

New model of stress and disease provides hope for people with multiple sclerosis

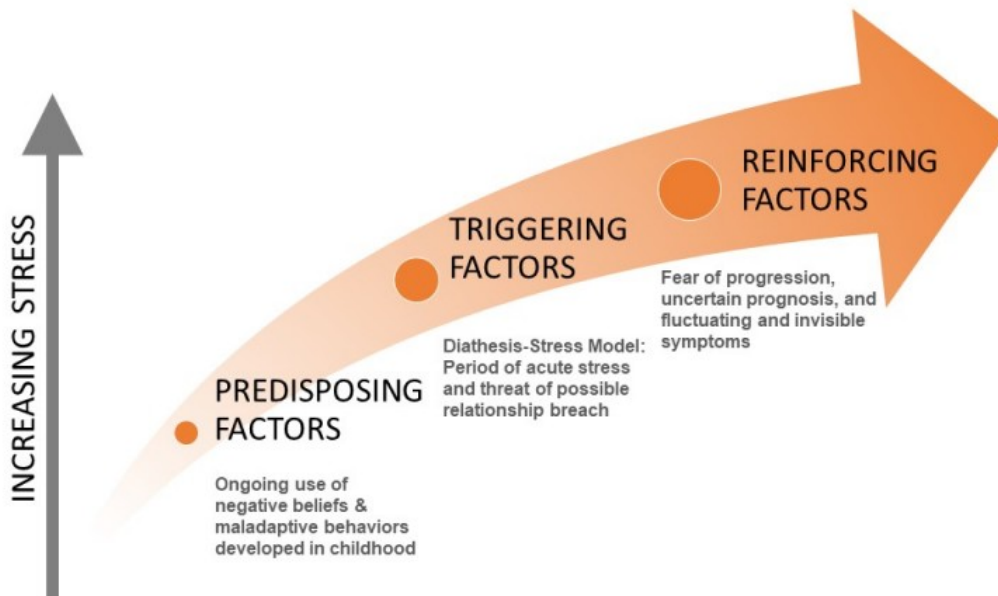


Figure 1. Categories of Stress in People with MS

Encinitas, California Jun 25, 2024 (IssueWire.com) - Stress has long been identified as a possible causal factor for multiple sclerosis (MS). A new article by [Fauver, Clark](#), and [Schwartz](#) published in [Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience](#) describes the Developmental Model of Stress. It provides a research-based framework for understanding the role of beliefs in disease development and treatment. It documents a set of stress-related beliefs and behaviors common to people with MS, and that differ from those found in other diseases. And a pilot study designed to change those beliefs and behaviors showed clinically important improvements among people with MS. The article was partly supported by the [California Institute for Human Science](#).

The mind's influence on stress

The Developmental Model of Stress shows a person's interpretation and response to stressful events is guided by core beliefs about themselves and others that were developed in early childhood. If the core beliefs are negative, they persist through life, shaping how the person experiences and responds to the world around them. This can lead to them experiencing ever higher levels of stress, and increased physical problems from the body's stress response.

Listening to people makes a difference

The problem is these negative core beliefs are mostly unconscious, and therefore difficult to measure. Author Eva M. Clark has spent 10 years working with people with MS and other chronic diseases,

helping them recognize and change these unconscious core beliefs. In doing so, she recognized patterns in the beliefs her clients presented with. The paper includes a content analysis of these unconscious core beliefs, showing those found in people with MS are different from those found in people with other diseases. She also recognized a unique combination of stressful experiences prior to onset.

Developing the model

The types of stress reported by people with MS are not well represented in the medical literature. They are, however, fully described in the psychological literature. Health psychology shows a strong relationship between these kinds of stress and disease development. This paper combines these areas of knowledge into a new framework for understanding stress and disease. It includes three categories of stress factors - Predisposing factors, the negative core beliefs learned in early childhood that lead to ongoing and increasing stress levels; Triggering factors, the acute stresses immediately preceding disease onset; and Reinforcing factors, the ongoing stresses associated with managing a serious disease.

Treating the mind treats the disease

Most mind-body treatments are designed to help people cope with having a serious disease, working only with the third category of stress. The research team did a pilot study testing the effects of a treatment designed to identify and change the problematic beliefs and behaviors in all three of the model's categories. People with MS showed large improvements in both physical and mental health.

Lead author Dr. Michelle Fauver said, "This adds a new dimension to mind-body medicine. It shows that particular patterns of thought may lead to the development of particular diseases, and that changing those patterns of thought may effectively treat the disease."



Media Contact

Michelle Fauver, PhD

michelle_fauver@cihs.edu

701 Garden View Court, Encinitas, CA 92024

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