

## Review of Foreign Studies of the Mechanisms of Mental Adaptation in Mentally Healthy People

***Maria M. Pronicheva***

V.P. Serbsky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7468-9221>, e-mail: [mariya\\_pronichev@mail.ru](mailto:mariya_pronichev@mail.ru)

***Alexander A. Dubinsky***

V.P. Serbsky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6091-3299>, e-mail: [aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru](mailto:aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru)

***Olga Yu. Rashevskaya***

V.P. Serbsky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2905-2173>, e-mail: [olga\\_rashevskaya@bk.ru](mailto:olga_rashevskaya@bk.ru)

The article presents an overview of modern foreign studies devoted to the study of adaptation mechanisms of mentally healthy people. The authors examine the relationship between mental health and physical illness, the role of social support in adaptation to stress and its impact on psychological well-being, as well as the impact of stressors on emotional regulation. A separate block of studies is devoted to the study of post-traumatic stress disorder as a manifestation of maladjustment in high-risk and life-threatening situations. It is shown that studies of the mechanisms of mental adaptation are necessary for the development of effective strategies for maintaining emotional stability and psychological well-being. The present study provides an idea of the vectors of foreign empirical studies over the past 7 years, the degree of development of the problem of adaptation mechanisms and coping with stress in high-risk and life-threatening situations.

***Keywords:*** mechanisms of mental adaptation, stress response, regulation of behavior, high-risk situations, life-threatening situations, mental health.

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## Обзор зарубежных исследований механизмов психической адаптации у психически здоровых лиц

### **Проничева М.М.**

Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр психиатрии и наркологии имени В.П. Сербского Министерства здравоохранения Российской Федерации (ФГБУ «НМИЦ ПН им. В.П. Сербского» Минздрава России), г. Москва, Российская Федерация  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7468-9221>, e-mail: [mariya\\_pronichev@mail.ru](mailto:mariya_pronichev@mail.ru)

### **Дубинский А.А.**

Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр психиатрии и наркологии имени В.П. Сербского Министерства здравоохранения Российской Федерации (ФГБУ «НМИЦ ПН им. В.П. Сербского» Минздрава России), г. Москва, Российская Федерация  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6091-3299>, e-mail: [aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru](mailto:aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru)

### **Рашевская О.Ю.**

Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр психиатрии и наркологии имени В.П. Сербского Министерства здравоохранения Российской Федерации (ФГБУ «НМИЦ ПН им. В.П. Сербского» Минздрава России), г. Москва, Российская Федерация  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2905-2173>, e-mail: [olga\\_rashevskaya@bk.ru](mailto:olga_rashevskaya@bk.ru)

Статья представляет обзор современных зарубежных исследований, посвященных изучению адаптационных механизмов психически здоровых людей. Авторами исследуется взаимосвязь между психическим здоровьем и физическими заболеваниями, роль социальной поддержки в адаптации к стрессу и ее влияние на психологическое благополучие, а также влияние стрессоров на эмоциональную регуляцию. Отдельный блок исследований посвящен изучению посттравматического стрессового расстройства как проявления дезадаптации в высокорисковых и жизнеугрожающих ситуациях. Показано, что изучение механизмов психической адаптации необходимо для разработки эффективных стратегий поддержания эмоциональной устойчивости и психологического благополучия. Настоящее исследование дает представление о векторах зарубежных эмпирических исследований за последние 7 лет, о степени разработанности проблемы механизмов адаптации и совладания со стрессом в высокорисковых и жизнеугрожающих ситуациях.

**Ключевые слова:** механизмы психической адаптации, стрессовая реакция, регуляция поведения, ситуации повышенного риска, жизнеугрожающие ситуации, психическое здоровье.

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### **Introduction**

Socio-economic and technological progress confront a person with significant stresses that affect its physical and intellectual state [33]. In addition, priority areas for the development of healthcare are strengthening and preserving the mental health of people, improving the system of psychoprophylactic work in the context of an increase in the number man-made, biological and social threats.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), 22% of people who have survived war or other armed conflicts in the last 10 years develop mental disorders such as depression, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar disorder [25]. It emphasizes that mental health is an important aspect of full social and economic recovery after emergencies, both at the level of society and the country as a whole, and at the individual level.

The prevalence of mental disorders varies depending on the frequency of disasters and traumatic events. Thus, studies show that stressful environmental influences (epidemics, disasters) lead to a significant increase in the number of mental disorders. In particular, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people seeking psychiatric help with complaints of anxiety and depressive symptoms has sharply increased. There was an increase in indicators of operational and organizational stress (88.4% and 87.2%, respectively), emotional burnout (10.9%) and a decrease in resilience (53.8%) among employees of internal affairs bodies and doctors. 24.6% had a high severity of socio-psychological maladjustment [3; 35].

Particular attention is paid to studying the consequences of occupational stress and maladjustment in representatives of dangerous professions. It has been established that in everyday conditions, maladaptive neuropsychic states are observed in 23% of employees of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations, and after eliminating complex fires – in 33% [1]. It has been shown that professional stress in representatives of dangerous professions has a negative impact on self-regulation processes, leading to a decrease in labor efficiency, loss of productivity and making wrong and risky decisions [2; 4].

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is considered as one of the consequences of stressful effects on humans. It is noted that it is directly dependent on the intensity of stress and develops in 50-80% of people who have suffered severe stress. Foreign studies have shown that the prevalence of PTSD throughout the year remains at 4.8% [16].

Thus, most studies are aimed at studying the features of mental adaptation in representatives of dangerous professions and from the point of view of mental illnesses. However, taking into account the current situation and the growth of social tension and the tendency for life-threatening situations to increase, it seems important to review and analyze studies of the mechanisms of mental adaptation in mentally healthy people.

### **Methods and materials of the study**

The search for foreign research materials was carried out in the Science Direct ([www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)), PubMed (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>), which include publications indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. A search was conducted for articles published in English according to the following criteria: mechanisms of mental adaptation, stress response and regulation of behavior in high-risk and life-threatening situations in mentally healthy people. More than 5,000 sources were identified. Despite the large number of studies on this topic, there are very few modern works. Preference was given to empirical studies for the period from 2018 to 2024.

### **Results and discussion. Social adaptation and socio-psychological adaptation**

The study of the process of social adaptation and morbidity is carried out within the framework of studies devoted to the analysis of the impact of life events and stress on health. Relevant studies are usually carried out using rating scales of social adaptation, named “life events questionnaires” [15]. However, research that began in the late 60s and continues until recently demonstrates that isolated events do not play a decisive role in the occurrence of the disease [12; 13]. Moreover, the score does not explicitly imply that the event is of equal importance to different people, e.g. its in-

dividual significance and the possibility of selective selection of recorded events, depending on the personal characteristics of the subject, are not taken into account.

An important direction in developing and deepening ideas about the role of life events and social adaptation in the genesis of neurotic and psychosomatic disorders has been their inclusion in the broad context of psychological and psychophysiological studies of humans. In accordance to the adaptation concept, the question of the similarities and differences of pathogenetically significant factors of neurotic and psychosomatic disorders can be presented as a question of the similarities and differences of factors underlying the development of clinically pronounced forms of violation of two interrelated aspects of mental adaptation: psychopathological phenomena that are in the nature of neuroses can be associated primarily with violations of mental adaptation itself, and psychosomatic disorders – with violations of primarily pathophysiological adaptation.

It can be assumed that personality characteristics can influence the subjective selection of recorded events, changing their individual significance, or, by determining the effectiveness of interpersonal interaction, they can increase or decrease the probability of the occurrence of certain events. Most likely, both mechanisms take place.

The concept of “socio-psychological adaptation” is defined as a complex process of interpersonal interaction in a certain social community with its group standards, value orientations and traditions, the convergence of activity goals and value orientations, the individual’s assimilation of the norms and traditions of the group, and entry into the role structure.

Research on the adaptability of college students suggests that stress and anxiety levels can impact students’ ability to learn effectively and adapt to new environments. It is important to develop regulation and self-regulation strategies to cope with high levels of stress and anxiety. It is noted that students’ adaptability plays an important role in improving the psychological model of quality education. At the same time, the psychological mechanism for the development of adaptability is discussed, which correlates with the years of study of students [27; 34; 36]. The aspect of cultural diversity in stress responses and individual differences in approaches to reducing perceived cultural incongruity are also noted when studying students’ adaptation [32]. The cultural aspect of mental adaptation is especially clearly shown in the example of expatriates [21].

Luxembourg scientists conducted a study aimed at studying learning and adaptation in older adults [33]. Their main conclusion is that there is a need for environmental support for aging in the form of assistive technology and supporting older people’s desire to learn new things.

Australian and Canadian scientists believe climate change is affecting mental health [14]. They believe that climate change has a serious impact on people’s mental health, putting them at risk for stress and psychopathology. It is therefore important to take priority actions to overcome these risks and improve adaptation to new climate conditions.

American and Canadian scientists consider adaptation and mental health from a neurophysiological point of view. They study behavioral and structural adaptation to stress [8]. Their research suggests that unpredictable aversive experiences or stressors lead to changes in behavior associated with depression and anxiety and changes in hippocampal structure, including decreased adult neurogenesis, granular and pyramidal dendritic morphology, and volume. Considering the relationship between behavioral and structural changes, they discuss the possibility that these changes may be largely adaptive. Specifically, they suggest that new neurons in the dentate gyrus increase behavioral adaptability to changes in the environment by biasing behavior in new situations based on previous experiences of stress. Conversely, atrophic changes in the hippocampus and decreased neurogenesis in adults following chronic stress may serve to limit stress responses and stabilize behavior during chronic stress.

It is noted that despite its potential for adaptation, the largest risk factor for mental illness remains family history, whether related to genes, environment, or both, and suggesting a limited ability of the brain to adapt to these early and lifelong risk factors [5; 7]. The hypothesis that genetic structure modifies the trajectory of adaptive behavior underlies current efforts to identify specific genetic changes associated with mental illness. For example, genes associated with schizophrenia, such as *NRG1*, *DISC1*, or *DTNBP1*, are under positive selection, suggesting that these genes drive a behavioral phenotype that may confer an evolutionary advantage in certain conditions. The question is whether potentially deleterious inherited traits produce homeostatic compensatory responses and whether these responses can be enhanced through early interventions.

### **Mental health and psychological adaptation in high-risk and life-threatening situations**

Mental health and psychological adaptation play an important role in everyone's life, especially in situations of crisis and stressful situations such as diseases, natural disasters, wars and pandemics. Therefore, studies related to stress, high-risk and life-threatening situations occupy a special place in the study of adaptation and mental health. In this regard, foreign studies often touch upon the issues of PTSD. For example, Israeli and English scientists [28] found that higher levels of general negative emotions predicted post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression two months after the armed conflict. Levels of positive affect and negative and positive emotional reactions to sirens were not associated with subsequent symptomatology. Their results indicate a stronger role for general negative emotions as predictors of symptomatology compared to momentary emotional reactivity and a stronger predictive role for negative emotions compared to positive emotions.

Italian [9], Spanish [10; 30] and Turkish scientists [22] focused on the effects of COVID-19 related to stress and adaptation to it. The first evidence for the mediating role of worry in the relationship between coping and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown was offered. It confirms the clinical importance of studying people's coping strategies as well as levels of (cognitive) anxiety and their long-term impact on psychological well-being during the outbreak to ensure adequate personalized interventions. Psychological support should enhance emotion-focused coping strategies, which have a protective effect on anxiety.

It has been shown that people with high levels of attachment anxiety will experience lower resilience due to emotion-focused coping strategies [22]. Strengthening attachment security may reduce the use of emotion-focused strategies and may increase resilience in individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety.

It has also been shown that one of the consequences of COVID-19 is symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder [11; 17; 30]. At the same time, emotional intelligence is a key health resource that helps reduce unproductive behavior. And, as a result, it is the main means of reducing stress and increasing productivity.

There is growing evidence that dysfunctional personality traits, associated with psychological maladaptation and psychopathology, may play an important role in an individual's ability to cope with major stressful events. In this regard, the relationship between maladaptive personality traits, such as psychoticism, detachment and negative affect, and psychological distress, taking into account the consequences of COVID-19-related anxiety and emotional dysregulation [30]. Maladaptive personality traits (psychoticism, detachment, and negative affect) have been found to be associated with psychological distress. COVID-19-related anxiety and emotional dysregulation partly explain this association. The study's findings suggest that in the early months of 2022, as government restrictions were lifted, although the world's population was no longer under nationwide lockdown,

the emotional component associated with COVID-19 could still explain, at least in part, the association between maladaptive traits personality and psychological stress.

In a study of adolescent's COVID-19 stress, it was shown that adolescents' perceived stress from the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly positively correlated with their depressive symptoms. It has been shown that adolescents' character strengths may act as a protective factor and may buffer the impact of the perceived stress of the COVID-19 pandemic on their depressive symptoms and help support their mental health [24; 29]. In addition to character strengths, foreign scientists name a supportive family among the protective factors of stress [18; 20; 23]. Whereas a family in which abuse was noted, on the contrary, is a risk factor for maladjustment in the future. It is noted that distancing from such a family is a basic coping strategy that promotes growth and recovery.

Results of a study of adolescents who experienced an earthquake [19], showed that PTSD significantly predicted future depression, with the effect partially mediated by negative life events after the earthquake. Gender was not found to be a significant moderator between PTSD and depression.

Another direction of research is to study models of psychological adaptation. Mental health and coping play an important role in everyone's life, so it is important to pay attention to them and develop effective strategies to maintain resilience and psychological well-being. Using the example of nurses, it was shown that the psychological adaptation model of nursing can effectively help nurses experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome after a natural disaster [26]. Thus, it is important to create a supportive environment for health workers and provide them with the necessary help and support in difficult situations.

French scientists have proposed a model of adaptability as a key mechanism of interaction between people [6]. Research has shown the influence of adaptation mechanisms on the experience of interaction between people and their perceptions. Communication with an adaptive agent is perceived as more positive than with a non-adaptive one. Research on human interaction in virtual space emphasizes the importance of taking expectations into account.

### **Conclusion**

Summarizing the review of the mechanisms of mental adaptation of mentally healthy people, it is worth highlighting several vectors for studying this issue. From the point of view of social and socio-psychological adaptation, areas of adaptation related to the educational environment and climate change were highlighted. Also the relationship between mental adaptation and mental health from a neuropsychological point of view was noted.

The studies presented in the article show that stressful environmental influences can lead to an increase in mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and bipolar disorder. Scientists turn their attention to the consequences of COVID-19, natural disasters such as an earthquake, as well as the consequences of armed conflicts.

The impact of socio-economic and technological progress on people's physical and intellectual state, as well as the increasing frequency of man-made, biological, and social threats, highlight the need for further research in this area. It appears that very important research has been conducted on models of mental adaptation.

Studies on the mechanisms of mental adaptation are essential for developing effective strategies to maintain resilience and psychological well-being. The research presented here provides valuable insights into how individuals cope with stress and adapt to high-risk and life-threatening situations. Also this will help improve mental health outcomes and promote overall social and economic recovery after emergencies. Concerning the fact that in periods of social crisis, social stress disorders become widespread among the majority of the population, it seems important to conduct further

studies of the mechanisms of mental adaptation not only within the framework of clinically defined disorders, but also at the preclinical level.

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Проничева М.М., Дубинский А.А., Рашевская О.Ю.  
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### **Information about the authors**

*Maria M. Pronicheva*, PhD in Psychology, Senior Researcher Associate, Laboratory of Psychohygiene and Psychoprophylaxis, V.P. Serbsky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7468-9221>, e-mail: [mariya\\_pronichev@mail.ru](mailto:mariya_pronichev@mail.ru)

*Alexander A. Dubinsky*, PhD in Psychology, Senior Researcher, Laboratory of Psychohygiene and Psychoprophylaxis, V.P. Serbsky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6091-3299>, e-mail: [aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru](mailto:aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru)

*Olga Yu. Rashevskaya*, Junior Researcher, Laboratory of Psychohygiene and Psychoprophylaxis, V.P. Serbsky National Medical Research Centre for Psychiatry and Narcology of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2905-2173>, e-mail: [olga\\_rashevskaya@bk.ru](mailto:olga_rashevskaya@bk.ru)

### **Информация об авторах**

*Проничева Мария Михайловна*, кандидат психологических наук, старший научный сотрудник, лаборатория психогигиены и психопрофилактики, Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр психиатрии и наркологии имени В.П. Сербского Министерства здравоохранения Российской Федерации (ФГБУ «НМИЦ ПН им. В.П. Сербского» Минздрава России), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7468-9221>, e-mail: [mariya\\_pronichev@mail.ru](mailto:mariya_pronichev@mail.ru)

*Дубинский Александр Александрович*, кандидат психологических наук, старший научный сотрудник, лаборатория психогигиены и психопрофилактики, Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр психиатрии и наркологии имени В.П. Сербского Минздрава России

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(ФГБУ «НМИЦ ПН имени В.П. Сербского»), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID:  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6091-3299>, e-mail: [aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru](mailto:aleksandr-dubinskij@yandex.ru)

*Рашевская Ольга Юрьевна*, младший научный сотрудник, лаборатория психогигиены и психопрофилактики, Национальный медицинский исследовательский центр психиатрии и наркологии имени В.П. Сербского Минздрава России (ФГБУ «НМИЦ ПН имени В.П. Сербского»), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2905-2173>, e-mail: [olga\\_rashevskaya@bk.ru](mailto:olga_rashevskaya@bk.ru)

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