

This Week's Citation Classic

CC/NUMBER 34
AUGUST 24, 1987

Sarason I G, Johnson J H & Siegel J M. Assessing the impact of life changes: development of the Life Experiences Survey. *J. Consult. Clin. Psychol.* 46:932-46, 1978.
[Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA]

This paper describes the Life Experiences Survey, a questionnaire that assesses positive and negative life changes and allows for individualized ratings of the impacts of events. The paper shows that only negative changes are related to stress-sensitive dependent measures. [The SSC1® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 260 publications.]

Irwin G. Sarason
Department of Psychology
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195

July 13, 1987

In 1972, on a flight from Norway to London, Cecily de Monchaux, Tim Hunt, and I discussed the problems associated with the assessment of life events. The discussion was so stimulating that we then coauthored an article¹ that reviewed these problems and suggested some possible solutions, and I began to construct an assessment tool to implement some of these suggestions in my own work.

The major impetus for the Life Experiences Survey (LES) was provided by my doubts concerning the influential belief that life changes are stressful regardless of the desirability of the events experienced. I needed a way to separately assess desirable events (for example, getting a raise) and undesirable events (for example, the death of a loved one). The many citations to the paper are due to the usefulness to researchers of the positive- and negative-events scales of the LES, which are based on

respondents' subjective estimates of the impacts of events.

Research with the LES has yielded many interesting and provocative results. For example, high negative-events scores are associated with depression, anxiety, burnout, accidents, poor signal-detection performance, risk-taking, proneness to commit child abuse, cardiovascular disease, and periodontal disease. Positive-events scores tend to be unrelated to these factors; rather, they seem to be correlated with a positive outlook on life, relatively low psychological distress, and resistance to burnout.

I continue to be intrigued by life events. In 1983² I described a modification of the LES that provides quantitative measures concerning the impacts of and meanings attached to events, how unexpected the events are, and how much control respondents perceive themselves as having over the events.

At the present time, I am especially interested in psychological and social factors that may moderate the effects of life events. Social support is a moderator on which my colleagues and I have worked for over 10 years. We have found that our Social Support Questionnaire seems to reflect an individual-difference variable important in its own right.^{3,4} An example of how life events and social support interact is provided by a study in which we found that the relationship between negative life events and illness was much stronger for people low in support than for those with many supportive others.⁵

Interest in research on life changes will continue because we all experience such changes and think about their short- and long-term effects. Interest is growing in intervention research that identifies cognitive, behavioral, and social (including community) strategies and in resources that mitigate the negative effects of events and stressful life transitions and that facilitate effective coping.

1. Sarason I G, de Monchaux C & Hunt T. Methodological issues in the assessment of life stress. (Levi L, ed.) *Emotions: their parameters and measurement*. New York: Raven Press, 1975. p. 499-509.
2. Sarason I G, Levine H M, Basham R B & Sarason B R. Assessing social support: the Social Support Questionnaire. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 44:127-39, 1983. (Cited 60 times.)
3. Sarason I G, Sarason B R & Shearin E N. Social support as an individual difference variable: its stability, origins, and relational aspects. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 50:845-55, 1986.
4. Sarason B R, Shearin E N, Pierce G R & Sarason I G. Interrelations of social support measures: theoretical and practical implications. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 52:813-32, 1987.
5. Sarason I G, Sarason B R, Potter E H & Antoni M H. Life events, social support, and illness. *Psychosom. Med.* 47:156-63, 1985.