

Theoretical article

CONCEPT OF OPTIMAL HEALTH BY O'DONNELL AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR COPING WITH STRESS IN ADOLESCENTS

Chief Assis. Tsvetelina Hadzhieva, PhD

Department of Psychology, SWU "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria.

e-mail: cveti_hadjieva@swu.bg

Abstract:

This paper attempts to examine in greater depth the influence of stress on the psycho-emotional state of adolescents and how the coping strategies developed to manage stress facilitate their overall psycho-physiological well-being. The focus of the article is on O'Donnell's concept of optimal health as an effective approach to stress management in youth. The concept presents an integrated whole, viewing the individual as a single entity and emphasizing the interdependence of five key factors for establishing optimal health in adolescents. O'Donnell highlights that physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health operate within a dynamic balance, creating objective conditions for achieving optimal health among young people.

Keywords: optimal health, physical health, stress, psycho-social factors, adolescents.

Adolescence is a dynamic and multifaceted transitional period from childhood to maturity. The issue of adolescence remains relevant in every era because it is invariably marked by changes characteristic of this stage, which directly and indirectly affect the psycho-physiological development of young people. Regardless of the context, adolescence remains one of the most critical and often controversial phases of personal development. It is a period of searching, experimenting, confusion, proving oneself, and growing, characterized by various upheavals until the young individual finds their identity. It is no coincidence that the problems faced by adolescents have their own objective difficulty and seriousness that should not be neglected or underestimated.

The adolescent period is a perceptible and active transformative phase of development, both physically and mentally. During this time, young people face many challenges, including physiological stress associated with hormonal changes and sexual maturation. It is a period during which adolescents undergo a unique metamorphosis, forming the foundation for their personal development.

There are several typologies of adolescence based on different factors, with no significant discrepancies. This article focuses on the period from the onset of sexual maturity (around 10–11 years old) to the attainment of legal adulthood (18–19 years old) (Erikson, E., 1996).

Adolescence, in some sense, is a difficult process of maturation in which the young person, besides seeking their own identity, creates their social circle with which they identify and affirm themselves, while also setting their own goals, thus reaching the first major milestone of their development (Imani, A., Meknatkhah, S., Fakhraei, N., Pooyan, S., & Tofigh, N., 2019).

It is a multifaceted dimension through which the young individual traverses various upheavals, attempting to achieve independence, establish themselves within their social environment, assert their authority, and go through disappointments and rebellions. All of this is inevitably marked by the pursuit of identity. For this reason, this period possesses its own sensitivity and specificity, which require support and understanding from adults. The adolescent does not need to be “restrained,” but rather to be placed in an environment where they are convinced that they are understood, supported, and respected. The more misunderstanding and lack of recognition directed at adolescents—due to their contradictions and difficulties—the greater the disconnection from significant adults. This, in turn, leads to increased tension, which naturally escalates into frequent verbal conflicts that negatively impact the psycho-emotional state of the adolescent (Dollto, F., 2006; Dollto, F., 2021; Korcak, J., 2021).

Today, the concept of stress has acquired both commercial significance and widespread prevalence, but also raised serious concerns regarding the overall psycho-physiological health of individuals, serving as a predictor of numerous physical and mental illnesses. Its negative effects are even more alarming now, as increasingly more researchers focus on stress in adolescents, indicating that long-term exposure to stress can seriously disrupt nervous system functioning and significantly increase the risk of developing mental disorders (McEwen, B. S., 2007; Zimmerman, M. A., 2013; Gunnar, M., & Quevedo, K., 2007). Stress regulation, as a means of cultivating emotional resilience, serves as a protective factor that can improve psychological health in adolescents. Emotional support and conflict resolution skills are crucial protective factors against the negative impact of stress (Gunnar, M., & Quevedo, K., 2007; Zimmerman, M. A., 2013).

Stress can be defined as a critical factor that may adversely affect overall health status. The spectrum of health consequences that stress can provoke includes cardiovascular diseases, metabolic disturbances, diabetes, and others (Mousavi, M. S., Riazi, G., Imani, A., Meknatkhah, S., Fakhraei, N., Pooyan Pooyan, S., & Tofigh, N., 2019; Bomhof-Roordink et al., 2015). Recent comparative studies on the long-term effects of stressors in adolescence (Barha, Brummelte, Lieblich, & Galea, 2011; Okuda, A., Horii-Hayashi, N., Sasagawa, T., Shimizu, et al., 2017) indicate consequences of various types of stressors on behavioral and physiological activity (Isgor, Kabbaj, Akil, & Watson, 2004; Yahfoufi, N., Matar, C., & Ismail, N., 2020). It has been established that the brain recognizes physical and psychological stressors through the activation of different neural networks, which can lead to specific health problems (Dayas, Buller, Crane, Xu, & Day, 2001; Godoy, L. D., Rossignoli, M. T., et al., 2018; Gergov, T., 2022).

CONCEPT OF OPTIMAL HEALTH BY O'DONNELL AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR COPING WITH STRESS IN ADOLESCENTS

Despite the negative consequences of stress on psycho-physiological health, strategies have been developed to mitigate its impact. Building healthy habits and consolidating them into the overall behavior of adolescents forms the foundation for establishing optimal physical and mental health. Such a paradigm for optimal health in adolescents was first developed by O'Donnell as early as 1986, and subsequently been expanded and enriched by the *American Journal of Health Promotion*. This concept considers the dynamic balance of physical, mental, social, and emotional health simultaneously. According to the researcher, this collaboration underpins the achievement and consolidation of optimal health as a predictor of emotional resilience and coping skills in conflict situations. The author emphasizes that health should not be viewed unilaterally but as a complex of different well-being characteristics (well-being) that are interconnected and frequently change under the influence of various factors.

Stress, by its nature, disrupts the temporary or lasting balance between external influences and coping resources—both in adults and adolescents—and can consequently lead to health impairments in various aspects. Therefore, at the core of O'Donnell's holistic approach as a tool for stress management in young people is the development and reinforcement of resilience skills against stressors. This also aims to prevent the onset of chronic health problems.

O'Donnell describes “optimal health” as a dynamic balance among physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health. He delineates these dimensions as follows:

1. **Physical health**, determining the state of the body;
2. **Emotional health**, related to the ability to cope with and avoid stress and other emotional states;
3. **Social health**, the ability to create and maintain healthy and effective relationships with family, friends, and peers;
4. **Spiritual health**, linked to goal setting, love, hope, and peace;
5. **Intellectual health**, expressed in skills for academic achievements, career development, social interactions, talent development, and cultural pursuits (O'Donnell, M. P., 2008; O'Donnell, M. P., 2009).

In his concept, O'Donnell highlights that the most significant postulate is that the physical and social environment are the strongest predictors of mental health in youths, which in turn represents the greatest opportunity for health promotion. The author advocates the shaping influence of the social environment on the value orientation, goals, and priorities of adolescents, which, together with the family environment, form the main developmental stage of their personality (Walfish, S., McAlister, B., O'Donnell, P., & Lambert, M., 2012).

Thus, in his holistic paradigm, O'Donnell emphasizes the necessity of a fundamental understanding of the health challenges faced by contemporary adolescents, as well as the impact of stress, because health itself is not merely the absence of disease but a complex of physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Based on this, the main postulates in the author's concept for optimal health in adolescents are:

- Development of socio-emotional skills for making rational decisions to improve personal well-being;
- Building and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships as a prerequisite for proactive growth;
- Integrating health into education and living environments, encouraging the establishment of sustainable healthy habits;
- Establishing a long-term perspective on well-being.

Similar health models have been created by other authors, and despite the different times in which they were developed, they do not significantly differ in essential parameters (Jessor, R., 1991; Embry, D., 2011; Lenske, G., et al., 2016). On the contrary, they even converge around the common idea that health is a complex, integrated whole, whose main components are physical, psychological, and social factors for achieving psycho-physiological health and well-being. All these models emphasize the importance of developing healthy lifestyle habits from early childhood as a prerequisite for a higher quality of life.

References:

Barha, C. K., Brummelte, S., Lieblich, S. E., & Galea, L. A. (2011). Chronic restraint stress in adolescence differentially influences hypothalamic- pituitary- adrenal axis function and adult hippocampal neurogenesis in male and female rats. *Hippocampus*, 21(11), 1216-1227.

Bomhof-Roordink, H., Seldenrijk, A., van Hout, H. P., van Marwijk, H. W., Diamant, M., & Penninx, B. W. (2015). Associations between life stress and subclinical cardiovascular disease are partly mediated by depressive and anxiety symptoms. *Journal of psychosomatic research*, 78(4), 332-339.

Dayas, C. V., Buller, K. M., Crane, J. W., Xu, Y., & Day, T. A. (2001). Stressor categorization: acute physical and psychological stressors elicit distinctive recruitment patterns in the amygdala and in medullary noradrenergic cell groups. *European Journal of Neuroscience*, 14(7), 1143-1152.

Embry, D. D. (2011). Behavioral vaccines and evidence-based kernels: nonpharmaceutical approaches for the prevention of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. *Psychiatric Clinics*, 34(1), 1-34.

Godoy, L. D., Rossignoli, M. T., Delfino-Pereira, P., Garcia-Cairasco, N., & de Lima Umeoka, E. H. (2018). A comprehensive overview on stress neurobiology: basic concepts and clinical implications. *Frontiers in behavioral neuroscience*, 12, 127.

Gunnar, M., & Quevedo, K. (2007). The neurobiology of stress and development. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.*, 58(1), 145-173.

Isgor, C., Kabbaj, M., Akil, H., & Watson, S. J. (2004). Delayed effects of chronic variable stress during peripubertal- juvenile period on hippocampal morphology and on cognitive and stress axis functions in rats. *Hippocampus*, 14(5), 636-648.

CONCEPT OF OPTIMAL HEALTH BY O'DONNELL AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR COPING WITH STRESS IN ADOLESCENTS

Lenske, G., Wagner, W., Wirth, J., Thillmann, H., Cauet, E., Liepertz, S., & Leutner, D. (2016). The importance of pedagogical knowledge for classroom management and for students' achievement. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 19, 211-233.

McEwen, B. S. (2007). Physiology and neurobiology of stress and adaptation: central role of the brain. *Physiological reviews*, 87(3), 873-904.

Mousavi, M. S., Riazi, G., Imani, A., Meknatkhah, S., Fakhraei, N., Pooyan, S., & Tofigh, N. (2019). Comparative evaluation of adolescent repeated psychological or physical stress effects on adult cognitive performance, oxidative stress, and heart rate in female rats. *Stress*, 22(1), 123-132.

O'Donnell, M. P. (2008). The face of wellness: Aspirational vision of health, renewing health behavior change process and balanced portfolio approach to planning change strategies. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 23(2), 1-13.

O'Donnell, M. P. (2009). Definition of health promotion 2.0: embracing passion, enhancing motivation, recognizing dynamic balance, and creating opportunities. *American journal of health promotion*, 24(1), iv-iv.

Okuda, A., Horii-Hayashi, N., Sasagawa, T., Shimizu, T., Shigematsu, H., Iwata, E., ..& Tanaka, Y. (2017). Bone marrow stromal cell sheets may promote axonal regeneration and functional recovery with suppression of glial scar formation after spinal cord transection injury in rats. *Journal of Neurosurgery: Spine*, 26(3), 388-395.

RICHARD JESSOR, P. D. (1991). Risk behavior in adolescence: A psychosocial framework for understanding and action. *JOURNAL, OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH*, 12, 597-605.

Walfish, S., McAlister, B., O'Donnell, P., & Lambert, M. J. (2012). An investigation of self-assessment bias in mental health providers. *Psychological reports*, 110(2), 639-644.

Yahfoufi, N., Matar, C., & Ismail, N. (2020). Adolescence and aging: Impact of adolescence inflammatory stress and microbiota alterations on brain development, aging, and neurodegeneration. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series A*, 75(7), 1251-1257.

Zimmerman, M. A., Stoddard, S. A., Eisman, A. B., Caldwell, C. H., Aiyer, S. M., & Miller, A. (2013). Adolescent resilience: Promotive factors that inform prevention. *Child development perspectives*, 7(4), 215-220.

Dolto, F. (2006). Everything is language. /Vsichko e ezik/. Sofia: Kolibri.

Dolto, F. (2021). The Cause of the Adolescent. Let's Respect Their Freedom and Differences. /Kauzata na unoshata. Da uvajavame swobodata I razlichiqta im/. Sofia: Kolibri.

Gergov, T. (2022). Resilience and self-esteem in adulthood. /Rezilians I samoocenka prez zrelostta/. Blagoevgrad: UZU "Neofit Rilski".

Erikson, E. (1996). Identity: Youth and Crisis. /Identichnost: mladost I kriza. Sofia: Nauka I izkustvo.

Korchak, Ia. (2021). /Izprani sychineniq/. Selected works. Sofia: SONM.