Explored increasingly complex models of the stress–depression relationship. Many contemporary studies of depression have largely neglected environmental factors, including stressors. The author’s research initially incorporated stress into cognitive models of depression and demonstrated individual vulnerability to specific types of stressors. Then research on the family transmission of depression showed that family and child stressors are important but commonly neglected predictors of children’s high risk for depression as offspring of depressed mothers. Recently, emphasizing the context in which depression occurs, we have shown that people contribute to the occurrence of stressors and have been exploring the predictors of stress generation. At each step, the stress–depression model grows more complex.

This paper attempts to explore changing conceptualizations of the stress–depression relationship as reflected in my work over the past decade. As a clinical psychologist and psychopathology researcher, my focus has been on depression—its origins and course as studied from a psychosocial perspective. Depression research during this period has largely been characterized by an intraindividual emphasis, whether on individual cognitive vulnerability to depression, or genetic transmission of disordered...
neuroregulatory systems. Even life stress and depression research has emphasized individuals' reactions to stressors. This article attempts to characterize some of the gaps in such approaches and to review studies that have illuminated the important role of stressors in understanding depression. The goal is to indicate the increasing complexity of stress-depression models and the need to understand the context of stress and the factors that affect the occurrence of stressors and stressful conditions that in turn influence the experience of depression.

At the outset, the contribution of Barbara and Bruce Dohrenwend to the study of the stress-depression process is acknowledged. Their seminal research on the social context of mental illness has influenced a generation of investigators who are persuaded that there is more to know about psychopathology and its course than diseased neuroregulatory processes and genetic transmission. The Dohrenwends have also contributed a legacy of exceptionally clear conceptualization and methodological rigor in the study of stressful life events. Indeed, their work has made it possible to conclude with reasonable certainty that stressors precede and trigger depressive reactions in some people, and to rule out the confounding interpretations that stressors are simply symptoms or consequences of the depression itself. It is because of their work that I have felt free to pursue some of the heretical notions that bring back a consideration of the role of the person in the stress process.

FOCUS ON DEPRESSION IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE EVENTS

The study of depression has been marked by exciting developments in diagnosis, treatment, and etiological conceptualization over the past 15-20 years. Studies of the stress-depression relationship need to take into account the improved methods and theories not only about stress but also about depression (Gotlib & Hammen, in press). For instance, clinical depression is typically recurrent, so that in clinical or community samples we rarely study onset. Moreover, because it is impairing and recurrent, it is extremely disruptive to lives, so that the impact of the disorder on the social environment needs to be considered a contributor to the course of the disorder itself. For instance, the impact of depression on others, such as children and spouses, is potentially severely negative. This also implies that mild symptoms of depression such as those studied in college student analog research may not capture the features of clinical depression unless it can be shown that students' depression meets clinical criteria. Also, it is increasingly a disorder of young people, especially women, and depression