

Family Stress Model (often called Family Stress Theory)

I do not know how many of you have learned about Family Stress Theory in other classes, but I think it is a very useful theory to help us understand why some families can experience stress and it does not seem to harm them much while other families experience stress and it overwhelms them. Look at Figure 10.1 on page 303 of your text to see the distinction between the ABCX and the Double ABCX Models. The left side of the figure, including the triangle associated with the crisis, represents the ABCX Model. The entire figure represents the Double ABCX Model. I will provide a brief explanation of each of them.

ABCX Model

The ABCX Model was developed first. It is a simplistic model but it was a very good starting point to help us understand how stress impacts families.

A represents a stressful life event or transition that has potential to change a family's life course (e.g., loss of job, untimely death, serious illness). The stressor can originate from inside or outside the family. Stress does not automatically send a family into crisis. A crisis might occur if a family lacks resources (**B**) and believes it cannot manage the stress (**C**).

B represents the resources a family brings to a stressful situation; resources that keep a stressor from turning into a crisis. Resources can include social support networks of family and friends; can include family flexibility, and can include individual resources such as intelligence or an even temperament. These are just some examples of resources that families bring to a situation. Think about our study of family cohesion and adaptability because they are considered resources in this model.

C represents the meaning the family attaches to the stressor, such as, the belief that the stressor will overwhelm the family versus the belief that the family can manage and overcome the stressor. The family's definition of the stressor determines whether the stressor is viewed as manageable or unmanageable. The definition is also connected to the family resources. For instance, if the house of a wealthy family burns down, the family would likely view this stressor as manageable. They would have insurance on the house and have the resources to stay elsewhere until it is rebuilt. A poor family with no insurance on their house would face extreme hardship if it burned down.

X represents the amount of disruptiveness that occurs to the family system. The amount of disruptiveness results from the interaction between the stressor (**A**), family resources (**B**), and family meaning (**C**). If the family lacks resources and considers the stressor unmanageable, it can turn into a crisis.

Double ABCX Model

This model was developed because it became apparent that stressors do not typically come one at a time providing the family with enough time to resolve each stressor as it appears. Instead, stressors tend to pile-up increasing the difficulty of managing them. In addition, the ABCX model did not allow us to understand the long term impact of this pile-up of stressors and the crisis that resulted. Thus, the Double ABCX Model is a more comprehensive model that includes post-crisis recovery efforts made by the family. This model emphasizes the pile-up of demands typically experienced by families, and the family strengths that influence adaptation after the family reaches the crisis point.

While families tend to handle stress in a predictable manner, using habitual, predictable patterns of behavior, unexpected crises may send them into a tailspin. How well families cope with unexpected crises, depends upon several factors. This model helps you to understand those factors. Coping strategies were added to this model. They're viewed as the bridge between behavior and cognition. They influence the behavior exhibited by the family and the perception of the event.

aA represents the immediate stressor and the demands or changes that emerge from previous stressors and consequences of coping attempts. In the text, there is an example of a father who dies, leaves his wife and young children behind, they have to cope with his death, role changes, economic uncertainty and possible strained relations with in-laws.

bB represents the family's ability to meet its needs through resources at the individual level (e.g., intelligence, education, mental health), at the family level (e.g., extended family that helps with childcare, financial help), and at the community level (e.g., survivor services such as support groups). These resources facilitate realistic perceptions of one's ability to cope with a stressor.

cC is how the family interprets the crisis; it includes the meaning given to the stressor. The example given in the text was of a wife who lost her husband. If the wife believes she has lost her only chance at happiness, she will have an extremely tough time dealing with the loss of her husband.

xX is how the family adapts to the stressor. At one end of the continuum is bonadaptation in which the family adjusts to the situation, and at the other end of the continuum is maladaptation in which the family does not adjust well.