

# This Week's Citation Classic®

**Pearlin L I & Schooler C.** The structure of coping. *J. Health Soc. Behavior* 19:2-21, 1978;  
and, **Pearlin L I, Lieberman M A, Menaghan E & Mullan J T.** The stress process.  
*J. Health Soc. Behavior* 22:337-56, 1981.  
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The experiences of daily life are examined both as sources of repeated or chronic stress and as the basis of coping repertoires. Major social roles, in particular, are important contexts for chronic stress and coping. When persistent stressors arise within one of these roles, they are likely to lead to problems in other roles. It is this proliferation of stressors over time that in part underlies the conceptualization of stress as a process. [The *SSCI*® and the *SCI*® indicate that these papers have been cited in more than 820 and 550 publications, making them the two most-cited papers published in this journal.]

## The Quotidian Character of Chronic Stress

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As an investigator in the Intramural Research Program at the National Institute of Mental Health in the early 1970s, I had the opportunity to develop a research program aimed at tracing out the sources of stress in the experiences and activities of daily life. However, although I could hypothesize that much of stress that adversely affects health stems from the structure of daily experience, I was substantially in the dark as to what these experiences might be. It was not possible to rely on the stress research that prevailed at that time to illuminate this matter. Twenty or more years ago, most research, in addition to being primarily oriented to the study of physiologic responses to stress, tended to focus on individuals in unusual circumstances (e.g., astronauts and people facing surgery). Therefore, to better understand stressful daily experiences, we undertook a series of exploratory interviews, emphasizing in our questions the difficulties people face in their major social roles and the ways they sought to cope with the difficulties. The exploratory interviews yielded an array of role-related problems or stressors and coping responses to them. These then were incorporated into a structured inter-

view that was administered in a large-scale survey of residents of Chicago, which I chose because of its demographic diversity. We launched the survey in 1972, two years after we began the planning.

"The Structure of Coping" was among the first articles published from this survey. I hoped to demonstrate that coping is not driven solely by idiosyncratic personality imperatives, but also by people's social and economic characteristics and by the nature of the stressors they confront and their roles. Roles, then, were regarded as important contexts in understanding both the chronic stressors to which people are exposed and their coping responses. Incidentally, Carmi Schooler became my coauthor as a result of the many good ideas he provided during our weekly racquetball games.

As analyses progressed on the survey, it became evident that social stress is not a one-time happening, but something that more typically emerges over time. About four years after the initial survey, therefore, I did a follow-up of the same sample to observe whether changes in people's well-being were associated with changes in the stressful conditions of their lives. It was from the longitudinal data that we wrote "The Stress Process." A key finding from that work, one that I have taken into my subsequent research, is that serious and chronic problems are likely to give rise to other problems over time; stress begets stress. One cannot have a continuing job problem, for example, without becoming vulnerable to problems in other areas of life, such as the family. The proliferation of stressors is one of the factors that makes it appropriate to think of stress as a process, not as an event or ephemeral episode.

There has been an enormous body of research since we began to publish our work, including our own efforts to theoretically elaborate issues raised by these papers.<sup>1-3</sup> I cannot be sure what effect these papers have had on the character of the research that followed, but I would like to think that they helped to bring a little conceptual clarity to a very untidy but important area of scholarly work.

1. Pearlin L I & Aneshensel C S. Coping and social supports: their functions and applications. (Aiken L H & Mechanic D, eds.) *Applications of social science to clinical medicine and health*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986. p. 53-74.
  2. Pearlin L I. The study of coping: problems and directions. (Eckenrode J, ed.) *The social context of coping*. New York: Plenum Press, 1991. p. 261-76.
  3. -----, The sociological study of stress. *J. Health Soc. Behavior* 30:241-56, 1987.
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