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# Introduction to Health Psychology

## Chapter Summary

Health psychology is a subspecialty within the field of psychology and is concerned with education, research, and practice related to the promotion and maintenance of health and the prevention and treatment of illness. The discipline has several subspecialties, including clinical health psychology, occupational health psychology, and community health psychology. A Health Psychologist specializes in working with individuals of all ages who have physical health problems as well as working with organizations and communities to influence health behaviours within their jurisdictions. This influence may be in the form of psychosocial support services or psychological interventions, both of which are known to improve quality of life.

The roots of health psychology can be traced back to early Greek physicians who believed that the mind and body are part of the same system and intricately related. With the beginning of the field of psychosomatic medicine, which acknowledged that psychological factors could explain physical symptoms, scholars and clinicians began to explore the interdependence of psychological factors and physical health, leading to the emergence of the field of behavioural medicine. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, health psychology became an official division of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). In North America, health psychologists are often trained to conduct both applied work and research and are often employed in academic institutions or in clinical settings, such as hospitals, private clinics, or private practice.

Health psychologists typically conceptualize health and illness using a biopsychosocial model of health that regards both health and illness as stemming from interactions among biological, psychological, and social variables. This model forms the conceptual basis of health psychology (Suls and Rothman, 2004). Other models/theories on which health psychologists commonly draw in both research and clinical work are the health belief model, social cognitive theory, and the theory of planned behaviour. These models are consistent with the assumptions of the biopsychosocial model but focus on identifying variables that predict health behaviour.

The common-sense model of self-regulation/illness representation and the cognitive behavioural perspective model enable an understanding of how one's lay view as well as cognitive appraisals influence coping responses. Finally, the transtheoretical model of behaviour change focuses on a five-stage model of change people may experience when modifying health behaviours.

## Essay Topics

1. How has our understanding of health and illness changed over time? What are the key differences in the ways in which we conceptualize health and illness today compared to how they have been understood historically? (pp. 4–6)
2. Describe health psychology and its subspecialties. What benefits can it provide for understanding and improving health? (pp. 3–4)
3. Health psychology as a discipline has grown tremendously since it was first defined by Matarazzo. What challenges still remain for future research in this discipline? What factors will need to be taken into consideration? (pp. 17–18)
4. What are the major theories/models used to explain health and illness? What do they have in common and how do they differ? (pp. 11–17)

## Weblinks

<http://www.cpa.ca/aboutcpa/cpasections/healthpsychology>

Website for the Section on Health and Behavioural Medicine of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA).

<http://health-psych.org>

Dr Cheryl MacDonald from the Health Psychology Center provides a detailed description of the field of health psychology, including references to scholarly articles and other publications.

<https://societyforhealthpsychology.org/about/who-we-are/>

The American Psychological Association's Health Psychology website describes the field and various roles of health psychologists, and provides a variety of links and resources relevant to health psychology.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17iSYi3ziTI>

This video presented by the non-profit group, Colorado Coalition for the Medically Underserved, describes several social determinants of health (e.g., income, education, transportation, housing) and explains how these factors can be barriers to good health.

# Glossary

**Behavioural medicine** “The field concerned with the development of behavioral-science knowledge and techniques relevant to the understanding of physical health and illness and the application of this knowledge and these techniques to diagnosis, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. Psychosis, neurosis and substance abuse are included only insofar as they contribute to physical disorders as an end point” (Schwartz & Weiss, 1977).

**Biopsychosocial model** Model that proposes that health is a function and interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors.

**Cartesian dualism** The idea that mind and body are separate entities and explanations for illness can be found in the body alone.

**Clinical health psychology** Subfield of health psychology focused on applying or translating knowledge from health psychology into practices that promote health, prevent and treat illness or disability, and address psychological consequences of symptoms.

**Cognitive behavioural perspective** A theory based on how one’s cognitive appraisal of internal sensations influence actions or responses to a medical condition.

**Common-sense model of self-regulation/illness representation** A theoretical framework proposing people process and cope with health threats based on their lay view of their health. This view comes from many sources including pain levels, past experience, social factors, culture, personality and mood.

**Community health psychology** Subspecialty of health psychology focused on community-wide health needs and health-care systems to effect change, promote access and cultural competence, and effectively serve diversity within communities.

**Health belief model** Model postulating that readiness to take action in relation to health problems is a function of people’s beliefs and their perception of the benefits of taking action in order to prevent health problems.

**Health psychology** A discipline-specific descriptor within the broad interdisciplinary field of behavioural medicine; discipline of psychology focused on the promotion and maintenance of health, the prevention and treatment of illness, and the identification of etiologic and diagnostic correlates of health, illness, and related dysfunction.

**Occupational health psychology** A subspecialty of health psychology focused on the prevention and management of occupational stress, the prevention of injury, and the maintenance of workers’ health.

**Social cognitive theory** Theory that emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy beliefs (developed through personal experiences, observing others, and social experiences as well as any internal experiences) as a determinant of health behaviour.

**Theory of planned behaviour** A view of behaviour as determined by three types of beliefs: behavioural, normative, and control beliefs.

**Transtheoretical model of behaviour change** A five-stage model, focused on change people may experience when modifying health behaviours. The stages are pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance with termination being the end of the change process.