



# e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

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## Fairness

"It's not fair." This is a statement that children tend to learn at a young age, and something that adults occasionally (perhaps frequently) think and/or say throughout life. Even if one believes that life isn't always fair, there still tends to be an underlying expectation that "life" should treat us in a manner that is right or reasonable.

An ongoing belief that things aren't fair appears to be a health hazard. In a large study of British civil service workers, the perception of being treated unfairly at work was associated with poorer physical and mental health, including a 55% higher risk of having a coronary event over an 11 year period. The higher incidence of coronary events was due, in part, to a higher prevalence of metabolic syndrome among those perceiving unfairness. Metabolic syndrome was defined by elevated measures of waist circumference, blood pressure, triglycerides, fasting glucose, and decreased levels of HDL cholesterol. This pattern was more prominent among persons with lower socioeconomic status (i.e., perhaps more likely to experience and perceive unfair treatment) but was nonetheless also present among workers with higher socioeconomic status.

How does the perception of unfairness affect health? The simplest answer is that perceived unfairness is a stressor, and the relationship between stress and poorer health is well-established. Furthermore, when a person believes that something isn't right, just, or fair, the emotional response tends to be anger. Perceived unfairness can foster a sense of helplessness and perhaps hopelessness, both of which can fuel

depression. If there is threat associated with the perceived unfairness, anxiety will likely be experienced. All of these emotional states, when chronic, tend to be harmful to health.

Indeed there are things that aren't fair in life. How an individual chooses to respond to the injustice is part of the equation as well. A problem-solving response can be very useful, especially if the individual has some control over the situation viewed to be unfair. In the absence of control over the situation, other types of coping may be more effective (e.g., positive health behaviors, choosing to focus less on the unfairness, or letting go of anger).

It is also important to remember that perceived unfairness is not always associated with objective unfairness, so that in some situations, finding another way to look at things can alleviate the perception of unfairness. Some people tend to view life through a "fairness filter" so that they are quick to perceive unfairness and often live with a good deal of anger and resentment. Moderating the filter in that case can reduce the negativity.

Whether we like it or not, life at times involves coping with things that we view as unfair. How we manage those situations plays a role in our health and well-being.

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