

Teaching Guide

Chapter 8: Health psychology

Topic map

Section number and name	Learning outcome	Number of hours (suggested)	Relevant material
8.1 Determinants of health	Among the many elements influencing the individual's quality of health are lifestyle, attitudes towards health-related behaviours and stress levels.	7	Figures 8.1–8.7 Activity 8.1 Activity 8.2 Self-assessment questions 8.1
8.2 Health problems: the example of obesity and its prevalence	The causes of health problems, for example obesity, tend to be highly complex with the likelihood of physiological, cognitive and socio-cultural factors all being involved.	7	Figures 8.8–8.10 Activity 8.3
8.3 Health Promotion	Psychology contributes to understanding the problems that people have in making the necessary changes to promote a healthier lifestyle, and helping them to overcome them.	6	Figures 8.11–8.13 Self-assessment questions 8.2 Essay response question at the end of the chapter

8.1 Determinants of health

Overview

The entire chapter considers how psychological research approaches health issues, with the objective of applying the concepts to help individuals of all ages maximise their physical well-being. Students should bear in mind that personal health-related issues are likely to be ethically sensitive, and they should be aware of relevant considerations both in the classroom and in research.

Underlying the first topic, determinants of health, is the principle that thoughts, attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of stress influence personal health to varying degrees, interacting with biological processes as well as lifestyle decisions.

Suggested activities

Possible starter

Open by asking the students this question: 'Does good news assist good health?' Then read Jim's anecdote in Section 8.1.1. Ask the students to volunteer similar experiences. Finally, divide them into pairs or groups to suggest possible explanations. Ensure that the students keep a record of their responses for later use in the homework activity, below.

Main lesson content

- There is a fine line between stress being beneficial or detrimental to health. Present the research of Kiecolt-Glaser et al. (1984) on exam-stressed medical students. Then follow up with a review of the stress levels experienced by care-givers (presented by Kiecolt-Glaser): [WexMed Live](#).
- Recent studies have produced physiological evidence that stress can adversely affect the functioning of the brain and hormones, and also modify genes; for example, see [How stress affects your brain – Madhumita Murgia](#) on the TEDEd website. The 'Dig Deeper' section extends those ideas with a short article on [the physiological effects of chronic stress](#).
- Recent studies have also indicated that a person's attitude to the stress experienced can determine whether it has a positive or negative effect on their health. Kelly McGonigal urges stress to be seen positively in her video, [How to make stress your friend](#) on the TED website, and supports the proposal that reaching out to others can make stress positively beneficial to health.
- For the importance of social support as a stress-coping strategy and thus a health-promoting strategy, present Graber et al. (2015) from the coursebook, and then contrast with the issue of big-city loneliness, using this article and video from *Time* magazine: [5 ways loneliness can hurt your health](#).

Common misunderstandings and misconceptions

It is important that students can distinguish between the stress that positively motivates the individual and is likely to be beneficial to health, and the stress that disturbs physical or mental equilibrium and can negatively affect health.

Supporting your students

This topic is unlikely to create difficulties for students as it is easy to relate to. However, as we have mentioned in other chapters, students may need to be reminded that personal anecdotal information might be of limited value. It can be useful, however, to compare personal experiences with the claims made by the research studies.

Challenging your students

The Critical Thinking activity in the coursebook should enable students to review the Whitehall Studies landmark research into stress in the workplace. They can bring in other studies, including for example Kiecolt-Glaser et al. (1984) on the effect of stress on cortisol levels.

Homework suggestion

- Ask students to review Jim's anecdote in Section 8.1.1 of the coursebook, and the responses that the class gave in the starter activity above: 'Does good news assist good health?' They can then write a new response using the research from the coursebook. Students can compare this later response with their suggestions prior to studying this topic, and reflect on what would support, modify or reject them.

Cross-references with other topics

2.5 Ethical considerations

3.2 The brain and behaviour

3.3 Hormones and their effect on human behaviour

3.4 Genetics and human behaviour

8.2 Health problems: the example of obesity and its prevalence

Overview

Psychologists interact with the health profession in dealing with a wide range of conditions, including addiction, obesity, chronic pain and sexual health. The syllabus approach allows for considering several health-related phenomena, or a single health issue. The coursebook follows the second choice, focusing mostly on obesity.

Please bear in mind that obesity needs very careful handling in the classroom. It may raise deeply sensitive and emotive issues for students who are facing such problems themselves, or know someone else who is dealing with this issue. Do therefore be careful when previewing the recommended video material.

Suggested activities

Possible starter

According to [Medical News Today](#), more than a third of American adults are obese. Figures from the [World Health Organization](#) show that, worldwide, more than one person in every ten is obese, nearly three times the rate of 1975.

Ask the students to brainstorm reasons for the rising world obesity rates. They can classify these reasons under biological, cognitive and socio-cultural factors. The students could then debate what they consider to be the three most significant elements. They should aim to reach a class consensus, record it and be prepared to revisit later in this topic.

It is suggested that the students do not consult the coursebook until they have completed this activity.

Main lesson content

Bear in mind that most of the ideas below contain a range of obesity-reducing initiatives which are relevant to *Section 8.3 Health promotion*.

All of these resources should be discussed in class specifically within the framework of the contribution of health psychology to understanding the factors that encourage obesity.

- Both the prevalence of obesity and the factors encouraging obesity in affluent societies as exemplified by the UK are presented in the [UK obesity](#) documentary on YouTube. This resource also explores various public health initiatives to reduce obesity, without claiming unqualified success.
- The prevalence of obesity is rising in economically less developed countries currently experiencing rapid urbanisation and entry to the middle class, such as India. You could watch videos such as [Inside India's obesity epidemic](#) on the CNN website, or [Obesity silent killer in India](#) on YouTube. This video claims that for cultural reasons, India is in a poorer position to prevent obesity's increasing prevalence than neighbouring China.

- The prevalence of obesity in urbanised China is presented in the coursebook in Li et al. (2015), and it includes grandparents' contribution to the problem. Other aspects of this rapidly growing health issue including China's academic excellence-promoting culture are incorporated in considerable depth in [China: from hunger to obesity in one generation](#), available on YouTube. This presentation continues towards health promotion initiatives, including an ingenious back-door approach when teaching children to speak English.
- The possibility that dieting can result in long-term weight gain rather than the hoped-for weight loss is an especially sensitive issue, and needs to be tackled carefully. The work of Polivy (2001) on unrealistic expectations from dieting could be supplemented with the TED talk by Sandra Aamodt, [Why dieting doesn't usually work](#), which links biological and cognitive factors. The content has attracted criticism as documented under the talk, which you may wish to bring to the attention of the students.

Common misunderstandings and misconceptions

The coursebook distinguishes between being obese and merely overweight; ensure that this difference is clear to the students. Bear in mind that BMI is viewed as a general guide, which can vary individually according to the person's body frame.

Supporting your students

This topic should be easily accessible and engage all students. As mentioned above, some students may need to be reminded that by itself, personal anecdotal information is likely to be of limited value. It can be useful, however, to compare personal experiences with the claims made by the research studies.

Challenging your students

Students select one economically more developed and one economically less developed country. They produce a five-column table, which is headed from left to right: (a) Factors promoting obesity, (b) In [*named developed country*], (c) Justification, (d) In [*named less developed country*], and (e) Justification. For each factor listed in (a), they rate on a 1–3 semantic scale under the country chosen in (b) and (d): 1 = not an important factor, 2 = factor of some importance, 3 = factor of great importance. They justify each award very briefly in columns (c) and (e).

Students should have access to both the coursebook and the recommended videos for this task.

Homework suggestion

- The students revisit the introductory activity and reconsider the class consensus for the three most significant factors encouraging the health problem of obesity. A possible framework would be: 'How far would you support the three factors in the class consensus as the leading promoters of obesity? Include in your response references to one economically more developed and one economically less developed country.' This task gives the students the opportunity to reflect on the starter activity in the light of what they have subsequently learnt in this topic.

Cross-references with other topics

2.5 Ethical considerations

3.4 Genetics and human behaviour

8.3 Health promotion

Overview

This topic follows through the health problems considered in the previous section by viewing psychology's contribution to addressing them, including the application of health promotion models. Though most of the focus is on obesity, the two health promotion models included in the coursebook may be applied to a wide range of health problems, including quitting the use of addictive substances and sexual health.

Suggested activities

Possible starter

Present the video [Food revolutionaries](#) from the TED website, where Jamie Oliver demonstrates the value of a food-centred curriculum at a primary (elementary) school in London, UK, located in a relatively deprived district. Follow up by discussing the potential of a similar programme at your own school, or in a community known to the students. It may also be a good idea to ask whether health promotion budgets should be directed at young people rather than at adults already facing health problems.

Main lesson content

Health promotion has two main aspects: the work of psychology in promoting health, and the effectiveness of various health promotion strategies. Some relevant material on health initiatives in the UK, India and China may be found in the videos suggested in Section 8.2. Students are recommended to review those materials.

- Among the perceived barriers to change in the Health Belief Model (Figure 8.11) is insufficient income to follow a healthy lifestyle. This is also a problem in economically more developed countries, as exemplified by the UK in the *Guardian* article, [Families struggle to eat healthily amid rising food bills and shrinking budgets](#).
- The assorted range of excuses for avoiding health-improving physical exercise is amusingly and poignantly examined by former world aerobics champion Sue Stanley, in the YouTube video, [Physical activity – overcoming barriers](#). This video might elicit knowing glances and more from the students. It can readily be incorporated into both health models presented in the coursebook.
- The idea of educating towards healthy nutrition from an early age as viewed in the starter activity is developed in the US context by Jamie Oliver. He demonstrates that such food is fun to work with, easy to prepare, tasty and economic, in the TED talk, [Teach every child about food](#).
- The anti-smoking Truth campaign covered in Section 8.3.2 of the coursebook, investigated by Schum and Gold (2007), claims that smoking is promoted by personal example. This YouTube video, [Truth campaign calls out celebrity smokers](#), gives the opportunity to apply social learning theory to the health promotion framework.
- Initiatives to address the high obesity rates in the Cook Islands in the Western Pacific, as presented in the Newsflash in Section 8.2 of the coursebook, can be followed up in this YouTube video: [Trouble in paradise – Nutritional challenges in the Cook Islands](#).

Common misunderstandings and misconceptions

It is important to remind students that health promotion should be framed within psychological theory, rather than a business and management or sports science standpoint.

Supporting your students

Once more, as in previous topics, the content should be easily accessible and engage all students. Again, some students may need to be reminded that by itself, personal anecdotal information is likely to be of limited value. It can be useful, however, to compare personal experiences with the claims made by the research studies.

Challenging your students

The Research Idea in Section 8.3.2 of the coursebook on studying a child-obesity prevention programme should enable students to apply the range of ideas contained both in the coursebook and the materials included in this guide. Alternatively, they could make use of those sources to design a suitable health-promoting programme in their own community, on the basis of the resources locally available.

Homework suggestion

- Students could write a critical analysis of the Activity component of their IB CAS (Creativity, Activity and Service) programme. They should describe the content as they experienced it, assess how effective it has been in achieving the objective of maximum health promotion within the allotted time and, as health psychologists, suggest ways that it can be improved to that end.

Cross-references with other topics

2.5 Ethical considerations

References

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Li, B., Adab, P., & Cheng, K. K. (2015). The role of grandparents in childhood obesity in China – evidence from a mixed methods study. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*; 12: 91.

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