

# Teaching the Psychology of Adjustment

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Happiness comes from... some curious adjustment to life.

-- Hugh Walpole

How do people cope with the psychological challenges of daily living? How can students learn to recognize adjustment issues in their lives and to appropriately apply psychological concepts to them? Will their understanding lead to better coping and even behavior change? Recognition and application of psychological constructs are at the heart of the Psychology of Adjustment course, which can serve as a solid applied offering within the undergraduate curriculum. Because of the intuitive appeal of applied psychology, this course offers the perfect opportunity to engage students through course content.

Broadly defined, adjustment refers to the psychological processes through which human beings manage or cope with the demands, challenges, and frustrations of everyday life. Although the Psychology of Adjustment course covers some of the same topics that are associated with Introductory Psychology (e.g., personality, social psychology, gender, abnormal psychology), the main focus is on topics that relate to navigating modern life effectively, such as stress, coping processes, interpersonal communication, friendship and love, marriage and intimacy, expressing sexuality, careers and work, and physical health. The nascent positive psychology movement, too, is relevant here, as people's strengths can regulate their well-being in the face of change, opportunity, or upset (see Dunn, Beard, & Fisher, this volume). The relevance of this course is easy for students to see and, as a result, initial student motivation to explore the material tends to be high.

The Adjustment course has been part of the curriculum in psychology since at least the 1940s when a number of popular texts began to appear (such as Klein, 1944; McKinney, 1941; Munn, 1946). The course appears to have peaked in popularity in the 1970s, when Lux and Daniel (1978) reported that it was the tenth most widely listed course in a survey of psychology departments. More recent data from Perlman and McCann (1999) suggest that its popularity has declined, although they reported that it

was still among the 30 most frequently listed psychology courses across all types of institutions, and the sixth most commonly listed course at two-year colleges. The decline of the Adjustment course seems perplexing in light of frequent, high-profile pleas for psychologists to emphasize the practical relevance of their discipline (Fowler, 1999; Klatzky, 2009; Miller, 1969; Zimbardo, 2004)

Although specific titles for psychology courses often vary across colleges, this seems to be especially true for the Adjustment course. In its earliest incarnations it was often titled Mental Hygiene. Other popular titles have included Personal Development, Personal Growth, Human Relations, Practical Psychology, Personal Adjustment, Personality and Adjustment, and Applied Psychology. This variation in course titles may reflect a similar diversity in course content, as Bridges (1988) concluded that the topical coverage in Adjustment courses tends to be less consistent or standardized across texts and instructors than in other psychology courses.

We believe that there are at least four compelling reasons for teaching the Psychology of Adjustment course. Given the course's decline in popularity, we think it is important to briefly review these reasons before outlining our suggestions for exercises and activities.

*First, the Adjustment course can be especially useful in demonstrating the nature and value of the scientific method.* Most courses in psychology emphasize the field's empirical basis, but the Adjustment course presents special opportunities to demonstrate the value of the scientific approach. Why? Because the Adjustment course addresses a host of issues that are discussed in widely-read self-help books, or "pop psychology" literature. This overlap in content can permit instructors to draw compelling contrasts between pop psychology material based on casual observation, common sense, armchair speculation, and anecdotal evidence as opposed to information based on scientific research.

*Second, the Adjustment course provides exceptional opportunities for debunking myths related to psychology and enhancing students' critical thinking.* Regrettably, myths regarding the

origins, causes, and functions of human behavior abound (e.g., Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2009).

Because the Adjustment course often deals with areas of behavior related to popular myths (such as the presumed benefits of high self-esteem or the erroneous assumption that when “opposites attract” a more stable and happy marriage results), it can serve as a sort of educational reality check. Along the way, instructors can work to improve students' critical thinking skills. The process of debunking myths can allow instructors to demonstrate the value of looking for alternative explanations for events and findings, checking for contradictory evidence, recognizing the weaknesses of anecdotal evidence, understanding the limitations of correlational evidence, and so forth.

*Third, the Adjustment course is an excellent venue in which to stimulate self-reflection and self-understanding.* In fact, it would be difficult to learn about adjustment issues without considering whether many of them are self-relevant. Thus, the self as touchstone, or specifically the activity of self-assessment, is integral to the Adjustment course. Many instructors who teach the Adjustment course emphasize experiential exercises that can provoke self-reflection and cultivate improved self-understanding. Many of these experiential exercises would probably feel out-of-place in most undergraduate psychology courses, but the Adjustment course can provide a comfortable context for students to engage in self-exploration.

*Fourth, the Adjustment course is uniquely well-suited for fostering self-improvement in students.* Typically, the Adjustment course encourages students to use course information to their advantage, to experience it rather than simply to study it, and to improve themselves in the process. Perhaps more so than in any other psychology course, Adjustment instructors often attempt to help students to alter their actual, everyday behavior in healthful ways that will result in self-improvement. For example, many Adjustment instructors use basic research in cognition to help students to improve their study habits, reading skills, and test-taking abilities. Another example of the Adjustment course's practical focus on self-improvement is the frequent use of behavior modification projects to help students gain greater control over their everyday behavior.

In summary, the Adjustment course can engage students by highlighting the value of the scientific method, debunking myths, stimulating self-reflection, and by providing opportunities for self-improvement. Now, let's examine some recommendations for useful activities and exercises in the adjustment course.

## **Original Activities for Teaching about Adjustment Issues**

As just noted, experiential activities bring concepts from the Adjustment course to life in the classroom and can have a beneficial impact on the lives of students. What follows are nine activities designed to actively engage students in material from the Adjustment course.

### ***Stress Diary***

In order to get a handle on the frequency and nature of stressors they encounter in daily life, students can be assigned a stress diary. The goal is to set aside some time at the end of each day to record that day's emotional tone (i.e., positive, negative) while also identifying the time, place, and nature of any experienced stress. After keeping the diary for a week or two, students should be able to identify patterns or regularities in their self-reported stress. Subsequently, instructors can illustrate course content by having students identify the various sources of stress, for instance, from their diaries. As a record, the stress diary can be a first step toward identifying particular coping responses.

### ***In-class Coping Strategies***

Once stress has been identified, instructors can illustrate a variety of coping strategies in class. For instance, after discussing the research of Pennebaker and colleagues regarding the benefits of writing about stressful events (e.g., Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), instructors can have students engage in the practice in class. By using the same instructions for writing as the original studies, instructors can demonstrate both the scientific method and the application of the research. Of course, students should not be required to share their writing, but they can be asked to reflect on it as they learn about emotion-focused coping strategies. Likewise, strategies such as expressing gratitude, guided relaxation, and positive reinterpretation could easily be turned into a class activity.

### ***Time Management and the Internet***

Most students will complain that they have too little free time available to complete homework and reading assignments. In the past, television watching was the main culprit of lost time (to some extent this may still be true). Now, however, the ubiquity of the Internet and accessible wireless connections mean that students can surf the Internet, visit social networking sites, and send email at will, as well as watch videos on YouTube or even Skype to keep in touch with friends and loved ones. Lost or

mismanaged time may now be due to the utility and accessibility of the Internet. The nature of this exercise is a simple one: Have students document how much time they spend online doing non-academic work, as well as when and for how long they are online. No one is going to give up the Internet, of course, nor should they; however, once the regularity of use is documented, perhaps students can learn to better manage their time online.

### ***Attraction in Personal Ads***

To illustrate the gender differences typically reported in research (e.g., men value physical attractiveness more highly than women), students can conduct informal content analyses of personal ads. Instructors should provide some guidelines on what student should code (e.g., mention of physical attractiveness) and small groups can go through ads to see if their findings match those of research presented in the text. By seeing these differences in ads of their choosing, the research method and findings become more relevant for students.

### ***Gender Socialization in Children's Television***

After discussing the research on media effects on gender socialization, have students watch a current episode of an educational television show (e.g., Sesame Street, Barney, Dora the Explorer). In small groups, have them discuss instances of gender socialization from the show. Have them discuss if the episode would be equally healthy (or unhealthy) for both genders. Have them predict what might be different for a non-educational children's show. In this activity, students are encouraged to generate for themselves the very theories the class is exposing them to, thus allowing for critical thinking and application.

### ***Critique a Self-help or "Pop" Psychology Book***

Instructors can invite students to select a self-help book examining an issue of interest to them and to write a critique of it. By reporting what material in the book matches scientific research and what does not, students are able to debunk myths, see applications of research, and gain valuable information related to the topic. To get the most from this activity it should *not* be a book report (we do not want students encoding erroneous information); instead, it should be a critique matching each major assertion from the book to what students have learned in class.

### ***Personality tests***

Students are often fascinated to see how they score on formal measures of personality. Thus, they are readily engaged by opportunities to take various

personality tests. Most research scales that are not published by a commercial publisher are readily available for use in the classroom. Some prominent examples of engaging personality scales include the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974), the Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1979), the Desirability of Control Scale (Burger & Cooper, 1979), the Achievement Anxiety Test (Alpert & Haber, 1960), the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost, Martin, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), the Self-Efficacy Scale (Sherer et al., 1982), and the Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966; see Fischer & Corcoran, 1994 for additional possibilities). Scales, such as these, can be administered and scored in a class session. This process can permit the instructor to explain the test norms, and discuss evidence regarding the reliability and validity of the scale. The distribution of scores for the class can quickly be graphed to incite discussion. Once the nature of the scale has been fully described, students can be invited to comment on the face validity of the scale.

### ***Detecting Irrational Thinking***

Cognitive-behavioral models of depression and other disorders, as well as everyday problems, suggest that they are rooted in irrational thinking. Thus, another engaging exercise can center on asking students to work to detect examples of irrational thinking in their everyday lives. This exercise works best if the theoretical ideas of Aaron Beck (1976) and Albert Ellis (1977) are described first. Then, students can be instructed to identify two or more concrete examples of irrational thinking that occur over the course of the next few days or so. For each of these examples, students might be asked to identify the activating event, describe their negative self-talk, discuss any emotional reactions that resulted, and provide an alternative, more rational way of looking at the event. These examples can provide fodder for lively discussion in class, although instructors sometimes need to be careful about what they encourage students to reveal in class.

### ***Self-Modification Projects***

As noted earlier, behavior modification projects have long been a staple of the Adjustment course. Obviously, these projects require the instructor to spend a session or two explaining the basic principles of behavior modification. Of particular importance is to give students many concrete examples of reinforcers that can be harnessed to improve self-control. Additionally, instructors need to explain that students can use reinforcers they are already getting, they just have to make the provision of those reinforcers contingent upon meeting specific, measurable behavioral goals. Common target

behaviors for student projects have included increasing studying, decreasing excessive eating, giving up cigarettes, reducing nervous habits, increasing exercise, decreasing acts of verbal aggression, and increasing assertive behavior. Studies suggest that these assignments help students to alter their behavior in healthful ways and students often continue to use behavioral strategies after their course has ended (Barone, 1982; Dodd, 1986).

## Annotated Bibliography on Adjustment

### *Textbooks for Adjustment courses*

Duffy, Kirsh and Atwater summarize psychological principles that can be applied to students' lives with the goal of helping students gain self-insight and live more fulfilling lives. This textbook covers the major perspectives of psychology with an eye toward enhancing students' knowledge about adjustment. The textbook features chapter outlines, learning objectives, special-interest boxes, a glossary at the end of the book, and end-of-chapter summaries.

- Duffy, K. G., Kirsh, S. J., & Atwater, E. (2011). *Psychology for living: Adjustment, growth, and behavior* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Nevid and Rathus present up-to-date information on how students can use psychology to effectively deal with the challenges they face in life. Utilizing a modular organization within each chapter, the textbook encourages students to apply psychological principles through active learning exercises such as self-assessment questionnaires while also emphasizing the scientific nature of psychology by including classic and current studies in the field.

- Nevid, J. S., & Rathus, S. (2010). *Psychology and the challenges of life* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Weiten, Dunn and Hammer incorporate empirical research, applicable examples, and relevant applications to aid students in using psychological principles to understand themselves and enrich their lives. The textbook provides information that can be put to practical use while maintaining its grounding in psychological science. Full of standard pedagogical features, the text also contains experiential exercises, validated questionnaires, and personality tests that encourage students to directly engage with the material.

- Weiten, W., Dunn, D. S., & Hammer, E. Y. (2012). *Psychology applied to modern life: Adjustment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage.

### *Articles on Teaching Adjustment*

This article describes the impact of a psychology of adjustment class on body-acceptance and self-acceptance among a group of college students. Using a simple experimental design comparing students in the class with those in a control group, an analysis of covariance found gains in acceptance on the two forms of acceptance (as measured by two scales) in the former group. Women appeared to show greater gains in body acceptance after being in the adjustment class than men.

- Clance, P. R., Matthews, T. V., & Joesting, J. (1979). Body-cathexis and self-cathexis in an interactional, awareness training class. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 48(1), 221-222.

Mayo describes a life-adjustment narrative writing exercise used in a psychology of adjustment course. Quantitative analyses revealed that engaging in the narrative activity led to higher-level learning outcomes. Students reported the journal activity was valuable because it provided the opportunity for intellectual growth and the opportunity to experience meaningful personal insights.

- Mayo, J. A. (2003). Journal writing revisited: Using life-narratives as an autobiographical approach to learning in psychology of adjustment. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 16(1), 34-47.

Case-based instruction (CBI) was used in a psychology of adjustment course to demonstrate the applicability of course material to real life situations. Students were randomly assigned to receive either CBI or traditional instruction alone (control condition). Students exposed to CBI performed much better on objective tests assessing retention and application of course concepts than those in the control group.

- Mayo, J. A. (2004). Using case-based instruction to bridge the gap between theory and practice in psychology of adjustment. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 17(2), 137-146.

Meck and Ball discuss the use of progressive relaxation therapy within the context of a psychology of personality adjustment course. Learning such therapeutic techniques may help students to better cope with personal challenges in daily life.

- Meck, D. S., & Ball, J. D. (1979). Teaching adjunctive coping skills in a personality adjustment course. *Teaching of Psychology*, 6(3), 185-186.

Payne and Woudenberg describe the impact of teaching undergraduate students self-management techniques and help-giving skills in a psychology of adjustment course. In the former case, students selected a personal problem and then followed a prescribed series of steps to address it; subsequent

credit was based on data quality and adherence to steps. Help-giving was encouraged by having students learn about Rogerian therapy and engaging in role-playing and related exercises.

- Payne, P. A., & Woudenberg, R. A. (1978). Helping others and helping yourself: An evaluation of two training modules in a college course. *Teaching of Psychology, 5*(3), 131-134.

Tasto presents a behavioral self-modification course designed to help students tackle personal problems. Students targeted one behavior to modify; they also completed homework assignments and a final paper. Relaxation techniques and assertiveness training are also discussed as being integral components of the course.

- Tasto, D. L. (1976). The teaching of a self-modification course. *Teaching of Psychology, 3*(4), 174-177.

Unger and Palladino describe the psychology of adjustment course as one wherein students can learn to be responsible for their own lives, including dealing with stressors and changing behavior in helpful ways.

- Unger, B. I., & Palladino, J. J. (1978). The psychology of adjustment. *Teaching of Psychology, 5*(4), 216-218.

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