



# PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AS AN INDICATOR OF MENTAL HEALTH: A REVIEW

EL AJUSTE PSICOLÓGICO COMO INDICADOR DE SALUD MENTAL: UNA REVISIÓN

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological adjustment, as the adaptation between internal needs and external demands, is a key indicator of mental health. It is conceptualized as the balance, interaction, or dynamic and dialectical adaptation between the individual and their environment, encompassing intrapsychic (biopsychological) and interpsychic (psychosocial) dimensions, governed by the laws of learning. This balance is reflected in psychosocial behavior. The aim of this study was to explore its intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, its relationship with variables such as anxiety, depression, psychological well-being, and personality, and to propose a framework for its assessment in clinical, educational, and social contexts. A literature review was conducted using databases such as APA PsycNet, Scopus, SciELO, and Google Scholar, focusing on empirical and theoretical studies on psychological adjustment at different life stages. The results show that psychological adjustment is widely studied in adolescence and adulthood, highlighting its relationship with socioemotional competencies, parenting styles, and social support. In adolescents, variables such as self-esteem, emotional regulation, and optimism are important predictors of adjustment. In adults, factors such as optimism-pessimism, family support, and mood influence psychological adjustment, affecting life satisfaction and emotional health. In conclusion, psychological adjustment refers to a profile of indicators associated with an individual's mental health. It is essential for mental health as it enables individuals to maintain a balance with their environment, promoting personal and social well-being. Its assessment is crucial for designing interventions aimed at improving the quality of life in diverse populations.

**Keywords:** Emotional adjustment; psychological well-being; emotional regulation; mental health. (Source: MESH-NLM)

## RESUMEN

El ajuste psicológico, como adaptación entre necesidades internas y demandas externas, es un indicador clave de salud mental. Se conceptúa como el equilibrio, interacción o adaptación dinámica y dialéctica entre individuo y entorno, abarcando las dimensiones intrapsíquica (biopsicológica) e intersíquica (psicosocial), regido por leyes del aprendizaje. Este equilibrio se refleja en el comportamiento psicosocial. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo explorar sus dimensiones intrapersonal e interpersonal, su relación con variables como ansiedad, depresión, bienestar psicológico y personalidad, y proponer un marco para su evaluación en contextos clínicos, educativos y sociales. Se realizó una revisión bibliográfica utilizando bases de datos como APA PsycNet, Scopus, SciELO y Google Scholar, enfocándose en estudios empíricos y teóricos sobre ajuste psicológico en diferentes etapas de la vida. Los resultados muestran que el ajuste psicológico es ampliamente estudiado en la adolescencia y adultez, destacándose su relación con competencias socioemocionales, estilos parentales y soporte social. En adolescentes, variables como autoestima, regulación emocional y optimismo son predictores importantes de ajuste. En adultos, factores como optimismo-pesimismo, soporte familiar y estado de ánimo influyen en el ajuste psicológico, afectando la satisfacción con la vida y la salud emocional. En conclusión, el ajuste psicológico se refiere a un perfil de indicadores asociado a la salud mental de un individuo. Este es fundamental para la salud mental, dado que permite a los individuos mantener un equilibrio con su entorno, promoviendo el bienestar personal y social. Su evaluación es crucial para diseñar intervenciones que mejoren la calidad de vida en diversas poblaciones.

**Palabras clave:** Ajuste emocional; Bienestar psicológico; regulación emocional; salud mental. (Fuente: DeCS-BIREME)

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## INTRODUCTION

Mental health, defined as a state of well-being in which an individual can realize their potential and cope with the normal stresses of life, is closely linked to psychological adjustment. In this context, psychological adjustment can be understood as the emotional and behavioral adaptability of an individual in response to environmental demands. This process involves balancing internal needs and external requirements through mechanisms of emotional and cognitive regulation. Proper psychological adjustment enables individuals to achieve emotional well-being, which positively influences their perception of their environment and their ability to face adverse situations constructively. Thus, the study of this adjustment is highly relevant in psychology and mental health, as it helps identify adaptive behaviors that contribute to overall well-being.

Moreover, psychological adjustment is a key component of resilience, as it is associated with the ability of individuals to recover from stress, failure, or adversity. Various studies have shown that individuals with a high level of psychological adjustment exhibit not only a greater capacity for adaptation but also an enhanced ability to learn from difficult situations, turning these experiences into opportunities for personal growth. This capacity for regulation and adaptation involves not only emotional self-regulation but also an openness to restructuring mental schemas, fostering an adaptive and resilient response to changing contexts. In this sense, psychological adjustment is not only an indicator of mental health but also a predictor of personal development and the individual's ability to face challenges and maintain long-term psychological well-being.

### Human behavior, learning, and balance

Human development, through its various evolutionary stages, involves a repertoire of behaviors that are organized and constructed based on both internal and external conditions. From a psychological perspective, human behavior is essentially learned within a social environment, which influences the emergence of

diverse behaviors, while also taking into account the individual's internal conditions—initially biological and later biopsychological. Therefore, these behaviors are governed by the principles and laws of learning. Learned and developed behavior is notably distinct from innate behavior, which is more biological in nature and oriented towards unconditional responses and species survival<sup>(1,2)</sup>.

From a psychological standpoint, human behavior, as an expression of each individual's development, is formed through complex organism-environment interactions of a systemic nature, following the principles and laws of human learning. Its study aims not only to explain human behavior but also to predict and control it<sup>(1,3)</sup>.

Social learning defines what are called psychosocial behaviors, which are "psychological qualities or manifestations acquired through the principles of learning<sup>(4)</sup>." These behaviors are built and developed from childhood through social learning, also influenced by sociocultural factors, and contribute to shaping the individual's personality<sup>(5,6)</sup>. Psychosocial behavior, being of a cognitive-affective nature, is linked to the formation of ethical or moral values and is behaviorally expressed through attitudes, opinions, beliefs, feelings, or specific actions in a given context<sup>(4)</sup>.

Under the conception of the relationship between human development and balance, and from a value-based perspective, psychosocial behaviors, being cognitive-affective, can be considered either positive or negative. Positive behaviors align with the social environment and promote better development and the achievement of personal-social well-being. Examples of positive psychosocial behaviors include honesty, trust, self-esteem, tolerance, empathy, responsibility, resilience, generosity, solidarity, and altruism. On the other hand, negative psychosocial behaviors demonstrate maladjustments to the environment and, consequently, hinder individual development and the achievement of personal-social well-being. Examples of

negative behaviors include aggression, distrust, envy, hypocrisy, incivility, hopelessness, intolerance, resentment, and jealousy. Additionally, behaviors such as stress, anxiety, depression, and somatization-rooted in biological and temperamental bases-are also considered negative and develop according to the laws of learning<sup>(4)</sup>.

Given this unidimensional and bipolar characteristic of behavior, studies can be conducted based on recognizing behaviors as either positive (adjusted) or negative (maladjusted), acknowledging them as significant indicators.

### **Psychological adjustment**

Psychosocial behaviors reflect the level of an individual's psychological adjustment. To understand psychological adjustment, we start with the concept of dynamic and dialectical adaptation from Piaget's evolutionary approach<sup>(7)</sup>, which involves a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment, enabling equilibrium. According to Piaget<sup>(7)</sup>, adaptation in any organism entails two implicit processes: assimilation and accommodation. Through assimilation, the organism actively interacts with the environment, functionally incorporating aspects and experiences into its internal structure, facilitating development. Accommodation involves the organism adapting to environmental influences and experiences by transforming and restructuring itself. Throughout this process, organisms construct and reconstruct their structure, creating, recreating, and transforming their environment. Analogous to Piaget's view, psychological adjustment represents the highest form of adaptation humans perform to maintain equilibrium with their essentially social environment. The term psychological adjustment can be explained based on the concept of "adjustment," which refers to the individual's tendency to find "a state of harmony

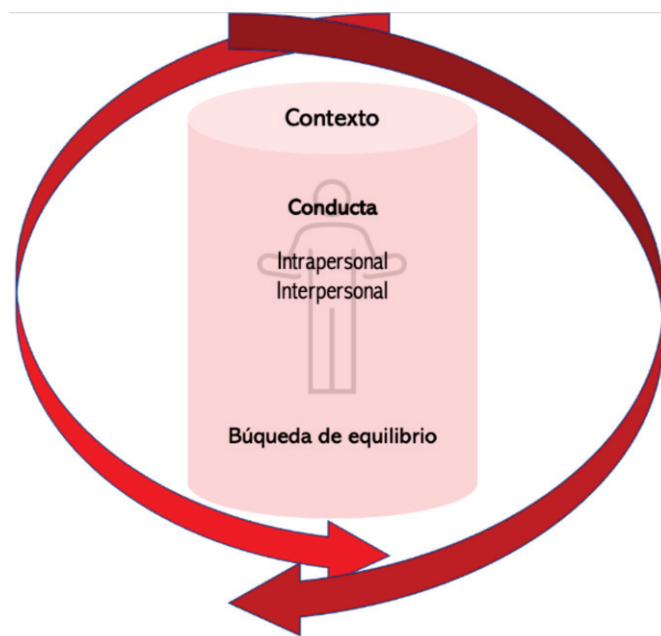
between internal needs and external demands and the processes used to achieve this adaptation<sup>(8)</sup>." Here, we differentiate psychological adjustment from sociological or cultural adjustment, which refers to adherence to social norms, and from biological adjustment in the traditional sense, which primarily concerns physiological or biological processes. According to the APA<sup>(8)</sup>, psychological adjustment encompasses personal adaptation, relating to one's inner self and environment. A well-adjusted person is one who satisfies their needs healthily, benefits from it, and demonstrates appropriate social and psychological responses to situations and demands. Psychological adjustment, while rooted in biological adaptation, operates at a higher level where humans respond to physical, psychosocial, and environmental demands, achieving equilibrium (allostasis). As an affective process, emotional balance serves as the core adaptive axis of psychological adjustment<sup>(9)</sup>.

From a sociocultural or traditional perspective, Richards<sup>(10)</sup> referred to psychological adjustment as the individual's behavior deemed acceptable within a specific cultural context, though it might differ in another cultural setting. Thus, humans tend to exhibit behaviors aligned with their social environment. However, even when these culturally adaptive behaviors align with their environment, individuals may feel emotionally dissatisfied from an individual perspective. Psychological adjustment is therefore closely related to both the individual's emotional domain<sup>(11)</sup> and their social environment<sup>(12)</sup>. Bronfenbrenner<sup>(12)</sup> argued that "optimal adjustment" does not depend on a single factor but rather on a range of variables linked to early experiences. Consequently, its study and evaluation involve indicators reflecting an individual's personality traits, which define what is known as personality adjustment.



Additionally, the study of psychological adjustment requires distinguishing between the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of behavior<sup>(13)</sup>. Every individual seeking constant equilibrium with their

environment must engage in behaviors at both intra- and interpersonal levels to meet contextual demands (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of adjustment.

The intrapersonal dimension is closely related to behaviors that primarily depend on the individual's internal conditions, which in their development are biopsychological in nature. In contrast, the interpersonal dimension pertains to behaviors influenced by external, social conditions and are more subject to the laws of learning.

In studying psychological adjustment with a focus on the intrapersonal dimension, emotional stability can be identified as a variable<sup>(14)</sup>. Similarly, Rotter's locus of control theory can predict good psychological adjustment, particularly when associated with an internal locus of control<sup>(15)</sup>. Additionally, coping strategies can also serve as predictors of whether an individual exhibits adequate psychological adjustment<sup>(16)</sup>. On the other hand, considering the context in which an individual operates, gender stereotypes can influence psychological adjustment<sup>(17)</sup>.

It is suggested that those who better conform to established gender role standards (male and female) achieve better psychological adjustment. Masculinity and femininity are also variables that may explain psychological adjustment, particularly in terms of instrumentality versus passivity<sup>(18)</sup>.

Psychological adjustment manifests across all spheres of human behavior, encompassing dimensions such as personal-family, educational, occupational, and social-community domains. Each of these dimensions contributes to the pursuit of psychological well-being, which is an integral component of an individual's overall well-being.

#### **Theories on psychological adjustment**

Below is a concise overview of theoretical approaches to adjustment<sup>(19-21)</sup>. (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Psychological theories on adjustment.

Theory	Main argument on psychological adjustment
Classical Psychodynamic Theory	According to Freud, good adjustment occurs when there is a balance between gratification and inhibition of impulses (of the Id) during childhood. A development with minimal conflicts and fixations across psychosexual stages allows the Ego to gain control and maintain harmony between the Id and the Superego. A well-adjusted person is one who can express the demands of their Id in a socially acceptable way. Well-adjusted individuals are still driven by the demands of their Id, but they possess a healthy Ego to moderate its influence and respond appropriately in social contexts.
Modern Psychodynamic Theory	These theorists place less emphasis on the Id and more on the Ego. They emphasize the importance of social interaction in defining good adjustment. Good adjustment is defined as the ability to form and maintain healthy, cooperative, supportive, and productive relationships with others.
Behavioral Theory	This theory asserts that well-adjusted individuals are those who have acquired behaviors through rewards and punishments that enable them to effectively deal with and resolve daily conflicts. Adjusted and maladjusted behaviors are learned through reinforcement.
Cognitive-Behavioral Theories	This theory incorporates internal events, such as thoughts and emotions, to better understand the concept of adjustment and good adjustment. According to this theory, an individual's behavior depends more on their interpretation of external events than the events themselves. Thus, good adjustment involves interpreting life events in a way that promotes personal and social development.
Humanistic Theory	Good adjustment is achieved when a person develops their full potential. Maslow, and also Rogers, argued that a person who reaches the self-actualization stage after fulfilling other needs in the hierarchy is a well-adjusted person.
Existential Theory	Adjustment is seen as a struggle to rediscover the meaning of life. Modern societal values, such as materialism, are considered barriers to self-actualization. To be well-adjusted, one must find personal meaning in life and live according to their own ideals.



**Psychological adjustment and mental health**

According to the World Health Organization<sup>(22)</sup>, mental health refers to achieving the best possible conditions for an individual’s psychological well-being, which contributes to good personal development and overall health.

As individuals strive to achieve optimal personal well-being, this can only occur through social interaction. Therefore, processes of adaptation, balance, or adjustment are constant and ongoing. In this sense, positive psychosocial behaviors become clear indicators of positive mental health, whereas negative psychosocial behaviors are indicators of negative mental health, which can be highly detrimental to

overall health. Consequently, through the study and evaluation of indicators of adjusted or maladjusted psychosocial behavior, it is possible to develop a profile of an individual’s mental health.

**Indicators of psychosocial behavior for evaluating mental health**

Table 2 schematically presents a list of behavioral indicators that can serve as criteria for evaluating an individual’s mental health level. The type of evaluation instrument applied to assess these indicators will depend on the study’s methodological approach, whether it is objective and behavioral or projective in nature.

**Table 2.** Indicators of adjusted and maladjusted psychosocial behavior.

Adjusted psychosocial behaviors	Maladjusted psychosocial behaviors
Respect,	Aggressiveness,
Honesty,	Dishonesty,
Tolerance,	Distrust,
Trust,	Envy,
Cooperation,	Hypocrisy,
Empathy,	Intolerance,
Assertiveness,	Lying,
Generosity,	Resentment,
Solidarity,	Hopelessness,
Altruism,	Uncertainty,
Condescension,	Family maladjustment,
Resilience,	Low self-esteem,
Responsibility,	Procrastination,
Self-concept.	Sexual maladjustment,
	Anxiety,
	Depression,
	Somatization,
	Stress.

### Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to review existing literature to investigate the role of psychological adjustment as a key indicator of mental health. It aimed to explore its intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, its relationship with variables such as anxiety, depression, and psychological well-being across different life stages, and propose a theoretical and practical framework for its evaluation and application in clinical, educational, and social contexts.

### METHODS

A bibliographic review was conducted to analyze psychological adjustment as an indicator of mental health. The search focused on studies addressing this concept at various developmental stages, particularly adolescence and adulthood. The review included relevant scientific literature accessed through databases such as APA PsycNet, Scopus, SciELO, and Google Scholar to retrieve relevant and up-to-date articles on psychological adjustment. The search terms used included "Psychological Adjustment," "Psychological Adjustment – Adolescence," and "Psychological Adjustment – Adulthood." This strategy allowed for a broad spectrum of empirical and theoretical investigations that support the development and evaluation of psychological adjustment and its relationship to emotional and social well-being in diverse contexts.

Research articles explicitly referencing "Psychological Adjustment" in their titles, published in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals, were included. Only studies written in Spanish or English were considered to ensure comprehension and accuracy in text analysis.

The studies retrieved underwent a multi-stage selection process. First, the relevance of each article was assessed by reading abstracts and keywords. Next, the full texts of studies meeting the inclusion criteria were reviewed. Particular attention was paid to the methods and results, focusing on their approaches to psychological adjustment and its relationship with specific mental health indicators, such as emotional

well-being, resilience, and emotional regulation. The selected studies were organized and classified according to their methodological and theoretical characteristics, focusing on the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of psychological adjustment. A systematic analysis of the variables involved was conducted, grouping them based on their impact at different life stages, such as adolescence and adulthood, and their relationship to overall well-being. This approach sought to identify patterns of adjustment across various contexts, including clinical, educational, and social settings, and analyze their impact on specific populations, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of psychological adjustment in different environments.

### RESULTS

The review consolidated that psychological adjustment has predominantly been studied in areas such as clinical, health, and personality psychology, with the primary age groups being adolescence and adulthood.

#### Psychological adjustment and health psychology

Research on adjustment encompasses diverse populations, ranging from children to the elderly, and includes both healthy individuals and patients with conditions such as cancer and other diseases or disorders. Adjustment studies are expanding to address interactions within groups, such as families or organizational settings, to examine workers' adjustment to their roles and organizations and vice versa. In health psychology, research has evaluated the degree of adjustment in patients with various physical illnesses, either temporary or chronic.

Studies have explored adjustment to spinal cord injuries<sup>(23)</sup>, chronic illness<sup>(24)</sup>, cleft lip<sup>(25)</sup>, illness, disability, and loss<sup>(26)</sup>, and cancer, focusing on indicators like anxiety, depression, low self-esteem<sup>(27)</sup>, and treatment duration<sup>(28)</sup>. In educational health, numerous studies link adjustment to school and university environments<sup>(29)</sup>. Social and psychosocial studies, such as children's adjustment to a third culture, have also been reported<sup>(30)</sup>.



### Studies on psychological adjustment in adolescents

Psychological adjustment in adolescents has been examined in relation to variables such as emotional intelligence, social competencies, self-esteem, parenting styles, and emotional challenges characteristic of adolescence.

Psychological adjustment has been associated with variables considered recurring issues during this life stage, such as physical appearance and weight-related problems, linking them to indicators of self-esteem, depression, and social anxiety. These findings suggest that psychological adjustment may be mediated by social pressure<sup>(31)</sup>. Similarly, social networks can influence mental health, contributing to psychological well-being, buffering stress, and mitigating indicators of depression and distress. On the other hand, physical attractiveness, social skills, self-awareness, and social competence are fundamental for developing social support and promoting psychological adjustment. Optimism, in particular, is a key variable for developing extensive and supportive social networks, as individuals who express gratifying positive emotions are preferred<sup>(32)</sup>. Additionally, the social context among peers has been a significant variable in its study. Fantuzzo et al.<sup>(33)</sup> investigated peer accompaniment as a strategy to achieve better academic performance and psychological adjustment. This involved evaluating aspects such as academic stress, anxiety, depression, fear, and psychological distress as indicators of psychological adjustment.

Socioemotional competence has also been considered a predictor of psychological adjustment. Ollendick et al.<sup>(34)</sup>, in a longitudinal study, found that children classified as rejected or controversial tended to score worse on long-term adjustment indices than those classified as popular, neglected, or average. Wang<sup>(35)</sup> also found that social competence mediated the relationship between perceived school climate variables and adolescent adjustment, except for the relationship between mastery goal structure and adjustment variables. Casares et al.<sup>(36)</sup> argued that emotional problems in adolescence, particularly anxiety and depression, are associated with psychological adjustment.

Emotional problems such as anxiety and depressive symptoms were positively related to negative affect and emotional and behavioral problems, and inversely related to positive affect and quality of life. Emotional regulation difficulties in educational contexts were evident among adolescents. Schoeps et al.<sup>(37)</sup> found significant gender differences in their research: females better perceived and understood emotions but exhibited more emotional problems, while males had higher self-esteem and more behavioral issues. Regression analysis revealed that emotional competencies and self-esteem were associated with fewer emotional and behavioral problems, highlighting the importance of self-esteem as a predictor of adolescents' psychological adjustment.

Fuentes et al.<sup>(38)</sup> emphasized the relationship between parenting styles and psychological adjustment. They found that the indulgent style, characterized by affection rather than parental imposition, yielded better results in terms of psychological and emotional adjustment among Spanish adolescents. Cobos-Sánchez et al.<sup>(39)</sup> studied the role of emotional intelligence in psychological adjustment, demonstrating the influence of mood and parent-child relationships on psychological adjustment and students' emotional intelligence.

Sánchez and Palacios<sup>(40)</sup> found significant differences in indicators of low self-esteem, family maladjustment, and stress between male and female high school students, identifying family maladjustment as a predictor of low self-esteem and stress. Similarly, Sánchez et al.<sup>(41)</sup> observed that indicators of maladjusted psychosocial behavior in adolescents—such as stress, low self-esteem, jealousy, and family maladjustment—were causally linked to violent behavior tendencies.

### Studies on psychological adjustment in adults

Studies on psychological adjustment in adults have focused on middle-aged and older adults, exploring relationships with personality, optimism-pessimism, mood, cognitive factors, and family climate and support, among other variables.



Adulthood is defined by an individual's capacity to make decisions and act independently. Rogers' concept of the integrated self (1959) explains that adequate psychological adjustment, associated with personality traits and role integration, can predict an individual's adjustment<sup>(42)</sup>. Similarly, Carver and Scheier's<sup>(43)</sup> theoretical framework on optimism suggests that optimism leads to positive outcomes, while pessimism results in negative ones.

Chang and Sanna<sup>(44)</sup> identified mood as a predictor of psychological adjustment, describing two dimensions: positive affect, characterized by feelings of activeness, alertness, and enthusiasm; and negative affect, where individuals feel irritated or negatively aroused. They emphasized the need to consider cognitive factors related to outcome expectations. Their model proposed that affectivity mediates cognitive processes, including optimism and adaptation.

Brissette et al.<sup>(32)</sup> found that individual differences in optimism play a significant role in adapting to stressful life events. Higher optimism levels were associated with less disruption in mood and a better ability to respond to a variety of stressors. Optimistic coping strategies were more effective in managing stress than pessimistic approaches. Furthermore, dispositional optimism and emotional intelligence were linked, with increases in both correlating with better psychological adjustment in young and middle-aged adults<sup>(5)</sup>.

Studies on personality and adjustment have examined neuroticism using the Costa and McCrae Short Personality Inventory, linking it to indicators of depression and self-esteem<sup>(42)</sup>. Similarly, aggression has been associated with psychological adjustment, particularly in cases of antisocial personality traits and depression<sup>(45)</sup>. In adulthood, cognitive and affective factors are crucial predictors of psychological adjustment, especially regarding indicators of depression. Individuals with high levels of depression often have limited cognitive resources. Studies have evaluated indicators of psychological well-being and

life satisfaction<sup>(46)</sup>, associating these with expectations of outcomes (optimism and pessimism), affectivity (positive and negative), and symptoms of depression in middle-aged adults<sup>(44)</sup>.

Family support has been associated with measures of psychological well-being, self-esteem, happiness, distress, depression, and anxiety<sup>(47)</sup>. Social support also emerges as a predictor of good psychological adjustment. Crocetti et al.<sup>(48)</sup> studied the integration of Mexican-American university students into the U.S. educational system, demonstrating that family support and active coping strategies mitigated high acculturative stress related to anxiety and depression symptoms. Peer support also moderated the relationship between acculturative stress and anxiety symptoms.

In adults, psychological adjustment evaluation has been linked to variables such as social isolation, parenting, couple problems, perceived social support, and family adversity<sup>(49,50)</sup>. These are associated with anxiety, mood alterations, and self-esteem. Roskos et al.<sup>(51)</sup> found that individuals who avoided resolving family conflicts tended to exhibit poor psychological adjustment, with clinical levels of anxiety, stress, and depression.

Research on psychological adjustment in older adults has focused on evaluating motivational styles and self-determination levels, exploring their association with life satisfaction, self-esteem, depression, and life meaning<sup>(52)</sup>. Human et al.<sup>(53)</sup> investigated whether well-adjusted individuals are more "judgeable" than less-adjusted individuals. They found that well-adjusted individuals provided more relevant and truthful information, making them easier to judge. Matos and Sánchez<sup>(54)</sup>, in a study on life expectations, uncertainty, and behavioral maladjustment, identified significant differences across gender and age groups in indicators such as anxiety, depression, aggression, hopelessness, intolerance, and fear.



## CONCLUSIONS

Psychological adjustment is a dynamic, dialectical process of adaptation and balance that individuals maintain with their environment, encompassing both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. Psychosocial behaviors, acquired through social learning, serve as clear indicators for evaluating psychological adjustment and, when integrated, can be analyzed as part of an adjusted personality. These

behaviors can be evaluated as positive or negative: positive behaviors promote adjustment and balance with the environment, while negative behaviors adversely affect this adaptation. Thus, psychological adjustment, as expressed through psychosocial behavior, serves as a significant indicator of individuals' mental health, enabling a comprehensive assessment of personal and social well-being.

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