

# Adjustment

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November 14, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Adjustment*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=25721>

## Adjustment

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Sociology, Education, Behavioral Science

### 1. Core Definition

Adjustment is fundamentally defined as a dynamic process through which an organism, typically a human being, seeks to establish and maintain a harmonious or functional relationship with its internal and external environment. This process necessitates the alteration of behavior, cognitive frameworks, or emotional responses in response to changes, demands, or pressures emanating from the surroundings or from internal psychological states. As the source content suggests, when individuals describe themselves as being in an "adjustment period," they are acknowledging a phase of transition characterized by active efforts to re-establish a state of psychological equilibrium or acceptance amidst environmental or personal upheaval. The goal is not merely survival, but the achievement of a satisfactory level of functioning and well-being within the given context.

The core of adjustment lies in adaptation--the organism's capacity to cope effectively with novelty, stress, or discrepancy. This adaptive mechanism is crucial for mental health, allowing individuals to navigate complex social structures, meet societal expectations, and fulfill personal goals despite obstacles. Psychologists often distinguish between two primary forms of adjustment: internal adjustment, which involves modifying one's own attitudes, beliefs, or self-concept to fit reality; and external adjustment, which involves making observable changes to one's actions or behaviors to better align with environmental demands. Effective adjustment often requires a sophisticated interplay between these two forms, enabling the individual to mitigate sources of stress while concurrently optimizing their interactions with the world.

Crucially, adjustment is not a singular event but a continuous, ongoing process throughout the lifespan. From infancy, where an individual adjusts to basic physiological needs and caregiver relationships, through adolescence, characterized by adjusting to identity formation and peer pressure, and into adulthood, involving adjustment to career changes, family roles, and aging, the requirement for adaptive behavior remains constant. Failure to adequately adjust to persistent stressors or major life transitions can lead to maladaptive behaviors, psychological distress, and, in severe cases, the development of psychological disorders. Therefore, the study of adjustment is central to understanding both normative human development and psychopathology.

### 2. Theoretical Frameworks of Adjustment

The concept of adjustment is integrated into several major theoretical frameworks across behavioral sciences, with early psychological models drawing heavily on biological concepts like homeostasis. This biological view posits that the organism inherently strives toward a state of

internal balance, and adjustment represents the behavioral and physiological actions taken to restore this balance when disrupted by external stimuli. For instance, when a new environmental demand (a stressor) is introduced, the system reacts to normalize its functional state. This perspective, while foundational, has been expanded by models that incorporate cognitive and social factors, recognizing that human adjustment is far more complex than simple physiological regulation.

One dominant framework is the cognitive-transactional model of stress and coping, most notably advanced by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman. In this model, adjustment is viewed as the process of coping, which is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. The adjustment process involves primary appraisal (evaluating the situation as irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful), and secondary appraisal (evaluating available coping resources). Successful adjustment, according to this framework, hinges on the selection and deployment of effective coping strategies, which can be either problem-focused (aimed at changing the stressor) or emotion-focused (aimed at managing the resulting emotional distress).

Furthermore, socio-cultural theories emphasize that adjustment is highly relative to the cultural and social context in which the individual operates. What constitutes "harmonious relationship" or "effective behavior" in one culture may be considered maladaptive in another. Sociological models, particularly those related to socialization, view adjustment as the internalization of social norms and roles, allowing the individual to fit seamlessly into the existing social structure. From this viewpoint, adjustment is not solely about individual psychological comfort but about societal functionality and conformity, highlighting the crucial role of external expectations and social acceptance in defining successful adaptation.

### 3. Key Components and Processes

The process of adjustment can be broken down into several interconnected components, all aimed at reducing tension and facilitating integration. The initial component is **Recognition of Discrepancy**, which involves the awareness that a mismatch exists between the current state (internal or external) and a desired or required state. This discrepancy could range from realizing one's skills are insufficient for a new job (external demand) to recognizing persistent feelings of anxiety that disrupt daily life (internal demand). Without this initial awareness, the motivation for behavioral or cognitive change remains dormant.

Following recognition, the individual engages in **Coping Mechanisms**--the specific actions, thoughts, or emotional regulation strategies used to manage the stressor. These mechanisms are diverse and can range from defense mechanisms (unconscious attempts to protect the self) to conscious, deliberate problem-solving. For effective adjustment to occur, the coping strategies

employed must be flexible and appropriate for the context; rigidity in coping often predicts poor adjustment outcomes. For example, relying heavily on avoidance mechanisms might offer short-term relief but prevents long-term harmonization with the environment.

Finally, **Integration and Re-evaluation** represent the successful resolution phase. This involves integrating the behavioral or cognitive changes into the self-system, leading to a new, more stable equilibrium. The individual is then able to function effectively in the previously stressful or discordant environment. The process is cyclical; this new state of equilibrium is constantly tested by new environmental demands, necessitating ongoing re-evaluation and potential further adjustment. Successful adjustment, therefore, contributes to greater resilience and psychological flexibility, empowering the individual to handle future stressors more effectively.

#### 4. Types and Contexts of Adjustment

Adjustment manifests differently across various domains of human life, leading to specialized classifications. **Social Adjustment** refers to the capacity of an individual to interact effectively with others, adhere to accepted social norms, and establish meaningful interpersonal relationships. This is crucial during developmental periods, such as starting school or entering the workforce, where establishing a functional social niche dictates personal success and psychological comfort. Challenges in social adjustment are often linked to issues like shyness, aggression, or an inability to understand social cues.

**Occupational Adjustment** concerns the individual's adaptation to the demands, culture, and specific environment of their employment. This involves adjusting to workloads, hierarchical structures, team dynamics, and the specific skill requirements of the role. Major life events like starting a new career, changing industries, or experiencing long-term unemployment require significant occupational adjustment efforts. Similarly, **Academic Adjustment** is vital for students, encompassing the ability to manage academic stress, organize study time, adhere to institutional rules, and develop intellectual competencies necessary for educational success.

Perhaps the most foundational type is **Psychological Adjustment**, which refers to the internal harmonization of the self, including managing emotions, maintaining a coherent self-concept, and possessing realistic expectations about life. This internal harmony underpins all other forms of adjustment. A well-adjusted individual exhibits good emotional regulation, high frustration tolerance, and a balanced self-esteem. Furthermore, **Cultural Adjustment** (or acculturation) is a highly specialized and increasingly relevant form of adjustment, addressing the process immigrants or individuals moving between radically different societies undergo to adapt to new cultural norms, languages, values, and traditions.

## 5. Significance in Human Development

The ability to adjust is paramount throughout the human lifespan, acting as a crucial determinant of overall mental health and developmental success. In childhood, successful adjustment to the demands of schooling and peer interaction lays the groundwork for future social competence. Adolescence is a period marked by intense need for adjustment, particularly concerning identity formation, sexual maturity, and emancipation from parental dependence. Failure to adjust effectively during these sensitive periods can result in long-term behavioral issues or the crystallization of detrimental coping patterns.

In adulthood, adjustment takes on the form of navigating major life transitions, which are often accompanied by significant stress. This includes marital adjustment, parental adjustment, and occupational changes. The capacity to adjust to these normative, yet challenging, events is often studied in the field of health psychology, particularly regarding how resilience (the ability to bounce back from adversity) facilitates successful adaptation. Individuals with high levels of psychological flexibility and robust support systems tend to exhibit superior adjustment capabilities during periods of upheaval.

Later life presents unique challenges requiring specialized adjustment, such as coping with physical decline, the loss of social roles (e.g., retirement), and bereavement. Gerontologists study how older adults adjust their goals and expectations (often referred to as optimization and compensation strategies) to maintain satisfaction and well-being despite decreasing physical resources. Thus, adjustment is not merely an early life phenomenon, but a lifelong imperative that continuously shapes psychological outcomes and quality of life until the end of life.

## 6. Debates and Criticisms

While the concept of adjustment is central to clinical and developmental psychology, it is subject to notable academic debate, primarily concerning its implicit normative assumptions and its potential emphasis on passive conformity. A primary criticism revolves around the definition of "harmonious relationship" and whether adjustment inherently favors the status quo. Critics argue that focusing too heavily on fitting in or achieving equilibrium might stifle necessary social change or critical nonconformity. For example, a person adjusting perfectly to an unjust or oppressive environment might be considered well-adjusted by a psychological metric, but ethically compromised by a sociological standard. This raises questions about whether adjustment should prioritize individual well-being or societal conformity.

Another significant debate addresses the distinction between **Maladjustment** and **Creative Non-Adjustment**. Maladjustment implies behavior that is self-defeating or harmful, failing to achieve harmony. However, historical figures and innovators are often characterized by a profound initial refusal to adjust to existing norms or conventional thinking, leading to significant societal

advancements. Critics suggest that the conventional psychological definition might pathologize necessary friction or dissent. Furthermore, the emphasis on external behavioral change overlooks situations where internal systemic change (e.g., changing the unjust environment) is the superior, though harder, form of adaptation, rather than forcing the individual to passively accept harmful circumstances.

Finally, cross-cultural validity remains a central point of contention. The criteria for optimal adjustment are not universal. Western models often value autonomy, self-actualization, and individual achievement as markers of good adjustment, whereas many Eastern cultures prioritize interdependence, collective harmony, and relational responsibility. Applying Western-centric adjustment scales globally risks mislabeling culturally appropriate behaviors as signs of poor adjustment. Therefore, contemporary research stresses the need for culturally sensitive models that acknowledge that the ideal state of equilibrium is socially constructed and varies significantly based on cultural value systems.

### Further Reading

[American Psychological Association \(APA\) - Understanding Stress and Coping](#)

[Wikipedia - Psychological Adaptation](#)

[Britannica - Psychological Adjustment](#)