

HABER & RUNYON

PSYCHOLOGY OF ADJUSTMENT



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1984

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## PREFACE

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The different ways people react have always intrigued us. Some seem so self-confident and able to overcome any and all adversity. Others seem to fall apart at the slightest provocation. Psychology as a science has made tremendous strides in helping us understand some of these diversities in human functioning.

What does it mean when we refer to someone as "well-adjusted"? How can we learn to understand and cope with the stresses of life? What role do our emotions and motivations play in our daily functioning? These are but a few of the questions this book addresses.

We have tried to communicate what psychologists have learned about those issues that affect our daily lives. We have integrated this scientific knowledge with a more practical approach that gives insight into how we as individuals can deal with these issues. We have utilized real-life scenarios to illustrate many of the ideas presented in each chapter. We felt that these glimpses into the lives of real people will make the concepts and theories more real for you.

As we wrote this book, we learned a great deal about psychology and adjustment. We hope you, too, will benefit from this book as well.

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### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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***Audrey Haber***  
***Richard P. Runyon***

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# **PSYCHOLOGY OF ADJUSTMENT**



# C H A P T E R 1

## OVERVIEW OF ADJUSTMENT

*A Letter Home*

What Is Adjustment?

Adjustment and Normality

Adjustment: State or Process?

Characteristics of Effective Adjustment

Accurate Perception of Reality

Ability to Cope with Stress and Anxiety

*Box 1.1: Controlling Your Own Behavior*

A Positive Self-Image

Ability to Express Feelings

Good Interpersonal Relations

The 10 Hallmarks of Well-Being

*Box 1.2: Life History Questionnaire*

Summary

Terms to Remember

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## A Letter Home

Dear Mom and Dad:

Since I left for college, I have been bad about writing. Please excuse my thoughtlessness. I promise to do better in the future. I'm going to fill you in on what has been going on. Please do not read further until you grab a chair. OK?

I'm getting along pretty well right now. The skull fracture and the concussion I got when jumping out of the dormitory window are almost healed. The fire wasn't too bad, but I count myself lucky to be alive. I spent only two weeks in the hospital, and I am getting my hearing back. I am learning to live with the constant headaches. Fortunately, the fire was witnessed by a gasoline station attendant. He called the fire department and saved my life. He visited me at the hospital daily. Since I had no where to go after getting out of the hospital (the dormitory will take months to be repaired), Mike was good enough to offer to share his apartment with me. He's a beautiful boy and I know you will love him just as I do. We're planning to get married.

We're not sure when, but I promise you it will be before my pregnancy starts to show. Yes, dear parents, your little girl is pregnant. I know how much you look forward to being grandparents, and I am sure you will give the baby plenty of love. The only thing preventing us from getting married is a little infection we picked up that prevents us from passing our blood test. It's one of those resistant strains, so we're not sure when it will be cleared up.

Now that I have brought you up to date, I want to tell you there was no dormitory fire, no skull fracture, no live-in roommate, no pregnancy, and no infection. However, I am getting a D in History and an F in Biology. I want you to see these marks in their proper perspective.

Your loving daughter,<sup>1</sup>

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This letter was probably never written. It has been going the rounds for a number of years now. But it contains a message you'll be reading often throughout this book. **One of the most important principles of effective adjustment is putting things into perspective. The perspective may involve evaluation of the significance of present events in your life, or it may place these events in a time frame.** For example, at times, everyone feels overwhelmed with problems, conflicts, and emotional turmoil. You wonder if you'll ever breathe freely again. In those silent conversations you carry on with yourself throughout many of your waking hours,

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<sup>1</sup> Based on *Fortune* (1970).

it is wise to pause and ask, How will I feel about the present situation in a week? A year? Ten years from now? Often the answer will put your present situation into perspective. You'll realize that a failing grade, loss of employment, a speeding ticket, or a love affair gone sour are not the end of the world. Somehow, you'll even survive events that seem catastrophic at the time they occur—bereavement over the loss of a loved one, a serious health problem, and so forth. How will you survive? Will you emerge from minor setbacks, major disappointments, and even life-shattering experiences as a "better," stronger, and more flexible person? Or will adversity leave in its wake a tired memory of what was once a vibrant human being? Finding the answers to these questions and applying them to your own life are really the subject matter of this book . . . adjustment.

### WHAT IS ADJUSTMENT?

LuAnn could not believe what the obstetrician had said. "Your child is normal and healthy in the physical sense of the word, but I fear that there is a problem with his mental development." That was all the doctor said. LuAnn's mind screamed out in anguish. Her first impulse was to tell the doctor to get out of her sight and say no more. She refused to hear the words *mentally retarded*. This could not possibly be happening to her. It was all a bad dream. But with the pain of the delivery still fresh in her mind and body, the reality of the moment was inescapable. A child, her child, had been born. Normal but not normal? What did the doctor mean? Did he mean she would lose her child? Would her baby have to be institutionalized? She shuddered at the thought. What could she do? Her mind reeled under the assault of so many questions.

Suppose we asked you to make a judgment: Is LuAnn's behavior maladjusted? You might say yes. She wished to deny the reality of the situation, dismiss the doctor's words, and run away from the inevitable. Moreover, her emotions were not under complete control. She appeared unable to gather together her resources and cope with the circumstances of her child's birth.

On the other hand, what more can we expect? LuAnn has just undergone a mentally and physically exhausting experience in which all her resources were taxed to the utmost. And then she learned that all was not right with the child whose birth she had eagerly anticipated. She even had sufficient composure to ask herself what she could do. Given the extreme stress of the situation, you could argue convincingly that LuAnn acted in a "normal" fashion under the circumstances.

It is not easy to distinguish between good and poor adjustment. One of the reasons is that the term *adjustment* is used in so many different ways. Consider the following:

Five out of six people want to see a particular film. Rosemary does not. Nevertheless, she decides to go along with the majority. Rosemary has adjusted her behavior by conforming to the wishes of the group.

Gene is recovering from a major heart attack. Under his doctor's orders, he has had to make many adjustments in his daily routines, including time spent

In spite of the loss of an arm, this man shows extreme self-sufficiency. Would you say he adjusted well to his disability? How is the term *adjustment* used in this example?



Susan Lapides 1981/Design Conceptions

at work, type and amount of exercise, and choice of foods. Here, adjustment is used in the sense of regulating daily schedules.

Mark has a bad knee that causes him almost constant pain. But he does not let it interfere with his daily activities. You may say Mark had adjusted to the pain. Here, adjustment means *growing accustomed to or learning to live with*. *Growing accustomed to circumstances can be an effective adjustment when the situation is not amenable to change.* In this context, the concept of adjustment



refers to the notion that a person must accept things over which he or she has no control. Since Mark can do nothing about his pain, he avoids situations in which the pain would be aggravated. For example, he swims instead of jogs. He makes reservations at restaurants and waits a few weeks to see a new "hot" movie so that he doesn't subject himself to long periods of standing in line. Thus, he has made certain adjustments in his lifestyle to accommodate a situation that cannot be changed. But, while he makes certain accommodations in areas that are of little importance to him, he refuses to allow the pain to dominate his life. He accepts the pain but continues to engage in productive living.

Let's take another look at LuAnn. Following the initial shocked reaction, LuAnn learned to adjust to the inescapable fact that her child was mentally retarded and would remain so. If she had merely passively accepted what she could not change and attempted to do no more, her adjustment would not be considered satisfactory. Instead, she reached out to various community resources for guidance and assistance. Specifically, she asked what she could do to maximize her child's potential for growth. In other words, effective adjustment consists of accepting limitations that cannot be changed while actively modifying those that can. This approach is beautifully stated in the serenity prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

You might expect that great confusion arises from the numerous ways in which the term "adjustment" is used. Fortunately, this is not often the case. For the most part, we rely on the context to communicate subtle nuances in the meaning of the word. It is when we are speaking about psychological adjustment that difficulties present themselves. We may speak in terms of good and poor adjustment, adaptive and **maladaptive behavior**, normal and abnormal reactions, and so forth.

**maladaptive behavior:** behavior that fails to conform to the requirements of the situation.

We shall not attempt a comprehensive definition of adjustment since there are so many elements that comprise this concept. Some of the facets of "good" adjustment will be examined in a later section of this chapter: Characteristics of Effective Adjustment. Before doing so, let us attempt to clarify some of the more common problems associated with this concept.

### Adjustment and Normality

Frank is worried. The big exam in his major is coming up tomorrow. For some reason, he has been unable to hit the books for the past few weeks. Instead of studying, he goes to the local bar for a drink or two and then winds up at the neighborhood movie house for the late feature. Red-eyed and disheveled the next day, he makes an abortive attempt to take the exam.

Contrast Frank's behavior with that of Nora in the following scenario.

Nora's world is coming apart at the seams or at least it appears that way to her. The apartment she just moved to permits the tenants to keep pets. The only problem is that she is terrified of dogs. Ever since she can remember, the

mere sight of a dog causes an inexplicable fear and panic to well up inside of her. Her heart races, her face flushes, and beads of perspiration form on her forehead. It has become so bad that she is unable to leave the confines of her apartment. All social contacts have, of necessity, been terminated.

Is Frank maladjusted? What about Nora? Are their behaviors abnormal? These two examples show that maladjustment and abnormality are related but not necessarily the same. Let's take a closer look at Frank.

Clearly, Frank's behavior is maladaptive and nonproductive. He stands little or no chance of passing the exam. He has done no studying. He has gotten little rest and the alcohol has probably fogged his mind and reflexes. But is he abnormal in the sense that he displays bizarre behavior, shows disordered thought processes, and has a distorted perception of reality? Probably not. Failure to adjust satisfactorily to the demands of one's environment is not sufficient in itself to be labeled abnormal.

Nora's dilemma is different. Not only is her behavior maladaptive and nonproductive, but it also contains elements of the bizarre. So crippling is her irrational fear of dogs that she has become a virtual prisoner of her own fears. Her entire emotional, social, and occupational life seems to revolve around this debilitating

### **phobia.**

**phobia:** an irrational and intense fear of people, objects, or events in which the danger is exaggerated.

In these two examples, you see that it is possible to be maladjusted but not abnormal (Frank) or maladjusted and abnormal (Nora). Is it also possible to be abnormal but not maladjusted? Strange as it may seem, it is. For example, Rodney has a compulsive need to wash his hands. He experiences extreme anxiety if he suspects his hands are even moderately soiled. Thus, he spends an unusual amount of time keeping his hands clean. His co-workers may even have noticed that

Which of these behaviors is abnormal? Why? Can you conclude that either individual is maladjusted?



John Thoeming



John Thoeming



there is something a bit strange in Rodney's behavior. He seems to spend an awful lot of time in the washroom. But, in spite of all this hand-washing activity, Rodney is able to perform his work-related activities in an effective manner.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have labored long and hard to come up with diagnostic categories of abnormal behavior. These categories are defined in terms of certain specific symptoms or clusters of symptoms. Thus, an individual may display certain symptoms that cause us to label his or her behavior as abnormal. However, the same individual may be able to adapt to the demands of the environment and perform everyday functions in a satisfactory manner.

In summary, the concepts of adjustment-maladjustment and normality-abnormality overlap but are not one and the same. The criteria for judging abnormal behavior have been more clearly spelled out. The chances are that if you are dealing with an individual displaying abnormal symptoms, that individual is also maladjusted. On the other side of the coin, a maladjusted individual is not necessarily abnormal. However, you should not overlook the possibility that some abnormal process may underlie poor adjustments to life's demands. We will explore abnormal behavior in Chapter 12.

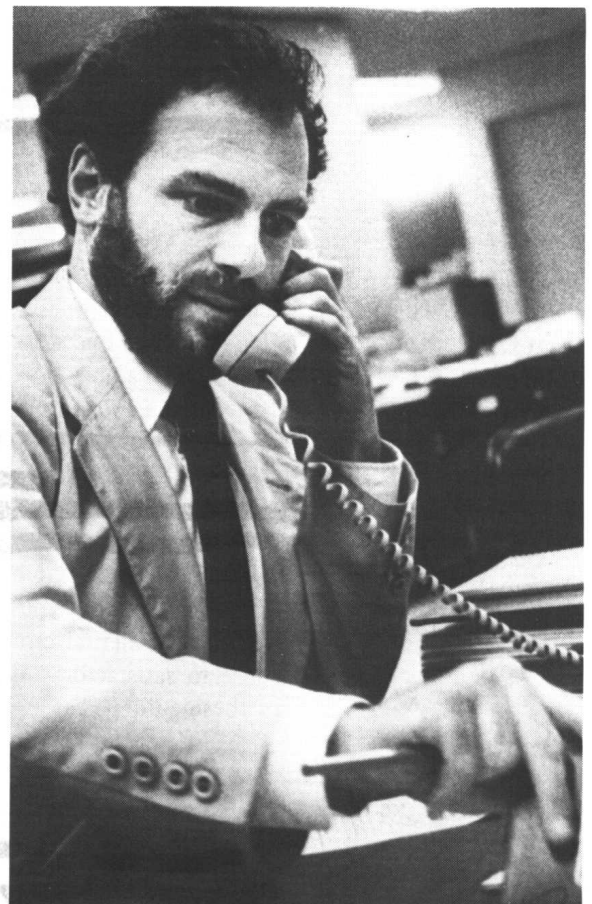
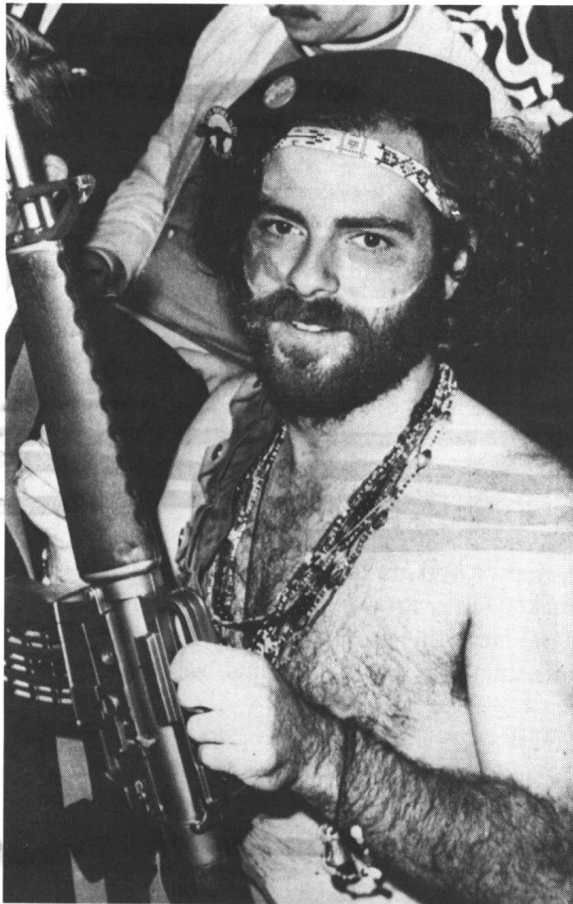
### Adjustment: State or Process?

At one time or another, you have probably heard a friend or acquaintance described in such terms as: "Billy is extremely maladjusted, and I think he's going to be that way the rest of his life." Or "Suzy is so well adjusted, I just hope I can be like her some day." In both of these observations, the underlying assumption is that effective adjustment is a state that you will achieve if you are lucky and you work hard enough at becoming adjusted. Thus, you might say, "I may not be well adjusted right now, but if I work hard at it I will someday become a well-adjusted individual." In this conception of adjustment, the state of well adjusted is like some distant and desired geographical location where you hope to live someday. When you have arrived at that adjustment Shangri-la, you will be able to proclaim, "At last, I am well adjusted." At this point in time, you may sit back, relax, and bask in the glory of your accomplishment.

At first blush, there is much to commend the conception of adjustment as a state toward which everyone strives. As is repeated throughout this book, one of the most important principles of effective adjustment is setting realistic goals and then striving to achieve them. But is the state of "well adjusted" a realistic goal? Is it reasonable to expect to someday be always happy, free from fears and stress, and with no problems to mar a blissful existence? The state conception of adjustment implies that the person as a whole is either adjusted or maladjusted. If you think about this for a moment, you'll realize that this is a rather simplistic view of adjustment. Even the most well-adjusted people sometimes fall short of their goals or ideals. At some time or another, everyone acts in ways they later regret. On occasion, they disappoint themselves and others. They feel guilt and are rarely completely free of fear and worry. These observations are nicely expressed in the following excerpt from *Notes to Myself* by Hugh Prather:

There are occasions when I talk to a man who is riding high on some recent insight or triumph, and for the moment life probably seems to him to have no problems. But I just don't believe that most people are living the smooth, controlled, trouble-free existence that their careful countenances and bland words suggest. Today never hands me the same thing twice and I believe that for most everyone else life is also a mixture of unsolved problems, ambiguous victories, and vague defeats—with very few moments of clear peace. I never do seem to quite get on top of it. My struggle with today is worthwhile, but it is a struggle nonetheless and one I will never finish. (Prather, 1970)

Life situations and goals sometimes undergo major changes. In 1968 Jerry Rubin was one of the leaders of the anti-establishment movement. Ten years later he was a research analyst on Wall Street.



United Press International Photos



In truth, adjustment is an ongoing process that will continue throughout your life. Life situations are always changing. Everyone experiences setbacks in the quest to achieve desired goals. People are continually changing their goals as life circumstances change. What was regarded as the most pressing and urgent need yesterday may now have faded into the background and be remembered with only a smile. According to the *process* conception of adjustment, the effectiveness of adjustment is measured in terms of how well a person copes with ever-changing circumstances.

Life is dynamic and filled with a continuous interplay between internal and external forces. To some extent, you are a product of your environment and your unique experiences, and are subject to circumstances over which you do not always exercise complete control. Consequently, it is inevitable that the quality of your adjustments will vary from time to time and from situation to situation. As a result, you will occasionally fall flat on your face. You will sometimes experience moments of unhappiness and even despair. On the other hand, if you display the resiliency that is inherent in all of us, you will cope effectively with stress and conflict either by meeting life's challenges head-on or by changing the circumstances to fit your needs. This book focuses on the view that adjustment is not a state but rather an ongoing, life-long process. All of us are capable of learning skills that enable us to cope with the everyday demands of living.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ADJUSTMENT

Historically, professionals in the mental- and emotional-health fields have tended to conceptualize adjustment in a negative sort of way. The *absence* of characteristics that define abnormality was taken as evidence of effective adjustment. Thus, a person free of pathological symptoms was thought to be "healthy." Over the years, the emphasis has shifted. We now say, in effect, *it's not what you don't have that constitutes effective adjustment but, rather, what you do have*. In other words, adjustment is regarded in terms of the positive characteristics an individual displays. Implicit in this positive approach is the view that strengths rather than lack of weaknesses underlie good adjustment.

There are no simple and easy prescriptions for dealing with life. Since you are totally unique, you must make your own way based on your own resources and environmental circumstances. Nevertheless, there are guideposts along the route to satisfactory adjustments. In the following sections, we examine some of these guideposts.

### Accurate Perception of Reality

Almost everyone would agree that an accurate perception of reality is a prerequisite to good adjustment. But what is reality? Is my reality the same as yours? It is easy to get bogged down in philosophical discourses on the nature of reality. There is really no way of knowing in any absolute or ultimate sense of the word