# Contents

List of figures and table viii
Preface ix

**Section One: Introduction**
1 What is health psychology? 3

**Section Two: Health Behaviour**
2 What is health behaviour? 13
3 Influences on health behaviour 24
4 Behaviour change models 43
5 Health psychology, public health and health promotion 62

**Section Three: Health Psychology in Action**
6 Managing and coping with stress 83
7 Eating behaviour 109
8 Smoking and drinking behaviour 135
9 Managing persistent physical health conditions 152

**Section Four: Conclusion**
10 Conclusion 169

References 174
Appendix 215
Glossary 220
Index 230
As our scientific knowledge has grown, so has our realization that the causes of ill health are multi-layered and complex. For example, the **medical model**, introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, suggested that disease arose from chemical imbalance, bacteria, viruses and genetic predisposition. In short, because illness was viewed in this manner, the medical model perpetuated the view that illness could not be influenced by individuals’ behaviour. This shortcoming was very apparent in the now-famous Alameda County Study (Belloc and Breslow, 1972) which was instrumental in highlighting the influence that our behaviour could have on our health. Almost 7,000 people were studied and researchers found that sleeping 7–8 hours a day, being less than 10% overweight, eating breakfast every day, not snacking between meals, taking regular exercise, not smoking, and drinking in moderation reduced mortality risk. The fewer the number of these health practices participants engaged in, the higher the mortality rate was at a 10-year follow-up. The medical model alone could not explain this finding, but the realization that, in addition to medical factors, our behaviour influenced our health status was an important step forward.

This shift in our understanding of the influences on our health means that we now talk of the **biopsychosocial model** and some use the term ‘biopsychosocial–spiritual model’ (e.g. Sulmasy, 2002). In so doing we recognize the interrelationship(s) between our behaviour, our psychology, our environment (e.g. physical, social, spiritual and economic), our genetics and our biology, and the resultant impact these interrelationships have on our
health. As health psychologists, we pay particular attention to the role psychological factors play in preventing and managing illness as well as in promoting wellbeing. In this chapter, I explain the difference between health and clinical psychology, share how health psychology developed and describe what health psychologists do. Finally, I set out why I think health psychology is important.

How is health psychology different to clinical psychology?

Unfortunately, many people confuse health psychology with clinical psychology. It is therefore important in this introductory chapter to highlight the differences between the two disciplines.

Clinical psychologists focus their attention on mental health problems (e.g. phobias, anxiety disorders, depression), whilst health psychologists focus on physical disorders (e.g. chronic illness, cancer, pain, stress, smoking cessation, weight loss). In other words, health psychologists apply psychological theories and methods in order to examine how people can maintain their health, or perhaps better adapt to, or recover from, illness. This is, of course, an oversimplification. We know that our mental and physical health are linked, and that as human beings we do not seek help for ‘tidy’ problems that fall solely into the category of mental health or physical health. This is why health psychologists must work closely with those professions who have expertise in mental health to ensure that their client is fully looked after.

How did the field of health psychology develop?

Kaptein and Weinman (2004) note that the term ‘health psychology’ was first used in a book title by Stone and colleagues in 1979. Later that same year, Joseph Matarazzo gave his presidential address to an American Psychological Association (APA) meeting. His speech focused on what he called ‘Frontiers for a new health psychology’. He published his speech the following year in the journal American Psychologist (Matarazzo, 1980). Then in 1986 the British Psychological Society (BPS) approved the setting up of a Section of Health Psychology. At the same time, the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) was also established.
In 1994, Salmon wrote an articulate and provocative think piece entitled, ‘Is health psychology a profession, or can it become one?’ He proposed four central criteria:

- The possession of a distinct body of knowledge – in this case, a body of knowledge distinct from clinical psychology;
- Discrete professional structures, in other words, clearly specified procedures for training and marketing services with a clearly defined public image;
- Identifiable professional skills; skills specific to health psychology;
- Autonomous practice with an identifiable client group.

At that time, he concluded that health psychology did not fulfil the four criteria. However, only three years later in 1997, thanks to a lot of effort from a core group of hard-working psychologists, the BPS Health Psychology Section became a fully fledged division, and was therefore formally recognized as being a profession. Indeed, as Forshaw and Sheffield (2013: xvi) noted, in the BPS ‘Sections are groups of people with academic or political interests, and Divisions are reserved for recognised professions’. Once health psychology was formally recognized by the BPS as a profession, a training route needed to be established. This was finalized in 2001 as a two-stage model of training: Stage 1 corresponding to MSc level, focusing on knowledge and theoretical underpinnings; and Stage 2 being practice oriented, at doctoral level (further information on training can be found in the Appendix).

ecedor So what do health psychologists do?

Health psychologists apply psychological research and methods to four key areas: the prevention and management of illness; the identification of psychological factors contributing to physical illness; the promotion and maintenance of health; and the improvement of the healthcare system and the formulation of health policy.

The prevention and management of illness

This facet of health psychology focuses on interventions designed to prevent healthy individuals from becoming ill in the first place, as well as those designed to prevent deterioration once they are diagnosed with a physical illness.
The identification of psychological and behavioural factors contributing to physical illness

Health psychologists regard the relationship between psychology and health as both direct and indirect. In other words, it is recognized that the way in which a person might experience their life can have a direct impact on their body, which in turn can have an effect on their health. Thus, feeling stressed can impact directly on the body’s physiological processes. In contrast, an indirect relationship is represented by the way in which a person’s behaviour can be influenced by the way that they think; it is engaging in this behaviour (e.g. drinking/eating too much) which then impacts on their health. Health psychologists have researched many different illnesses and in so doing have begun to identify the psychological factors that might contribute to the development or maintenance of illness. For example, coronary heart disease has been related to behaviours such as smoking, food intake and lack of exercise whilst some cancers are linked to diet, smoking, alcohol and failure to attend for screening or check-ups (Ogden, 2007: 5). Health psychologists work to further our understanding of the impact of these interrelationships between psychology and behaviour so that appropriate behaviour change interventions can be designed.

The promotion and maintenance of health

This aspect of health psychology is directed towards healthy individuals to raise awareness of the ways in which health can be protected and maintained.

The improvement of the healthcare system and the formulation of health policy

Health psychologists are also concerned with understanding the impact of the healthcare system and health policy on our behaviour. Although research in this area is not as abundant as in the other three, it is an important aspect of the role of health psychologists. Indeed, the UK Division of Health Psychology co-ordinates a database of expert health psychologists who can respond to government initiatives to ensure that the profession’s concerns are addressed and included in new health-related policies.
Why is health psychology important?

It is clear from the four key areas outlined above that health psychologists contribute much to academic knowledge as well as to practice. Health psychologists’ work is theoretically informed and evidence-based, and a major part of it concerns behaviour change. This is of vital importance because the key public health issues currently facing society could be reduced if behaviour change could be encouraged and intervention(s) successfully implemented. Consider, for example:

**Antibiotics:** Think about overuse of antibiotics – the behaviour of both health professionals (who are too quick to prescribe) and the general public (who are too quick to request antibiotics, or who do not take the full course of medicine as prescribed) needs to change, and change urgently if we are not to be in a dire situation of being immune to the antibiotics we have access to. Sarah Golding, who is currently completing a PhD which explores antibiotic use, suggests: ‘Health psychologists can assist by encouraging different groups of people, including patients, parents, pet-owners, farmers, doctors, pharmacists, and veterinarians, to use antibiotics responsibly.’ (Quoted in Rhodes, 2015: 960)

**Obesity:** Eating is an activity that is not solely about reducing our hunger. We eat for pleasure, to mark special occasions, to bond, and to make ourselves feel better when we are down. What, how and why we eat are influenced by many factors. Health psychologists have a key role to play, in collaboration with other professionals, to address this growing problem.

**Alcohol:** Alcohol problems vary from country to country. In the UK, a major concern is with **binge drinking**, with many city centres dealing with extremely drunk and disorderly young people during weekend evenings. Similarly, the embarrassing reputation of British travellers abroad involves unruly, drunken, disorderly behaviour (Marks et al., 2011). Means of addressing this problem vary: some suggest that we need to increase the price of alcohol and restrict advertising, whereas the drinks industry, as you would expect, firmly suggests that educational approaches and self-regulation are more appropriate strategies. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that educational practices are not so effective (Marks et al., 2011). Education might improve knowledge,
and even change attitudes, but education alone does not necessarily change behaviour. However, there is some evidence that brief interventions, for example advice given by general practitioners (GPs) or at hospital emergency departments, are proving effective. Such opportunistic interventions are an excellent opportunity for health psychologists to use their evidence base and work with other health professionals to inform the best means of designing and delivering these brief interventions.

**Sedentary lifestyle:** We will note later in this book that our lifestyle has evolved from that of an active hunter-gatherer to a more sedentary lifestyle. Indeed, many of us simply sit at a desk all day, every working day. We get up in the morning. Walk to our car. Drive to work. Walk from our car to our desk. Sit. Eat lunch at our desk. Finish the day’s work. Walk to the car. Drive home. Walk into our house. Sit. Go to bed. And start over the next day. Few of us are taking the recommended minimum amount of exercise. Health psychologists are working in this field, designing interventions to increase our activity levels.

**Smoking:** Much has already been done to reduce smoking. In the UK we have a ban on smoking in public places. Thankfully, the days when an evening out at the pub meant that you would have to wash your hair and clothes in order to remove the thick smell of smoke that had seeped into everything are long gone. In addition, we have health warnings on cigarette packets – we know that smoking causes cancer and respiratory problems. Packets themselves are hidden behind closed doors in shops, and in order to buy cigarettes you have to ask for them by name. In addition, it is socially acceptable to frown on smoking. However, in spite of all these barriers, many people still choose to smoke, or find it difficult to give up. Health psychologists have a key role to play in informing the design of health interventions, drawing from the vast body of knowledge about behaviour change.

In short, health psychology is concerned with the study of psychological processes in health, illness and healthcare (Kaptein and Weinman, 2004). Health psychologists study the behavioural factors that are associated with staying healthy as well as exploring how people who are ill can be helped to adapt to, or recover from, their illness. The remainder of this book explores health behaviour and the application of health psychology models and
practice to real-world examples, before concluding with an exploratory look into the potential future for health psychology.

**Further reading**


**Key search terms**

- Biopsychosocial model
- Medical model
- Health psychology
- Sedentary lifestyle
acute stress, 30, 90, 92, 105
adapted to flee famine hypothesis (AFFH), 124, 220
adherence to medical regimes, 31, 33, 36, 107
adrenaline, 87
adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH), 87
alcohol, 6, 7, 15, 18, 44, 50, 116, 135, 142–150, 171
impacts, 143–144
Initiation, 142
Interventions, 144–150
anorexia nervosa, 121–126
adapted to flee famine hypothesis (AFFH), 124, 220
cardiac dysfunction, 124
central nervous system abnormalities, 124
cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), 125–126
evolutionary explanations, 124
family background, 122–123
genetic factors, 123
management of anorexia, 125–126
musculoskeletal problems, 125
psychological factors, 123
approach style, 220
autonomic nervous system, 85–86
avoidant style, 220
behaviour change approach, 65, 66, 220
behaviour change wheel, 45, 59, 61, 220
behaviour change taxonomy, 45, 58, 221
big five, 98, 221
biofeedback, 102, 103, 120, 221
biopsychosocial model, 3, 9, 16, 24, 25, 41, 221
body mass index’ (BMI), 126, 127, 130, 221, 226
boundary model, 120, 221
buffering hypothesis, 102, 221
bulimia nervosa, 121–126, 221
cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), 125, 126
management, 125–126
psychological factors, 123
cancer, 4, 6, 8, 17, 26, 29, 44, 47–49, 70, 74, 77, 100, 104–105, 107, 118, 130, 137–138, 143, 154–155, 160, 172
carbohydrate craving syndrome, 113–114, 221
dieting, direct effects hypothesis, 101, 223
eating behaviour, 37, 56, 109–134
biofeedback, 102–103, 120, 221
biological explanations, 111–112
boundary model, 120, 221
carbohydrate craving syndrome, 113–114, 221
dieting, 110, 118–121, 134, 227
evolutionary explanations, 110–111
psychological explanations, 113–118
exposure, 113, 115
food neophobia, 115, 134, 223
mood, 113–115
social learning, 116–118
Neuropeptide Y, 112
neural mechanisms, 111–112
restrained eating, 119, 227
Set-Point Theory, 112
emotion-focused coping, 97–99, 107, 223
endocrine system, 85, 86–99, 107, 223
adrenal glands, 87
adrenaline, 87
adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), 87
corticotrophin-releasing factor (CRF), 87
hypothalamus, 87, 111–13, 120
noradrenaline, 87
pituitary-adrenal system, 87
sympathomedullary pathway, 86–87
environmental stress, 91–92
epidemiology, 16–18
observational case control study, 18–19, 221
observational cohort study, 18, 20, 222
observational descriptive study, 18–19, 223
randomised control trial, 20–21, 227
coronary heart disease, 6, 28, 29, 44, 137–138
reacted eating, 119, 227
corticotrophin-releasing factor (CRF), 87
cortisol, 87, 93, 94, 103
cues to action, 46, 47, 223, 224
defence mechanisms, 99, 223, 227
deferral, 99–100, 223
rationalization, 99, 227
regression, 99, 227
repression, 99, 227
denial, 99–100, 223
daily hassles scale, 93
defence mechanisms, 99, 223, 227
deferral, 99–100, 223
rationalization, 99, 227
regression, 99, 227
repression, 99, 227
denial, 99–100, 223
correlation coefficient, 138
endocrine system, 85, 86–88
adrenal glands, 87
adrenaline, 87
adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), 87
corticotrophin-releasing factor (CRF), 87
hypothalamus, 87, 111–13, 120
noradrenaline, 87
pituitary-adrenal system, 87
sympathomedullary pathway, 86–87
environmental stress, 91–92
epidemiology, 16–18
observational case control study, 18–19, 221
observational cohort study, 18, 20, 222
observational descriptive study, 18–19, 223
randomised control trial, 20–21, 227
carbohydrate craving syndrome, 113–114, 221
central nervous system, 85–86, 124, 149
chronic pain, 25, 152, 158, 160–161, 163–164, 166
chronic stress, 90, 92
cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), 102, 104–106, 125, 222
COM-B Model, 45, 58–59, 61, 220, 222
community development approach, 65, 68–69, 222
approach style, 220
avoidant style, 220
coping styles, 97, 222
emotion-focused coping, 223
personality and coping, 97–98
problem-focused coping, 227
social support and coping, 97, 100–102
coronary heart disease, 6, 28, 29, 44, 137–138

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fat cells, 112, 129, 223
fat cell theory, 127, 129, 223
fear arousal, 71, 79
food neophilia, 115, 134, 223
framing, 70–72, 224
gastric bypass, 131, 224
Gate Control Theory, 158–159
general adaptation syndrome (GAS), 88, 224
hardiness, 30–31, 224
health behaviour, 11–42, 224
  age, 26
  gender, 26–27
  hardiness, 30–31
  personality, 28–30
  socioeconomic factors, 27–28
health beliefs, 31–41
  adherence to medical regimes, 31, 33, 36, 107
  cultural factors, 36–37
  knowledge & expectations, 38–39
  lay beliefs, 31, 33
  locus of control, 33–34
  speed of recovery, 32–33
health belief model, 43, 45, 46, 47, 60, 61
  cues to action, 46, 47, 223, 224
  health motivation, 46, 224
  perceived barriers/costs, 46–47, 49, 226
  perceived benefits, 45–46, 48, 226
  perceived severity, 45–46, 48–49, 226
  perceived susceptibility, 45–48, 226
health motivation, 46, 225
health promotion, 16–18, 22, 44, 47, 60, 64, 65, 67–71, 73, 75, 77–79, 147, 171, 220, 222, 224, 227
  behaviour change approach, 65, 66, 220
community development approach, 65, 68–69, 222
  fear arousal, 71, 79
  health promotion and mass media, (see also mass media), 73–75
  message framing, 70–71
  self-empowerment approach, 65, 67, 227
  unrealistic optimism, 73, 229
hypothalamus, 87, 111–113, 120
  lateral hypothalamus, 111
  ventromedial hypothalamus, 111
illness representations, 157–158, 225
immune system, 96, 227
insulin, 34, 114
intention-behaviour gap, 51–52, 57, 144, 225
laparoscopic gastric banding, 131, 225
leptin, 112
locus of control, 31, 33–35, 42, 225
mass media, 31, 70, 73–78, 117, 225
  electronic media, 73, 75
  print-based media, 73, 75
  radio, 73–75, 109
  television, 73–75, 109, 117, 129–130
medical model, 3, 9, 16, 24, 25, 65, 225
message framing, 70–71
mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), 106, 226
motor neuron, 85–86
nervous system, 85–87, 93, 96, 108, 124, 149
  autonomic nervous system, 85–86
  central nervous system, 85–86, 124, 149
  neurotransmitter, 85, 112, 114
parasympathetic nervous system, 85–86
Index

peripheral nervous system, 85–86
somatic nervous system, 85–86
sympathetic nervous system, 85–86
neuropeptide Y, 112
neurotransmitter, 85, 112, 114
noradrenaline, 87

obesity, 126–133
  behaviourally explanations, 129–130
  behavioural interventions, 130–131
body mass index (BMI), 126, 127, 130, 221, 226
  evolutionary explanations, 110–111
fat cells, 112, 129, 223
  fat cell theory, 127, 129, 223
  gastric bypass, 131, 224
  genetic explanations, 127–128
  laparoscopic gastric banding, 131, 225
  metabolic rate theory, 127, 128, 226
  surgical interventions, 131–132
thrifty gene, 111, 229

obesogenic environment, 127, 129, 133, 134

pain management, 161–165
parasympathetic nervous system, 85–86
paraventricular nucleus (PVN), 112
perceived barriers/costs, 46–47, 49, 226
perceived behavioural control, 21, 49–51, 226
perceived benefits, 45–46, 48, 226
perceived severity, 45–46, 48–49, 226
perceived susceptibility, 45–48, 226
peripheral nervous system, 85–86
persistent physical health conditions, 152–166
  impact, 154–157
  prevalence, 153–154
personality, 28–31, 97–99, 229
  big five, 98, 221
  hardiness, 30–31, 224

type A personality, 28–29, 229
type B personality, 28–29, 229
type C personality, 28–29, 229
type D personality, 28–30, 229
problem-focused coping, 97, 107, 227
progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), 102
psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), 96, 106, 227
public health, 7, 17, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 79, 135, 172
  rationalization, 99, 227
  regression, 99, 227
  repression, 99, 227
  restrained eating, 119, 227
self-empowerment approach, 65, 67, 227
self-regulatory model (SRM), 39–41, 227
  consequences, 40
  controllability, 40
  curability, 40
  identity, 40
illness representation, 39–41, 157, 225
  perceived cause, 40
  time line, 40
serotonin, 114

set-point theory, 111–112, 228
smoking, 3, 4, 6, 8, 15, 34, 44, 47, 50, 54, 55, 66, 68, 73–75, 135–142, 151, 172–173
  impact, 137–138
  initiation, 136
  interventions, 138
social cognitive approach, 43, 228
social support, 54, 97, 100, 101, 102, 108, 139, 154, 221, 223, 228
buffering hypothesis, 102, 221
direct effects hypothesis, 101, 223
somatic nervous system, 85–86
stages of change model, 43, 45, 53–55, 60, 61, 228
action, 53–54
contemplation, 53–55
maintenance, 53–54
pre-contemplation, 53–55
preparation, 53–55
stress, 83–108
acute stress, 30, 90
chronic stress, 90, 92
cortisol, 87, 93–94, 103
daily hassles scale, 93
decision making, 91
dermatocrine system, 85–86
environmental stress, 91–92
general adaptation syndrome (GAS), 88, 224
immune system, 96
nervous system, 85–87, 93, 96, 108
physiological explanations, 85–88
physiological measures, 92–93
psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), 96, 106, 227
relationship stress, 91
stress–response, 84, 85, 89, 92, 102, 104, 228
transactional model of stress, 89, 90, 229
work-life balance scale, 93
workplace stress, 91
stress management, 96–107
biofeedback, 102, 103, 221
cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), 102, 104–106, 125, 222
desensitization, 102, 103, 228
drugs, 104
emotional expression, 29, 104, 105
exercise, 103
humour, 106
mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR),
music, 106
progressive muscle relaxation (PMR),
stress toughening, 107
swearing, 105
systematic desensitisation, 103
subjective norm, 50–52, 228
swearing, 105
sympathetic nervous system, 85–86
sympathomedullary pathway, 86, 87
systematic desensitisation, 103
type A personality, 28–29, 229
type B personality, 28–29, 229
type C personality, 28–29, 229
type D personality, 28–30, 229
unrealistic optimism, 73, 229
workplace stress, 91
zombie, 22