

6 Personal factors and coping

The first considerations in this model are personal factors which influence the experience of stress (see Figure 6). In considering our ability to cope with pressure we will start by looking at (appraising) how we feel about ourselves.

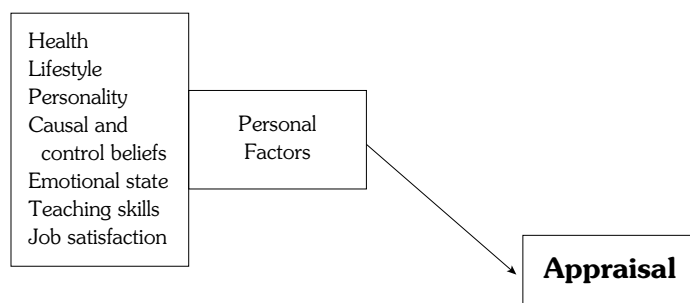


Figure 6: Part of Model 2 showing personal factors

Health

The following questions ask you to take time to examine your health over the last six or twelve months:

- How do you feel in terms of your general health?
- Have you been unwell or do you consider your health has declined recently?
- Have you found it difficult to 'shake off' a virus, cold, or flu-like symptoms? If so, what have you tried to do about it?
- Have you visited the doctor recently or have you felt you should but did not think you had the time to do so?
- Have any of these changes coincided with pressure or change at home or in work?

Answers to these questions offer insight into difficulties you have had coping with pressures you would normally feel comfortable with. You might enquire a little further by asking a friend or family member if they feel you have seemed to have been experiencing a decline in your coping capacities.

Lifestyle

It is important to recognise the importance our lifestyle has on our ability to cope with pressure, particularly if we have made recent changes to it. Frequently, those parts of our life which provide a balance to work activities become eroded because of perceived additional demands from work. Similarly we can find ourselves over-doing or under-doing an activity which has a direct relationship to health or physical image. Drinking, smoking, exercise and diet are obvious factors here.

Type A and Type B personalities

Which aspects most reflect your regular behaviours? Tick the boxes which best describe you. Which personality type is most like you? What are you going to do about it?

Some behaviours associated with **Type A personality**:

- An unremitting attempt to accomplish more and more things in less and less time
- Lack of self-esteem, ie expectations of self in excess of achievements
- Not merely a desire to win but to dominate
- Free-floating hostility – often experienced as a more or less permanent state of irritation
- A speed-up of almost all daily activities and constant attempts to do or think more than one thing at a time
- Polyphasic thinking and performance, ie undertaking multiple tasks
- A drive towards self-destruction
- An inability to relax

Some behaviours associated with **Type B personality**:

- Take the long view
- Do not feel the need to have to rush to complete every task on a deadline basis
- Indulge in periods of reflection
- Do not engage in a ceaseless struggle to bolster their self-esteem by finding fault with others
- Rarely feel tense or induce tension in others
- Understand that affection must be expressed
- Can maintain focus on one problem at a time
- Feel they have time to relax and switch off from work

7 Situational factors and coping

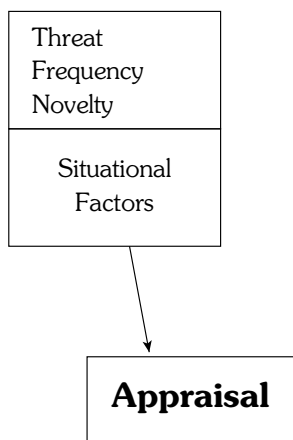


Figure 8: Part of Model 2 showing situational factors

Threat

We now turn to consider the second component of Model 2 by looking at what we have called **situational factors** (see Figure 8). These relate to our perceptions of the stressful event itself. What is it about the incident which makes it more or less stressful, and is this consistent over time? Stress represents a threat to the *self*. The self being a range of feelings and beliefs which we hold about ourselves in relation to others. We all have an image of ourselves. As teachers we will hold a personal and a professional image of ourselves. These ratings of ourselves can be similar or different. We may, for instance, see ourselves as confident and competent when standing in front of a group of pupils and teaching a subject we know well. At the same time we may not feel so confident about our interactions with adults in social settings. It is possible for teachers to feel self-assured about teaching older pupils but cringe at the thought of 'teaching' colleagues at an INSET session. Other teachers will feel happy about working with colleagues but uncertain about teaching pupils of a particular age or level of ability.

These feelings can be understood in relation to the factors discussed in Section 6 *Personal factors and coping* (page 45). In response to these feelings of being threatened we can select from a range of responses. It is clear that under pressure it is important to cope as well as possible and sometimes '*pretending everything's OK*' (denying reality) may be the best achievable response at the time. Some situations are so bad that survival depends on being able to ignore reality. However, using this type of coping as a long-term strategy is likely to have detrimental effects.

Group support for problem solving

Structured groups are a method of enabling you to become actively involved and committed to becoming your own agent of change. Being in control or being able to change events in itself can help in the re-appraisal of potential stressors as being less stressful than previously thought. The main purpose is to enable you to develop survival and longer-term problem solving skills in co-operation with others by engaging in problem solving. Staff are required to work both individually and in groups to define, evaluate problems and suggest possible solutions. The activities are best managed by a group leader, not necessarily a senior manager, to stimulate and co-ordinate the activities. The group **must** be non-judgmental.

Stage 1

Each group member should complete the first two columns of the chart *Group support for problem solving* (**Form 14**, page 76). In column 1 the sources of stress listed should be the five most pressing concerns related to work for each individual. In column 2 the emotional reaction you experience in response to each source should also be noted. For example:

Source of stress	Emotional reaction	Coping strategy	Time
Colleague observes my mismanagement of a pupil	Anxiety, fear, shame, feelings of incompetence		

Stage 2

You next divide into small groups of three to five. Together, each group will construct strategies for coping with the problems identified by each member. The group suggests and the individual chooses the most appropriate and manageable for them. This is best undertaken by “brainstorming” where all members can suggest the wildest ways of coping for discussion by the group without fear of criticism. The coping strategy is selected and recorded by the participant in column 3.

Stage 3

The time column of the chart is crucial to the evaluation of the coping strategies. Each member should decide a date by which the strategies are tested out.

Stage 4

Each member keeps a diary of the effects of their new strategies. Members should also note other sources of stress which are likely to impinge upon their appraisal of their performance in school. For example, a severe cold, family problems or financial pressure may all affect work. At the next meeting of the group these can be discussed in full and changed in the light of experience. The group can meet at intervals which are best suited to the needs of members.