behaving. Some of these shifts are socially directed, while some of these are self-defined. These ways of thinking about aging influence the experiences of aging and the decisions one makes in adjustment. This chapter examines these issues and the research that informs our understanding of these issues.

**Chapter 13.** This chapter looks at psychopathology and therapy for the problems that can arise in adjustment. The focus is on the major categories of mental illnesses and their impact on a person's life. The chapter ends with a review of effective treatments for psychological disorders.

**Chapter 14.** The book concludes with an exploration of emergent changes in the world. One of these changes is the demographic shifts in population in the United States. New concepts regarding sexuality and gender call for reconsiderations of their definitions and how they influence our frameworks for dealing with individuals. Finally, the chapter examines how technological advances in communications have changed our understanding of connectedness and the manner in which social relationships are initiated, established, and maintained. These are all seen to be fast-evolving and worldview-shifting developments.

In our daily lives, we face the challenges of dealing with life's tasks. This text provides information from the psychological sciences and allied fields to help understand these tasks. Both practical suggestions and research perspectives are highlighted throughout. The goal is to understand and practice psychology to the betterment of everyday life.

## Conclusion

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Life is dynamic and full of change. Because of this, individuals must learn to adjust or cope with the problems of everyday life. Evidence of adjustment can include goodness of fit, a lack of problems, a positive outlook, and mind–body health. The way that people perceive change can also affect their reactions to a situation or event. If change is interpreted as stressful or negative or it is unanticipated and incomprehensible, it can have an adverse effect on a person's well-being. However, when a change is anticipated or seen as beneficial and explainable, it can be seen in a positive light. Subsequent chapters will examine ways to adjust to life changes in such areas as relationships, school, work, and aging.

## Review Questions

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1. What is adjustment? Explain the complexities that may be involved in determining adjustment.
2. Define *goodness of fit*. How does it relate to the topic of adjustment?
3. What does the positive life experience approach to adjustment contribute to our way of thinking about adjustment and the human experience?
4. Give an example of mind–body health linkage. How have you seen this applied in your life?
5. Discuss two ways to classify and consider change.
6. Describe the various perceptions of change.
7. Think of a major change you experienced in your life. What was your perception of this change? Did it fall into one of the perceptions described in this chapter?

8. What are the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach?
9. Define *psychoeducation*.
10. The end of the chapter describes the rest of the text's chapters. Which two interest you the most? Why?

## Key Terms

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adjustment 5	ecological 7	positive mental health 8
autonomic nervous system 12	general adaptation syndrome (GAS) 10	psychoeducation 20
competent individual 9	goodness of fit 6	salutogenic 20
context 6	pathways 7	telomeres 10



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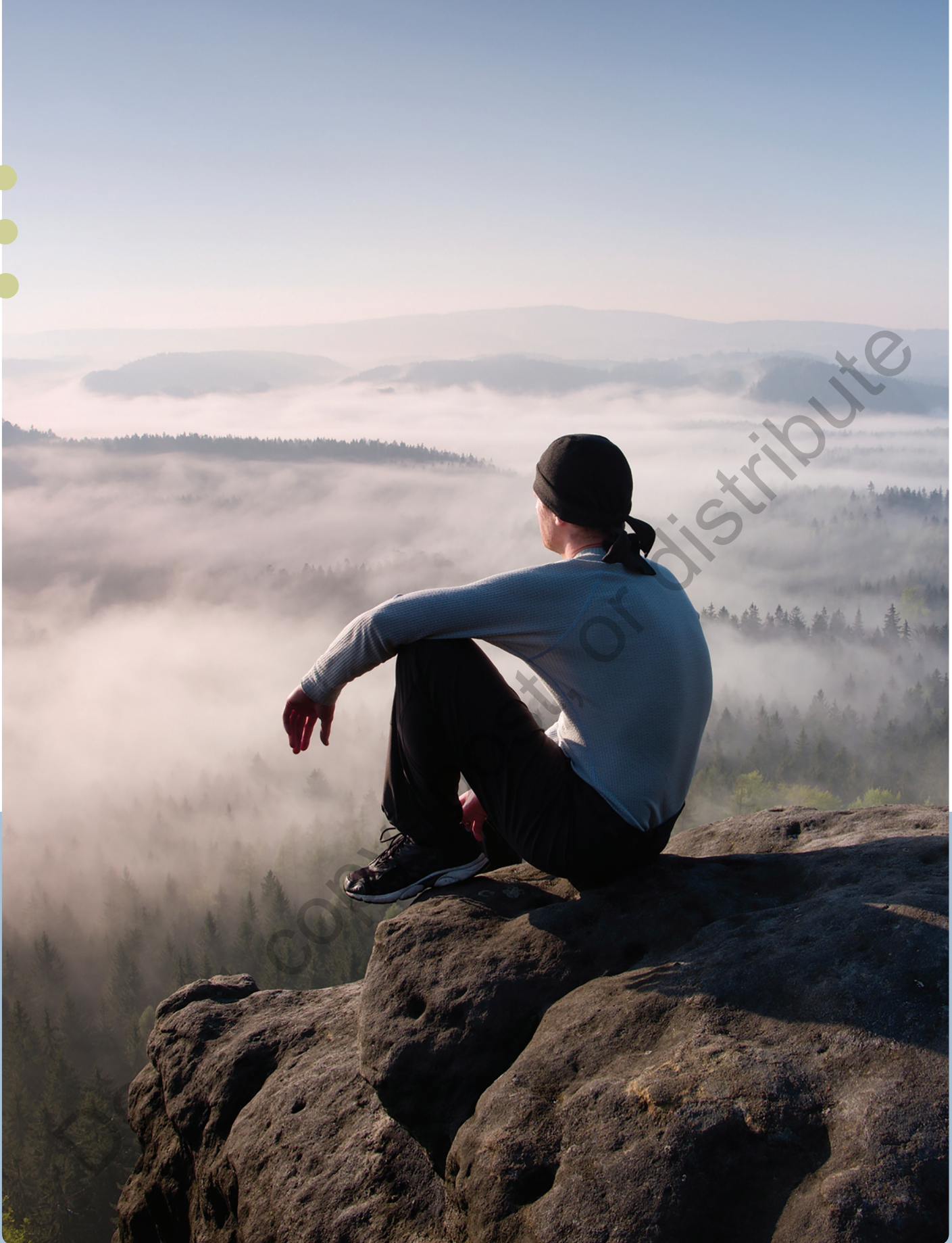
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