



# What is Health?

A new approach to understanding  
well-being and illness

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Based on the concept of Salutogenesis after Aaron Antonovsky

# What exactly does health mean?

“I am healthy”, means more than just a person’s medical condition. Being healthy means having a good work-life balance, being fit and creative, having energy and feeling attractive. Health is a requirement for people to live productively and self-determined. So health is not just the absence of disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized this and defined health in the 1986 Ottawa Charter as follows:

**«Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity»<sup>1</sup>**

Although several aspects of human life are included and the concept of health is henceforth tied to well-being rather than illness, this definition does not seem flawless. Who can say that he is in a „state of perfect physical, mental and social well-being“? If not, are we directly sick by definition?

Aaron Antonovsky presents an interesting point of view in his concept of salutogenesis<sup>2</sup>: health is not rigid, static, no snapshot, not a clearly definable construct; rather, health is a dynamic process for balancing individuals and their environment and must be viewed multi-dimensionally.

## From Pathogenesis to Salutogenesis

Aaron Antonovsky, a New York born medical sociologist and stress researcher, who migrated to Israel, observed in the course of his studies how some people despite adverse circumstances remain healthy while others get already sick under simple stress. These observations and later considerations eventually led to his model of salutogenesis. Antonovsky makes a paradigm shift from the pathogenesis<sup>3</sup>, the question of the causes of disease, as it is usually practiced in classical medicine, to salutogenesis, the question of the causes of health. Antonovsky by no means rejects the pathogenesis, but extends it by the model of salutogenesis. He considers 5 fundamental differences in his perspective compared to the pathogenetic model:

- **Adopting a multidimensional health-disease continuum**  
No consistent separation of health and disease, instead a dynamic process in which one sometimes moves more towards the pole of health or disease.
- **Holism: looking at the whole person instead of reducing it to the patient**  
Not only patients and their disease, but the human being as a whole and its history are considered.
- **Broadening perspectives on health-preserving factors**  
Not only risk factors and causes of disease, but also salutary factors or resources are considered.

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1: Definition World Health Organisation WHO Ottawa Charta 1986

2: Neologism from Salus (lat.) = Health and genesis (gr.) = origin, literally origin of health

3: Pathos (gr.) = Illness, suffering and genesis (gr.) = origin

- **Assumption of heterostasis<sup>4</sup>**  
Omnipresence of stressors resulting in a permanent imbalance.
- **Active adaptation**  
Active adaptation to the ever-changing environment (heterostasis) to counteract the negative entropy<sup>5</sup>.

In the pathogenetic model finding causes and treatment of diseases has priority. Aaron Antonovsky does not look for causes of illness with the salutogenetic approach, but, starting from his holistic understanding, asks how and why people can remain healthy or recover despite stress. According to this approach, not only risks should be avoided, but strengths should be promoted.

## Stressors and Resources

A **stressor** is a burden that creates tension. Stressors are omnipresent and justify the described heterostasis, the imbalance and the constantly changing environmental influences to which the organism tries to adapt. However, stressors can - and this is very important - have not only pathogenic, but also neutral or even beneficial consequences. This is how some people, under pressure, really blossom and only then achieve peak performance. How the stressors ultimately work depends on the subjective processing by the tension management of the individual. When stress is perceived as a challenge, the health of the stressors can be harnessed for the benefit of health. The stress finally bounces off and has a salutogenic, health-promoting effect.

Resistance resources describe the ability to cope with the given social and biological tensions and burdens so that they can contribute to one's own benefit and promote one's own development. They can ease the effective tension management of an organism, thereby stressors can be avoided or overcome - the applied tension does not lead to stress, but gives these stressors a deeper meaning. Antonovsky concretizes and categorizes the resistance resources into 3 groups:

- **Adaptability**  
Physiological and biochemical, psychological, cultural and social potentials of the individual to adapt to the different stressors and, as much as possible, to immunize against it. In addition to the resource of the social network that an individual should possess, identity is the most important resource of resistance.
- **Deep attachment to others**  
Establishment of social relationship networks in primary groups such as family, friends or colleagues, in which such social relationships are applied on a daily basis.

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4: Heterostasis = imbalance, lack of stability, opposite of homeostasis

5: Negative entropy describes the loss of health as a natural and ubiquitous process that requires health to be continually built up to stay alive

- **Institutionalized commitment to communities**

Meaningful institutions, such as schools or churches, allow the individual free rein for self-realization when participating in larger things. Such structures help to bounce off stress.

Resistance resources thus largely prevent stress from becoming stress on the one hand by reducing the stress brought by the stressors and on the other hand by avoiding stressors altogether.

## Sense of Coherence

The sense of coherence is the central element of the salutogenesis model and represents a sense of trust expressed through a fundamental attitude towards life or orientation of the individual in his environment. In this confrontation of the individual with his environment Antonovsky answers the already mentioned salutogenetic question on the basis of the sense of coherence as follows: How do people manage to stay healthy or recover under the most difficult conditions? The sense of coherence consists of 3 components:

- **The feeling of comprehensibility**

refers to the ability to respond to the confrontation of external and internal stimuli in their inexplicable chaos and to be able to sensibly and consistently perceive and organize them in a structured manner. This cognitive processing of such influences helps to ensure that individuals with a high sense of coherence also know how to classify unpredictable events.

- **The feeling of manageability**

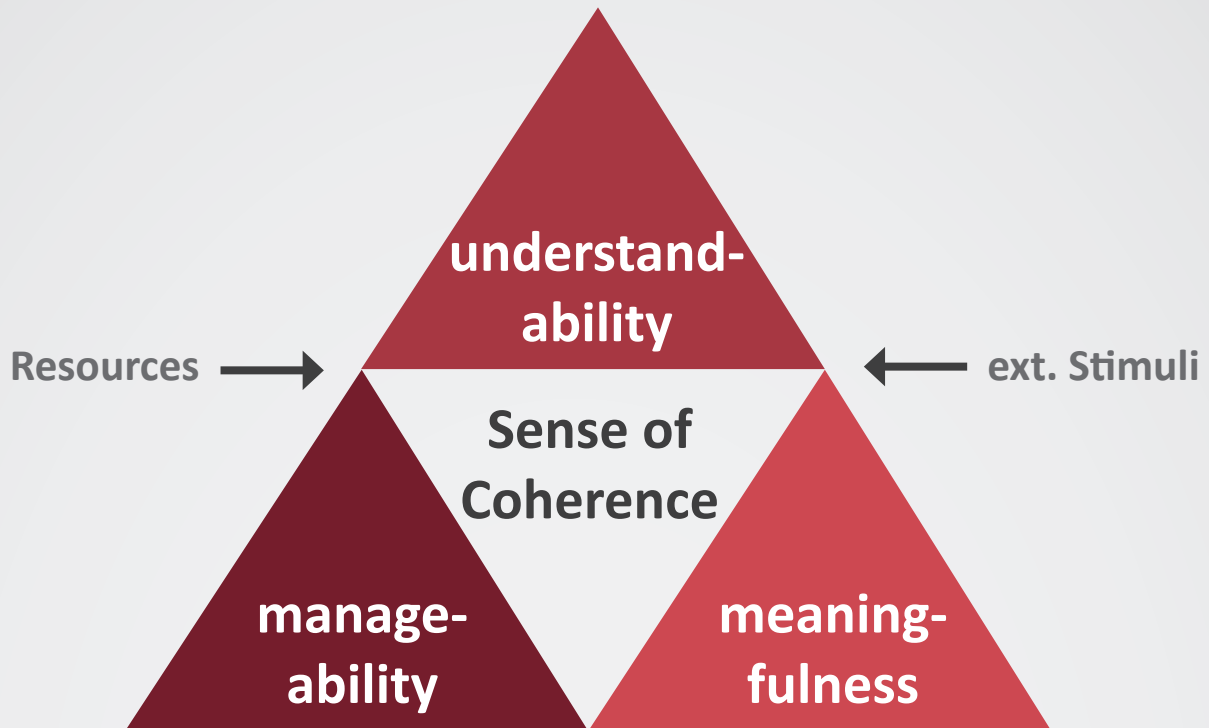
refers to the extent to which someone believes they have certain coping resources, thus a person's belief in overcoming difficulties. A high degree of manageability prevents on a cognitive-emotional level that individuals do not inevitably feel as victims of events, but can deal with fatalities.

- **The feeling of meaningfulness**

refers to the extent of a feeling of seeing meaning in life, so it pays to invest energy in the demands placed and to find the guidance that, in the end, being is a good thing.

The development of these different feelings within the sense of coherence is strongly related. On the basis of different life experiences of the individual, however, the individual feelings - comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness - can be developed differently in the course of a personality development.

„My world is understandable, coherent and in order. I can see the problems and burdens that I experience in a larger context“



“Life gives me tasks that I can solve. I have resources that I can mobilize to master my life and my current problems.”

“For my way of life every effort makes sense. There are goals and projects for which it is worthwhile to get involved.”

## Coherence and Health

Does the sense of coherence affect a person's health status? Considering the brain as a health care system, the sense of coherence can activate it to the extent that messengers are sent to other body systems, thus maintaining homeostasis. Seen in this way, the sense of coherence can also have health-promoting functions on a physiological level, since the concepts of tension and stressors refer to both emotional and physiological states. The link between sense of coherence and health is therefore the successful coping with stressors and the meaningful transformation of pathogenic tension into neutral or even salutogenic one.

**This coping happens according to Antonovsky on three different modes of action:**

- The sense of coherence helps to assess situations on a cognitive level and thus influences the decision for the reaction to be made.
- Through successful use of resistance resources, the sense of coherence contributes significantly to the reduction of stress and thus has an indirect effect on the physiological systems of stress processing.
- A higher sense of coherence, influenced by a healthy lifestyle, has an indirect influence on the state of health of the individual.

# The future of health education

In his resource-oriented concept, Aaron Antonovsky describes how people react to external and internal stressors and how they try to manage them successfully. The sense of coherence describes the basic attitude of an individual to life in order to meet new challenges over and over again. Antonovsky's paradigm shift - from pathogenesis to salutogenesis - provides an orientation to human well-being and conditions for health. If a high sense of coherence helps to ward off stressors, promoting a salutogenic health education is the way to go!

More than ever, we realize that those who live healthy are happier in the long term. At the same time, the number of elderly people and the incidence of chronic diseases is increasing worldwide. Health systems are therefore facing great challenges in the near future. It is even more important today to focus on prevention in this dynamic model of the health-disease continuum, to create an optimal environment for health and to actively prevent the onset of disease. We become managers of our own health and thus highly responsible for our quality of life!

The mission of Swiss Bionic Solutions is based on its originality on the salutogenetic model. Developing, delivering, improving, and supporting health-promoting theories, technologies, and applications create opportunities and solutions that sensitize and optimize the individual's sense of coherence!

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