

1 'Culturogenic' stress

While culture can protect against stress, it can also make it more likely. That is, certain cultural beliefs, values and practices are likely to *increase* the number of stressors that the individual is exposed to. For example, each culture defines what constitutes 'success' (as opposed to 'failure'), 'prestige' (as opposed to 'bad'), and 'good news' (as opposed to 'bad tidings'), and there is considerable variation between these in different societies. In part of New Guinea, for example, failure to have enough pigs or yams to exchange with other tribal members on certain occasions may lead to a stressful loss of face; in the Western World, failure to 'keep up with the Joneses' in terms of consumer objects may also result in subjective stress. In each society, individuals try to reach the defined goals, levels of prestige and standards of behaviour that the cultural group expects of its members. Failure to reach these goals (even if these goals seem absurd to members of another society) may result in frustration, anxiety, depression, and even the giving-up-given-up complex described above. Some beliefs can be directly stressful, such as the belief that one has been cursed or hexed by a powerful person, against whom there is little defence. In some cases, as in voodoo death, this may result in the victim's death after a short period of time. Other cultural values that may induce stress are an emphasis on war-like activities, or intense

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competition for marriage partners, money, goods or prestige. The unequal distribution of wealth in a society, based on its 'economic culture', is usually stressful to its poorer members, whose lives are a daily struggle for existence, but economic privileges, too, sometimes involve high levels of stress, caused by competitiveness and fear of the poor.

In its effect upon the health of the individual, therefore there are both negative and positive sides to belief; as Hahn and Kleinman²⁰ put it, 'belief heals'. Those beliefs and behaviours which contribute to stress, and which are acquired by growing up within a particular society, can therefore be regarded as a form of culturally induced or *culturogenic* stress.

This Type of stress is also an example of the *nocebo* phenomenon (from the Latin root, *noceo*, I hurt), which is the negative effect on health of beliefs and expectations – and therefore the exact reverse of the 'placebo' phenomenon (see Chapter 8).