

Can Change Really Make Me Sick?

Researchers found that 93% of health problems (infections, allergies, bone and muscle injuries, and psychosomatic illness) affected patients who, during the previous year, had been exposed to events with LCU values totalling 150 or more.

Although a minor life change on its own was not enough to constitute a serious stressor, the cumulative impact of many events could be considered a crisis. The greater the numbers of LCUs, the greater the risk of illness.

Of those exposed to:

- Mild crisis (150 – 199 LCUs) – 37% reported illness
- Moderate crisis (200 – 299 LCUs) – 51% reported illness
- Major crisis (more than 300 LCUs) – 79% reported illness.

Am I at Risk?

Of course, we are all unique individuals and so vary in the way we handle change, as well as in our personal interpretation of the change event. Personal characteristics can also modify the impact of the life changes on our health. Many people have illnesses that do not seem to be preceded by identifiable stressors, and others undergo stress but do not seem to get sick.

Assess Your Stress

Below are examples of life change events and their respective number of Life Change Units (LCUs), as applicable to adults.

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Divorce | 73 |
| Death of a close family member | 63 |
| Personal injury or illness | 53 |
| Marriage | 50 |
| Change in number of family reunions | 15 |
| Change in eating habits | 15 |
| Vacation | 13 |
| Christmas | 12 |

Non-adults may also become susceptible to stress-related illness through experiencing positive or negative life changes. Example of events and their corresponding LCUs is given below.

| | |
|--|----|
| Getting married | 95 |
| Acquiring a visible deformity | 80 |
| Fathering a child | 70 |
| Breaking up with boyfriend or girlfriend | 53 |
| Beginning to date | 51 |
| Suspension from school | 50 |
| Birth of a brother or sister | 50 |

The Life Change Model

Change and Your Health

Most of us know that an event need not be of crisis proportions to cause stress. Sometimes seemingly small, everyday events cause stress - and very often these events can cause a change in our lives.

Observing this led researchers to study the fact that any life change, even positive changes, can have a detrimental impact on health. The life-change model assumes that all changes in a person's life – large or small, desirable or undesirable – can act as stressors, and that the accumulation of several small changes can be as powerful as one major change.

To measure the impact of life changes, two researchers (Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe) devised the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), also known as the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale. In this scale, the number of "Life Change Units" (LCUs) that apply to events in the past year of an individual's life are added. The life change units are in essence stress potential values. That is, they give an indication of how stressed the individual is likely to be, and directly related to that, how many health problems they are likely to experience.

Researchers found that 93% of health problems (infections, allergies, bone and muscle injuries and psychosomatic illness) affected patients who, during the previous year, had been exposed to events with LCU values totalling 150 or more. Although a minor life change was not sufficient to constitute a serious stressor, the cumulative impact of many events could be considered a crisis. The greater the number of LCUs, the greater the risk of illness. Of those exposed to:

- Mild crisis (150 – 199 LCUs) – 37% reported illness.
- Moderate crisis (200 – 299 LCUs) – 51% reported illness.
- Major crisis (more than 300 LCUs) – 79% reported illness.

Clearly, change in our lives can be considered stressful, and stressful life events do play some part in producing physical and psychological illness for many people.

Of course, we are all unique individuals and so vary in the way we handle change, as well as in our personal interpretation of the change event. Personal characteristics can also modify the impact of the life changes on our health. Many people have illnesses that do not seem to be preceded by identifiable stressors, and others undergo stress but do not seem to get sick.

The Social Readjustment Rating Scale

Take a moment to reflect on the past 12 months of your life. For each event that applies to you, note the corresponding LCU score in the "Your Life Units" column. Your total will give you a sense of the stress load your system has been quietly carrying.

| Life Event | Life Change Units | Your Life Units |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Death of a spouse | 100 | |
| Divorce | 73 | |
| Marital separation | 65 | |
| Imprisonment | 63 | |
| Death of a close family member | 63 | |
| Personal injury or illness | 53 | |
| Marriage | 50 | |
| Dismissal from work | 47 | |
| Marital reconciliation | 45 | |
| Retirement | 45 | |
| Change in health of family member | 44 | |
| Pregnancy | 40 | |
| Sexual difficulties | 39 | |
| Gain a new family member | 39 | |

| Life Event | Life Change Units | Your Life Units |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Business readjustment | 39 | |
| Change in financial state | 38 | |
| Death of a close friend | 37 | |
| Change to different line of work | 36 | |
| Change in frequency of arguments | 35 | |
| Major mortgage | 32 | |
| Foreclosure of mortgage or loan | 30 | |
| Change in responsibilities at work | 29 | |
| Child leaving home | 29 | |
| Trouble with in-laws | 29 | |
| Outstanding personal achievement | 28 | |
| Spouse starts or stops work | 26 | |
| Begin or end school | 26 | |
| Change in living conditions | 25 | |
| Revision of personal habits | 24 | |
| Trouble with boss | 23 | |
| Change in working hours or conditions | 20 | |
| Change in residence | 20 | |
| Change in schools | 20 | |
| Change in recreation | 19 | |
| Change in church activities | 19 | |
| Change in social activities | 18 | |
| Minor mortgage or loan | 17 | |
| Change in sleeping habits | 16 | |
| Change in number of family reunions | 15 | |
| Change in eating habits | 15 | |
| Vacation | 13 | |
| Christmas | 12 | |
| Minor violation of law | 11 | |
| Total | | |

Score of 300+: At strong risk of illness.

Score of 150 – 299: Risk of illness is moderate (reduced by 30% from the above risk).

Score of less than 150: Slight risk of illness.

Non-adults

A modified scale has also been developed for non-adults. Similar to the adult scale, stress points for life events in the past year are added and compared to the rough estimate of how stress affects health.

| Life Event | Life Change Units | Your Life Units |
|--|-------------------|-----------------|
| Death of parent | 100 | |
| Unplanned pregnancy/abortion | 100 | |
| Getting married | 95 | |
| Divorce of parents | 90 | |
| Acquiring a visible deformity | 80 | |
| Fathering a child | 70 | |
| Jail sentence of parent for over one year | 70 | |
| Marital separation of parents | 69 | |
| Death of a brother or sister | 68 | |
| Change in acceptance by peers | 67 | |
| Unplanned pregnancy of sister | 64 | |
| Discovery of being an adopted child | 63 | |
| Marriage of parent to stepparent | 63 | |
| Death of a close friend | 63 | |
| Having a visible congenital deformity | 62 | |
| Serious illness requiring hospitalisation | 58 | |
| Failure of a grade in school | 56 | |
| Not making an extracurricular activity | 55 | |
| Hospitalisation of a parent | 55 | |
| Jail sentence of parent for over 30 days | 53 | |
| Breaking up with boyfriend or girlfriend | 53 | |
| Beginning to date | 51 | |
| Suspension from school | 50 | |
| Becoming involved with drugs or alcohol | 50 | |
| Birth of a brother or sister | 50 | |
| Increase in arguments between parents | 47 | |
| Loss of job by parent | 46 | |
| Outstanding personal achievement | 46 | |
| Change in parent's financial status | 45 | |
| Accepted at college of choice | 43 | |
| Being a senior in high school | 42 | |
| Hospitalisation of a sibling | 41 | |
| Increased absence of parent from home | 38 | |
| Brother or sister leaving home | 37 | |
| Addition of third adult to family | 34 | |
| Becoming a fully- fledged member of a church | 31 | |
| Decrease in arguments between parents | 27 | |
| Decrease in arguments with parents | 26 | |
| Mother or father beginning work | 26 | |
| Total | | |

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Score of less than 150: Slight risk of illness.