Stressful Life Events Schedule (SLES)
Training Manual

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WHAT IS THE STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS SCHEDULE?

The Stressful Life Events Schedule (SLES) is a semi-structured interview that was created in order to ascertain acute and chronic stressful life events. The SLES was originally designed to obtain information about events occurring in the past year; however, the document is flexible enough to be used to cover any time period. There is a parent, child, adolescent, and adult versions of the SLES. The child version was designed for children approximately 8-12 years of age. The adolescent version was designed for kids approximately 13-18 years of age. The parent version can be used to assess events in youth 8-18 years of age. Finally, the adult version was designed to be used with adults 18 years of age and older.

For each event that is endorsed by the subject, information obtained during the interview includes: 1) The date of occurrence; 2) The duration of the event; 3) A thorough yet concise description of the event; and 4) The subject's rating of their perception of the threat associated with the event. Subjective threat is defined as the amount of stress or unpleasantness that accompanies an event as reported by the subject. Following the interview, a consensus panel derives the following for each event: 1) The objective threat rating; 2) The independence vs. dependence on the subject’s behavior (i.e. how much did the subject’s behavior cause or effect a particular event); and 3) The focus of the event (i.e. who or what is principally involved in the event). Additional details for the administration and rating of the SLES are provided below.

THE INTERVIEW

1. Timeline

The interview begins with the establishment of a timeline. The timeline is a guide to distinguish at what time a specific event occurred during what is referred to as “the interview period”. The “interview period” is that period of time during which the occurrence of events is probed for. For example, if today’s date was 6/15/2005 and we were interested in assessing events occurring during the past year then “the interview period” would be the time between 6/15/2004 and 6/15/2005. The timeline should be labeled appropriately for the time period in question (e.g. previous 12 months, previous 24 months, etc.). The timeline is intended to serve as a tool to relate the occurrence of stressful life events to “the interview period” and to other dates that are significant to the subject and easy for him/her to remember. As such, it is expected that the use of a
timeline will greatly aid in recalling the sequencing and timing of events as best as can be retrospectively recalled. It is important to add memory-jogging aids in the timeline such as birthdays and holidays, the start and end of school for children and adolescents, etc. to help the subject remember when an event occurred. For example, did the endorsed event occur before or after his/her birthday? Did the event happen close to Halloween? Did it occur during summer vacation of 2004? The timeline is intended to be repeatedly referred to during the course of the interview. When the subject endorses an event, it should be added to the timeline. Consult with the subject about where the event fits into the timeline as you do this. In addition, the use of a timeline should help to ensure that events occurring prior to the interview period do not get included as well as aiding in the establishment of an accurate chronological sequencing of events.

2. Demographic Information: Relationships

The next section obtains demographic information about important relationships in the subject's life. The first section is for household members. This should include anyone who has been living in the subject's home at the beginning of the interview period detailed above, regardless of whether or not they are family members. The next section is for close relatives. Close relatives are considered to be those family members whom the subject sees, spends time with, and/or communicates with via telephone or email on a regular basis. One can also define the frequency of contact here that can be helpful in determining how close the subject is to the relative. The next section is for close friends, which includes those people whom the subject meets with regularly. You may find it helpful to note where they spend time together (e.g. in school and/or at work) and how frequently they get together outside of school/work, if at all. The final section is for boy/girlfriends. This would include anybody that the subject was romantically involved with at the beginning of the interview period. It is important to establish the nature of the romantic relationship (i.e. How long have they been dating? Do others see them as a couple? Do they see each other outside of school? etc.). For all relationships, only describe those that are in place at the beginning of the interview period. Do not include individuals who are going to become part of the subject’s life during the interview period and will count as an event (e.g. starting a romantic relationship, birth of a sibling, etc.).

3. General Notes

The following section is a blank page labeled General Notes. The General Notes section should begin by summarizing who the subject is at the beginning of the interview period. This initial description is read to the consensus panel to provide a summary of who the subject is. This should include a description of the subject (e.g. age, gender, etc.) as well as a summary of the subject's demographics as gathered previously in the interview process. This description is intended to be used for referral throughout the sequence of event descriptions.
Example:

- At the beginning of the interview period, S is a 15 year old female. S lives at home with her mother, father, sister, and two brothers. She attends high school and has a few close friends. S has been dating her boyfriend, Sam, for about three months. She works with him at McDonald’s.

In addition to describing the subject, this section is also intended to provide an area where the interviewer can comment on any of the details surrounding the interview that may be important to note. Information to be obtained here may include the following:

1.) Where and when the interview took place
2.) Period of time that the interview covers (e.g. “This interview covers events that occurred in the past year…”).
3.) How the subject presents him/herself to the interviewer, for example:
   - who accompanied the child/adolescent to the interview, if anyone
   - how did the subject acted during the interview (e.g. extremely talkative, rather quiet and reserved, shy, nervous, distant, etc.)
   - anything distinct about the subject which may have an effect on how events unfold for this person
4.) Any other details/situations that would be necessary to explain or further understand events that will be endorsed during the SLES interview.

You can also include any other information that you feel would be helpful for your study purposes - such as demographics or psychiatric diagnosis and treatment - that of course are not related to the dependent variables of your study.

It is important for the objectivity of the consensus process to only include information that describes the subject’s situation prior to the interview period. In this way, information from events that occurred during the interview period will build upon the information in the General Notes section. Be sure to exclude any people and or details about the subject that will be revealed during the interview process. Revealing future information in the General Notes section can confound the rating of the other endorsed events. For example, do not include a new sibling that is born during the interview period as you would not want to convey to the consensus group that the subject is currently living with a newborn sibling prior as the birth of a newborn sibling will be included as an endorsed event and revealed chronologically according to when this occurred with respect to the other endorsed events.
4. Stressful Life Event Descriptions

Finally we come to the body of the SLES in which information about specific stressful life events is probed for. You may want to tell the informant ahead of time that they will be asked to remember what has occurred during the past year(s) and that you will be asking many specific questions. We have found that it is best not to take many specific notes when interviewing subjects, but rather to tape record interviews and transcribe them later. This will help to keep the time required to finish the interview to a minimum and also to keep extraneous and/or subjective information out of the event descriptions.

Parent Interviews

When interviewing a parent, be sure to emphasize that this is an interview based on events that have occurred in their child's life and/or any other event that the child would have an awareness of and that would have an effect on the child (from the child's perspective). You may find it necessary to periodically re-orient the informant of this throughout the interview process (i.e. "Remember that we are only talking about events as they occurred to your child and from your child's point of view."). Additionally, if a parent endorses an event that happened to themselves, such as troubles at work or financial problems, ask the parent whether or not this is something that the child would have been aware of. If the child is not aware of an event or situation, it should not be endorsed as an event.

Since this instrument was designed to document stressful life events as they relate to the onset of psychopathology, we have not considered the patient's own psychiatric treatment and/or hospitalizations to be an event. Depending on the nature of your study, you will need to determine what additional information you may want to collect. Of course, it is advised that no information or details should be collected that are related to the dependent variables of the study.

Endorsement and Dating of an Event

When an informant endorses a particular event, the date of occurrence should be ascertained with reference to the timeline. Every effort should be made to date the occurrence of the event as precisely as possible. However, keep in mind that many times, the informant cannot pinpoint the exact date of the event occurrence. Our convention has been to use the 8th to designate the "beginning" of a month, the 15th to indicate the "middle", and the 22nd for the "end" of the month.

It is sometimes more difficult to assess the total duration of an event. The duration of an acute event (e.g. failing a test, a car accident, etc.) should be recorded as "zero months". An exception to this rule, however, may include an acute event that has an extended effect on the subject, in which case the duration would be longer than zero. If a chronic event begins prior to and extends into the interview period, the date of...
occurrence would be recorded as the actual date of onset and the total duration given up until the time the chronic event ended or the date of the interview. For example, in the case of an event that has been ongoing for three years, even though we are only probing about the past year, the duration would be recorded as 36 months.

Example:

- S is a 15 year old female. She breaks her leg while playing soccer. S is treated at the emergency room and is required to be in a cast for 6 weeks. She missed 2 days of school and does not know when she will be able to play soccer again. There were no additional complications and S is expected to fully recover.
  - In this example, the duration of the event would be coded as 6 weeks or 1.5 months.

Suggested Probes

The suggested probes provided in the interview booklet are intended to provide the interviewer with questions sufficient to elicit enough information to allow the consensus group to rate the objective threat, behavior dependence, and focus ratings of the event. However, it is important to keep in mind that you want to get as much descriptive (but objective) information as possible about an event and feel free to add your own probes accordingly. Although the suggested probes provide a good structure to begin probing about event details, be creative in searching for more details that may be unique to a particular situation. In addition, it is important to establish how much the subject knows about a particular event and what impact it has had on the subject’s life. For example, if a subject is the victim of a crime, the probes do not include details of the crime but rather ask, “What happened?” The interviewer needs to think about the specific crime and the unique details that will be necessary in order to determine the appropriate objective ratings. The use of common sense and intuition is always recommended to probe further to find out about what happened, keeping in mind what types of information the interviewer and the consensus group would need, and want to know, to in order to appropriately rate the event.

For example, let’s suppose that S had her bike stolen and is therefore the victim of a crime. To completely understand and describe the situation to the consensus panel, you may want to know many of the following details:

- Was the bike locked up or was it left outside unlocked and unattended?
- Did the subject lend the bike to somebody, maybe even a stranger?
- How old was the bike?
- Did the bike have sentimental value? For example, was it an old one that had been passed down in the family? Was it a gift? Had the subject built it him/herself?
- How much did the subject use the bike?
• Was the bicycle the subject’s primary mode of transportation or was it used as recreation?
• Can the bicycle be recovered or replaced?

From this example, it should be clear that there may be many questions specific to a certain event that could have an impact on the various objective ratings made by the consensus group. The interviewer must always be mindful of this. Additionally, the interviewer must be aware that different subjects may respond differently to the way a question is asked. Try to ask questions in such a way that your specific subject can understand the question and respond accurately. It is important to keep in mind that it is best to error on the side of collecting more detail.

Another thing to be mindful of is that a person may be mentioned in an event that is not listed in the demographics section at the beginning of the interview. In this case you want to obtain information about the nature of that relationship. This would include information such as frequency of contact and closeness (e.g. Is the person a confidant or a casual acquaintance? How much time do they spend together? Do they spend time together outside of school/work? How long have they known each other?). It is possible that the person should have been included as a close friend or relative but was overlooked. It is also possible that this person is not close to the subject and therefore the event should not be included.

Sometimes an informant will endorse an event and not be able to provide much descriptive information about the event, or the event may seem trivial to the interviewer. At times, the subject may also want to describe an event that involves a person that is not of a close enough relation to him/her to be endorsed as an event. However, since the informant feels that it is important, the interviewer will want to get as much objective, descriptive information as possible. During the consensus process, a decision can be made as to whether this actually qualifies as “an event” or not.

**Subjective Threat Rating**

The subjective threat rating is intended to capture how severely the subject feels a particular event has affected him/her in a stressful or negative way. After the subject has described an event for you, ask them to rate the event in light of his/her perspective of threat. If a parent interview is being conducted, the parent should be asked to rate the event in light of the child’s perspective. We have used a four-point scale for rating this. The scale for subjective threat rating is as follows:

1 = Little or no effect
2 = Some effect
3 = Moderate effect
4 = Great effect
There is a chart included in the SLES material that depicts these ratings on a bar scale. It is helpful to show the subject this scale, especially younger subjects, when asking them to make subjective threat ratings. Once again, if you are interviewing a parent, be sure to remind them to rate the threat based on the child’s experience and perspective of threat – not on his/her own feelings. Be sure to code and record the subjective threat rating at the time of the interview. Please note that it is our experience that this information may be omitted from the taped recording of the interview. This can happen if, for example, the subject points to one of the numbers on the bar scale instead of speaking the rating. Therefore, it is helpful for interviewer to repeat the subjective threat rating aloud, after the subject has made his/her choice, in order to assure its recording on the audio tape.

Additional Events

At the end of the SLES interview, ask the subject if any other important events not previously mentioned have occurred within the interview period. If so, these events should be endorsed as Additional Events. As these events are unexpected, no probes are suggested. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to elucidate enough details of this event, through the use of probes, to thoroughly describe and relate this particular situation to the consensus group. The same procedure for subjective threat rating is used as previously described.

Write Up of Event Descriptions

After the interview is complete, the interviewer must then write up the event descriptions based on the tape recording and any general notes from the interview itself, keeping in mind that the write-ups should be filled with as much objective information as possible about the event. It is important to include as much objective information as possible in the event descriptions. It is also important that the interviewer does not include or elude to any of his/her personal feelings or subjective opinions of the event in the description. The description should be able to stand alone. Begin each description by describing who S is. Here as an example of an event description:

- RR-2: Have you broken up with your boyfriend or girlfriend?
  - S is a 15 year old female. She and her boyfriend, Sam, broke up with each other because he is moving away. The decision was mutual; however, S would have liked to try to make the long distance relationship work. They had been dating approximately 7 months. The relationship was not sexual but they did confide in each other. Neither her mother nor her father liked Sam because he was 3 years older than S. S still talks to Sam but finds it difficult to remain friends, as she still has feelings for him.
Some other important considerations and suggestions for the write-up of endorsed events include:

- Details in event description should come from the probes but should also contain information beyond the scope of the probes. Any details that are important or unique to each individual situation should be included
- Details should be thorough yet stated as concisely as possible
- Always error on the side of too much information/too many details

Details that can be included:
- Information/details that surround the occurrence of the specific event
- Any historic information leading up to the event

Details that cannot be included:
- Dependent variable-related events (e.g. if your study is looking at the relationship between stress and alcohol dependency, you would not want to include any details suggesting that the subject has been previously treated for alcohol abuse)
- Any events or details that will occur in the future

**Write Up of Event Descriptions: Special Circumstances**

- **Complex Events**

At times, certain event descriptions may contain details that can be classified under more than one category of events. In this case, it must be determined whether enough information is provided to meet the necessary criteria to be included as separate, multiple events. In other words, the details must provide evidence that enough change occurred to the subject (or other individuals involved in the situation) to be listed under more than once category.

Examples:

- S is a 16 year old female. After her parents divorced, S moved with her mother from Florida to Pittsburgh. S’s mother wanted to move to Pittsburgh to be closer to her family. S did not want to move because she would have to change schools. S said that she likes her new home. She misses some of her friends and sometimes wishes that she could go back to Florida to be closer to them.
  - This event involves both a housing change (H-2), a parents’ divorce (O-5), and a change of schools (E-3). If enough details surround each part (the move, the divorce, and the school change) and each event falls within the interview period, it should be included as 3 separate events.
• **S** is a 16 year old female. Her mother was recently laid off from her job and is currently unemployed. They have, at times, had a hard time coming up with enough money to pay their monthly bills and **S** now has no extra spending money. **S** doesn’t feel that her mother could get money quickly if it was necessary. **S** has not had to go without things that she has needed. She is thinking about finding a summer job to help her mother with the finances.
  - This event involves a parent’s unemployment (W-12) and financial difficulties (M-1). Again, if enough details surround each part (the firing and the money problems), it should be included as two separate events.

• **Events that Occur More than Once**

  If the same event happens more than one time to the subject, each occurrence should be written up individually using the “Additional Occurrence” supplementary sheet.

• **Events that Occur to Multiple Family Members**

  If the same event happens individually to more than one family member, the event should be written up individually for each person using the “Additional Occurrence” supplementary sheet.

  Example:

  - **S** is a 16 year old female. **S**’s mother, father, and younger sister are separately seeking psychological treatment. Each attends therapy individually about one time per week. The reasons for treatment are unrelated.
    - This should be written up as 3 separate events, as each family member has sought treatment individually for individual problems.

  All events involving multiple family members need not be written up individually. If more than one family member is involved in a single situation affecting both persons at the same time, only one event should be included.

  Example:

  - **S** is a 17 year old female. **S** moves from a rented apartment to a house that they own with her mother, younger sister, and brother. **S** did not oppose the move. The new home is in a nicer neighborhood and is much larger than their previous apartment. **S** likes her new house and does not feel too far away from her friends. She did not have to change
schools. It has had no affect on her relationship with her family or friends.
  - This event involves a change in housing (H-2). Although 4 family members were involved in the move, all persons were involved in the same event at the same time. Because of this, the description would be written up as one event.

**Marking of Front Cover of SLES Interview Book**

To assist in the consensus process and to easily identify the interview booklet, certain notes and markings should be made to the front cover of the packet. This information should include:

1. Date of consensus meeting
2. Subject identification number
3. Date of interview
4. Span of the interview period (the period of time that the interview is covering)
5. Number of endorsed events
6. Endorsed event number and date of occurrence (for consensus meeting)

Each endorsed event should be listed in chronological order, including the event number (e.g. W-2), page number, and date of event occurrence. The entire list of endorsed events should then be numbered chronologically to uniquely identify the event for ease of data entry.

**CONSENSUS MEETINGS**

The objective threat, behavior dependence, and focus ratings are all based on a consensus group's rating of each event.

1. **The Consensus Process**

Our consensus group meets on a regular basis (usually once a week) to rate SLES interviews. The consensus group consists of all SLES interviewers as well as the project leader/principal investigator. Aside from the interviewer, the remainder of the consensus group is blind to the child’s diagnostic status.

The interviewer will begin by providing the consensus group with the subject’s demographics and the general notes that present the situation at the beginning of the interview period. The interviewer will then present endorsed events from each subject's interview in chronological order.
The interviewer will read an event description and then consensus group proceeds with the rating process. Each member of the consensus group gives his/her own rating of all three variables (objective threat, behavior dependence, and focus) with the interviewer providing his/her ratings after all other members of the consensus group have provided theirs. Aside from the interviewer, the rest of the consensus group is blind to the subject’s subjective rating of stress. The interviewer should try to be as objective as possible and will offer his/her rating last. If there are any discrepancies, they are discussed with reference to the ‘Objective Threat Coding Sheets’ (see below) for comparison of rating logic, until a group consensus can be reached.

**Exclusion of an Event**

Members of the consensus group may decide to exclude an event from the rating process in the case of a questionable endorsement of an event by the subject. As previously described, this may occur when there is not enough information, when the event is based on speculation, when the person involved in the event is not of a close enough relation to the subject, or when the event falls outside the timeline of the interview period.

In the case of a parent interview, an event may be excluded when the parent projects his or her own stressful situation onto the child. This can be further explained in the following example.

Example (as reported in a parent interview by the subject’s mother):

- **D-3: Have any of your child’s close friends passed away?**
  - S is a 16 year old female. A close friend of S’s mother passed away, whom the child referred to as “uncle”. The child only saw him during the times that her mother visited him and rarely spoke to him during these visits. S did attend the funeral and it wasn’t the first that she attended.
    - Based on this event write-up, no information was provided about whether the child was directly affected by the death of her mother’s friend. Also, it is unclear if S wanted to attend the funeral or was told to. Although the mother, who endorsed this event, was close to this man, the effect of his death on the subject cannot be determined based on the provided details. Therefore, the consensus group agreed that this was not to be considered a stressful life event in the child’s life.
2. The Ratings

**Objective Threat**

*Objective threat* is defined as the amount of stress or unpleasantness that accompanies an event that an average person, given the subject’s biographical circumstances, could be expected to experience. The consensus group should rate this in light of all similar types of events that are within the realm of possibility. In other words, how stressful is this particular event in relation to other similar events or how severe the situation could be?

Objective threat is measured on the same scale as the subjective threat:

- 1 = Little or no effect
- 2 = Some effect
- 3 = Moderate effect
- 4 = Great effect

We have defined many criteria for rating different events on the Objective Threat scale based on our experience of rating thousands of events. These criteria are fully outlined in the ‘Objective Threat Coding Sheets’. This coding sheet is designed to capture the essence of the details that go into the objective ratings for each event. Although this provides a good template for the basic structures of objective threat, it can by no means cover all possibilities. As the details of each event and situation are unique to each subject, the sheet is intended to be used as a guideline for the necessary logic to standardize the details of an event description to an objective rating.

**Behavior Dependence**

*Behavior dependence ratings* are also based on a four-point scale. This scale captures the likelihood that an event was directly caused or influenced by the subject’s behavior. Oftentimes, people create stressful situations in their lives. On the other hand, stressful situations often occur without provocation or influence by the persons involved. The behavior dependence rating is a means by which to differentiate these extremes. In the event descriptions, it is important to include as much information as possible regarding the behavior of the subject and others involved in the event in order to accurately rate this variable.

The scale for behavior dependence is as follows:

- 1 = Totally independent of the child's behavior
- 2 = Probably independent of the child's behavior
- 3 = Probably dependent on the child's behavior
- 4 = Totally dependent on the child's behavior
It is important to rate an event as either totally dependent or independent, unless there is really some missing information or ambiguity that leaves the consensus group unsure. Ratings of 2 or 3 indicate that not enough information and/or details were provided to guarantee complete dependence or independence of the subject’s behavior. Many times, it can be difficult to decide on a behavior dependence rating and you need to be careful not to speculate on the reasons for dependence vs. independence but rather to focus on the details/facts that you do have and make as unbiased a rating as possible.

The rating of behavior dependence/independence becomes the most difficult (and are most important) when considering events involving relationships. It is important to elucidate what behavior is considered to be “normal” in the relationship. In this case, a rating of 4 – totally dependent on S’s behavior – would indicate that S did something significantly overt and flagrantly out of the norm of what is expected of them in the relationship. Likewise, a rating of 1 – totally independent of S’s behavior – would indicate that the other person involved in the relationship did something totally egregious of what S would expect in the relationship. Again, in these situations, it is important to determine from the subject if behavior guidelines were clearly defined in the relationship. If, based on the description of the event, it is determined that both people contribute to a fight/argument and/or the breakdown of the relationship, the behavior dependence would be rated as a 4 (totally dependent) as the subject’s behavior directly contributed to the situation.

Another difficult example in rating behavior dependence/independence is in the instance of failing to be accepted to a team or an organization. In this instance, it is important to determine whether the subject did anything out of the norm of his/her regular actions to cause this to occur. For example, did he/she perform his/her best, whatever that might be? Does he/she recall making an obvious mistake? Did he/she meet all of the qualifications of membership? Based on these details, the consensus group can then determine whether he subject’s behavior contributed to his/her inability to be accepted.

Focus Ratings

Focus ratings describe who or what is primarily involved in the event. In other words, who are the details of the event focused on and who will be affected by the consequences of the event? If an event occurs that has implications for the subject and another person, then Joint focus can be assigned. It is important to think about consequences of the event for the subject when rating focus. For example does the event cause a change in lifestyle or routine for the subject?

The scale for focus ratings is as follows:

1 = Self (details of the event only involves the subject)
• Example: subject has planned outpatient surgery
2 = Joint (details of the event involves the subject and a close relative/friend)
• Example: subject moves back home into parents’ house
3 = Other (details of the event involve somebody other than the subject)
• Example: subject’s brother is involved in an accident
4 = Pet and/or Possession (details of the event involve a pet or other possession)
• Example: subject’s pet needs to be put asleep; subject’s bike is stolen

We are glad that you have chosen to take a comprehensive approach in assessing stress in your work. Hopefully this training manual will be helpful in your administration of the SLES. However, if you encounter any problems in using this interview schedule, or would like to discuss the use of this instrument further, please direct all inquiries to:

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We wish the best of luck to you in all your efforts.