

HL IB Psychology

How to Answer the IB Health Psychology Question

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Exam Tips & Guidance

How is the exam paper structured?

- You will be asked an exam question on Health on **Paper 2** of the exam
- If you are **HL** you are required to answer **two questions** on **two different options** on Paper 2 e.g. Health and Relationships
- If you are **SL** you are required to answer **one question** on **one option** on Paper 2 e.g. Health
- If you are HL Paper 2 lasts for two hours; if you are SL Paper 2 lasts for 1 hour
- Each option consists of **three different questions** each of which are worth 22 marks; you choose to answer **one** of those three questions (don't answer more than one question per option!)
- You may be asked to choose to answer a question from, for example, the following choices: *determinants of health, health problems, promoting health*
- It is **highly unlikely** that you will be asked to choose all three questions from one topic e.g. the questions will not all be taken from the Determinants of health topic
- Each question is an **Extended Response Question** worth 22 marks so you should spend **one hour** planning and writing each question

How to structure and plan your response to a Health exam question

Let's take this question: '**Discuss the biopsychosocial model of health and well-being**' [22]



What is this question asking you to do?

Start with the **command term**: 'discuss' asks students to consider a range of arguments regarding the use of the biopsychosocial model to explain health issues. 'Discuss' means that you need to present an argument which explores the implications of using this model to investigate and explain health and well-being.

Here are some useful sentence stems/phrases that will help you to form a convincing 'Discuss' argument:

- *This model is an improvement on what went before, because...*

- However there are some limitations: the model is very complex and it can be difficult to isolate the variables which means...
- Evidence for the model comes from studies...
- This research can show a correlation, but not cause which is a limitation because...
- There is strong evidence for...
- There are other variables which may have also influenced the results of this study such as...

But what does all of that actually mean?

Students often express some confusion (panic even!) when they read exam questions. This confusion/panic tends to stem from a) exam nerves (understandable) and b) misreading the question or feeling that the question is asking them to do something that they have never done before.

So, let's **unpack** the above exam question and break it down into its constituent parts; this way you will be able to see that yes, you can answer this question and yes, you have revised the correct theories and studies that will enable you to answer the question. You should use this approach to deconstruct all possible exam questions as this strategy will help you to understand and be prepared for whatever the exam throws at you!

- Unpacking the question: '**Discuss the biopsychosocial model of health and well-being**' [22]
- '**Discuss**' means that you need to present arguments regarding the **explanatory value** of the biopsychosocial model of health and well-being e.g. can this model provide a full explanation for health and well-being?
- **The biopsychosocial model** is a replacement for the earlier biomedical model. It sees health as influenced by:
 - **biological factors** - such as **genetics**, **hormone** levels, **brain** and **anatomy**
 - **psychological factors** - such as individual **dispositions** and health **beliefs**, **coping skills**, **emotions**
 - **sociocultural factors** - such as **socioeconomic status**, **social support**, relationships, living conditions
- **Health and well-being** refers to good health and also to illness
- **Health psychology** includes investigating how factors such as lifestyle and social context may influence health and illness, making one of the goals of health psychology to promote an understanding of behaviour that leads to a healthier lifestyle.

In conclusion, this question is asking you to, 'Present arguments regarding how well the holistic approach of the biopsychosocial model can be used to explain differences in health and well-being of people with varying biological, cognitive and sociocultural factors.'



How to get full marks for this question

Yes, it is possible to get full marks for this question or for any question on any of your IB Psychology papers. It is, however, not easy to do so (if it was, everyone would be doing it!) but with hard work, revision (and use of this helpful revision site!) full marks could be yours.

So, let's take this bit by bit: what do you need to do to be in with a chance of achieving 100% on this question?

1. First, just describe the biopsychosocial model and how it replaces the biomedical model
2. Then decide which health problem you are going to use in your essay - if you are using this revision site as your guide you may choose to go the following route:
 1. Health problem - **Stress**: work stress and lack of **control**
 2. Research - **Marmot et al. (1997)**
3. You also need to consider how the model is **used** by physicians: in theory it explains health, but in practice is it used to promote well-being or to help treat health problems?
 1. Research - **Suls and Rothman (2004)**
4. You need to be able to satisfy the mark scheme criteria as follows:
 1. **Focus on the question (2 marks)** - are you *explaining* how the biopsychosocial model shows how lack of control influences stress
 2. **Knowledge & Understanding (6 marks)** - do you know the model well, in detail, and can you give examples to illustrate your understanding of how the model, study and health problem link back to the question?
 3. **Use of research (6 marks)** - is your answer evidence-based? Does this evidence support your argument? Two studies are ideal but one study in detail is better than several studies used at a superficial level that repeat the same point over and over
 4. **Critical thinking (6 marks)** - does your answer show that you have an inquiring and reflective mind? Have you evaluated the research methodology as well as the model? Have you challenged the central assumptions of the question along with its attendant theories and research?
 5. **Clarity & organisation (2 marks)** - is your meaning clear throughout and have you structured your essay coherently?



That's all very well but can you show me how?....

There is a full exemplar answer to this response (see the next page titled 'Model Exam Response - Health'). This exemplar response is accompanied by a commentary linking each paragraph back to the question, explaining how it satisfies the criteria for full marks.

But just to whet your appetite and give you a 'taster' of the exemplar response here are some edited highlights:

Exemplar paragraph from the model answer:

The biopsychosocial model of health and well-being (BPS model) was developed by psychiatrist George Engel in 1977 to replace the biomedical model that he viewed as too reductionist. Instead of just seeing health as related to our physiology, the biopsychosocial model argues that health is dependent on an interaction between physiological factors, psychological factors and social and environmental factors. Supporters of the BPS model assert that a health approach that considers the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors should lead to improved explanation of health behaviour and better understanding, diagnosis and treatment of illnesses. This essay will discuss the BPS model explanation for the correlation between lack of control at work, stress and heart problems, through Marmot et al.'s (1997) investigation of job stress.

Commentary provided for the above paragraph:

The wording of the exam question is used which shows **Focus** on the question. There is an explanation of the biopsychosocial model which shows **Knowledge & Understanding**. The command term is referred to explicitly which tells the examiner that the student has understood what is required of them (**Focus**). Relevant **Research** is cited so that the examiner knows what to expect in the essay plus the student has identified the biopsychosocial model's approach to stress (**Focus; Knowledge & Understanding**). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (**Clarity & Organisation**) with effective use of terminology.

Model Answer Example

Model Exam Response – Health

The question is: Discuss the biopsychosocial model of health and well-being' [22]

What follows is an exemplary response to this question which would achieve a high mark (if not full marks) in an exam. The right-hand column consists of commentary linking each paragraph back to the question, explaining how it satisfies the criteria for full marks.

Words or phrases written in **bold** in the right-hand column show which aspects of the markscheme criteria are being met per paragraph.

Model exam response	Commentary per paragraph
The biopsychosocial model of health and well-being (BPS model) was developed by psychiatrist George Engel in 1977 to replace the biomedical model that he viewed as too reductionist. Instead of just seeing health as related to our physiology, the biopsychosocial model argues that health is dependent on an interaction between physiological, psychological and social/environmental factors. Supporters of the BPS model assert that a health approach that considers this interaction between factors should lead to improved explanation of health behaviour and better understanding, diagnosis and treatment of illnesses. This essay will discuss the BPS model explanation for the correlation between job stress and heart problems, through Marmot et al.'s (1997) investigation of civil service employees.	The wording of the exam question is used which shows Focus on the question. There is an explanation of the biopsychosocial model which shows Knowledge & Understanding . The command term is referred to explicitly which tells the examiner that the student has understood what is required of them (Focus). Relevant Research is cited so that the examiner knows what to expect in the essay plus the student has identified the biopsychosocial model's approach to stress (Focus; Knowledge & Understanding). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.
Marmot et al (1997) took the BPS approach to investigating whether employees in lower position jobs who had little control over their work environment would develop heart problems over five years. This research was part of an ongoing prospective longitudinal study into civil service employees. Medical checks were carried out (biological factors), and then a standardised self-report questionnaire was sent to their homes at yearly intervals for the next five years. The questionnaire asked for	The biopsychosocial approach is explained (Focus) in relation to the study (Knowledge & Understanding and Use of Research). The command term is referred to (indirectly) in the final sentence of the paragraph (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and

<p>demographic data (social factors), but also asked about their environmental stressors, such as neighbourhood problems, loneliness and social support (a mixture of social and psychological factors). Any self-reported health problems were verified by hospital records. Job specifications and responsibilities were also measured through independent assessments of the work environment by personnel managers. In this way, a holistic approach was taken to the employees' health.</p>	<p>grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>The results showed that the rate of heart problems for those in the lowest level jobs was 1.5 times the rate in the highest levels. The most significant risk factor for developing heart disease over the five years of the study was the degree of control that participants felt they had in the work environment. This was correlated with the control they actually had through the personnel managers' independent assessments, showing that the employees' perception of their lack of control was accurate. Therefore, those with low control over their day-to-day working life were more likely to develop heart disease. This use of the BPS model to explain the psychological and social correlates of job stress increases the possibility of addressing these problems and so reducing the incidence of heart disease. It connects the biological with the social and psychological in an explanation of health and well-being.</p>	<p>The Research is used effectively to demonstrate the biopsychosocial model and the question is addressed directly i.e. the use of the biopsychosocial model is explained (Knowledge & Understanding). The command term is implicitly addressed at the end of the paragraph (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>Marmot et al.'s research used standardised questionnaires, objective health measures and correlational analysis, meaning that the results have a high degree of reliability. The longitudinal design means that the data from this study can be compared with data from previous and future research, allowing for a trend to be identified. However, although the methods used to gather the data were standardised and easily replicable, self-report questionnaires are subject to participant bias in several different ways, which can reduce the internal validity of the results. One of the main problems is the social desirability effect, as participants may under-report their own health problems in an effort to appear healthy. Questions are also open to individual interpretation and forced choices in closed-ended questions may not match the participants' preferred answers. As the questionnaires are about health, fear that confidentiality may not be maintained may have led to untruthful answers or some questions not being answered. Finally, a correlation can only suggest association rather than cause-and-effect so it cannot conclusively show what the source of the stress was in each</p>	<p>The use of Research to support the use of biopsychosocial model's explanation of the relationship between work stress and heart problems is expanded upon. (Knowledge & Understanding). Critical Thinking is used to challenge the extent of the validity and reliability of the findings. The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology. Focus is maintained, with the reference to the terms in the question at the end of the paragraph.</p>

<p>participant's life. However, the correlation between lack of control in one's job and heart problems is maintained over the five years of the study, supporting the BPS model's explanation for health.</p>	
<p>Supporters of the BPS model argue that it should lead to improved diagnosis and better predictions about treatment and follow-up. However, health professionals should not just explore each factor on its own, and then combine all the knowledge at the end, but understand how each affects and is affected by the others. For example, once an employee with little job control begins to suffer from chronic stress, their social life may diminish as their immune system is compromised and they are in the earlier stages of heart disease. This leads to exhaustion and no time for anything except work, and then loneliness can become a social factor in their ill-health. This interaction between the factors needs to be considered in order to engage effectively with prevention and treatment. The BPS model has been criticised for the complexity of this relationship and the resulting difficulty of isolating variables to identify just what is causing ill-health.</p>	<p>More knowledge shown of how the BPS model works (Knowledge & Understanding). Critical Thinking is used to discuss the interactionist nature and the complexity of the model. All of this is discussion, so meeting the command term requirements (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>Given this difficulty, Suls and Rothman (2004) suspected the BPS model was not being implemented as intended. They assessed the extent to which health psychologists used the BPS model effectively in an interactionist way. Their meta-analysis of studies showed that psychological factors were measured in over 94% of the studies being assessed, but biological and social factors appeared in only about half of the studies. They concluded that while health psychologists have acknowledged the BPS model enough to reference it in their research, their studies are not focused on the links between the different factors, and research exploring interaction between biological and social factors were especially limited. However, we have to consider that health psychologists, by the nature of their work, are more likely to favour psychological factors when researching health. Moreover, the study was carried out between 2001 and 2002, so it is over twenty years old and the findings therefore lack some temporal validity, and the frequency of use of the BPS model by medical practitioners may well have increased.</p>	<p>The student shows Critical Thinking which also includes wider Knowledge & Understanding of the topic and cites another piece of Research. The command term is implicitly addressed (Focus). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (Clarity & Organisation) with effective use of terminology.</p>
<p>To conclude, the BPS model provides a reliable explanation for ill-health by looking at the relationship between a person's physiology, psychology and social conditions (environment).</p>	<p>The essay comes to a conclusion, reflecting on what has been covered and returning to the demands of the</p>

However, any discussion of the BPS model has to acknowledge its complexity. In order to be effective, it needs to be used in the way intended, with the interaction between all three factors looked at to create a holistic explanation of health and well-being. The difficulty with this is that it is difficult to see how the factors interact, but also challenging to isolate the different factors and determine which may play the most significant role in stress for most people. But, given the complexity of many health problems, the BPS model would be insufficient if it was reductionist and simplistic. **1058 words**

question (**Focus**). **Critical Thinking** explores the limitations of the use of the BPS, and of the model itself. The question is explicitly addressed (**Focus**). The paragraph is clear, coherent and grammatical (**Clarity & Organisation**) with effective use of terminology.

Why would an examiner give this model answer top marks?

- It is fully focused on the question at all times
- It does not go 'off on a tangent' by including off-topic, irrelevant or superfluous detail
- It is concise, there is no 'waffle' and it uses key terminology throughout
- Research is used in a way which adds value to the response i.e. it is not a 'shopping list' of 'everything I know about this topic/theory/study' (what some teachers call a 'knowledge vomit', sorry for the gross imagery!)
- It selects key critical thinking/evaluation points
- Critical thinking is not simply an evaluation of research, it is an appraisal of the model as a whole
- Each paragraph is composed of a topic sentence which is then expanded on, with examples