Concepts and contexts (Paper 1 Sections B and C)

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Psychology · HL

Concepts and contexts

IB Diploma Programme Psychology HL (the course first assessed in 2027). Topic 1 gave you the content: the three approaches and their studies. This topic adds the other two parts of the course. The six **concepts** are questions you ask of any study or claim. The four **contexts** are real-world areas where you use the content: health and well-being, human development, human relationships, and learning and cognition. SL and HL students study all four. Paper 1 tests this topic directly: Section B gives you an unseen situation from one context (two questions, 6 marks each), and Section C asks one concept-based essay (15 marks) from a choice of two, each from a different context.

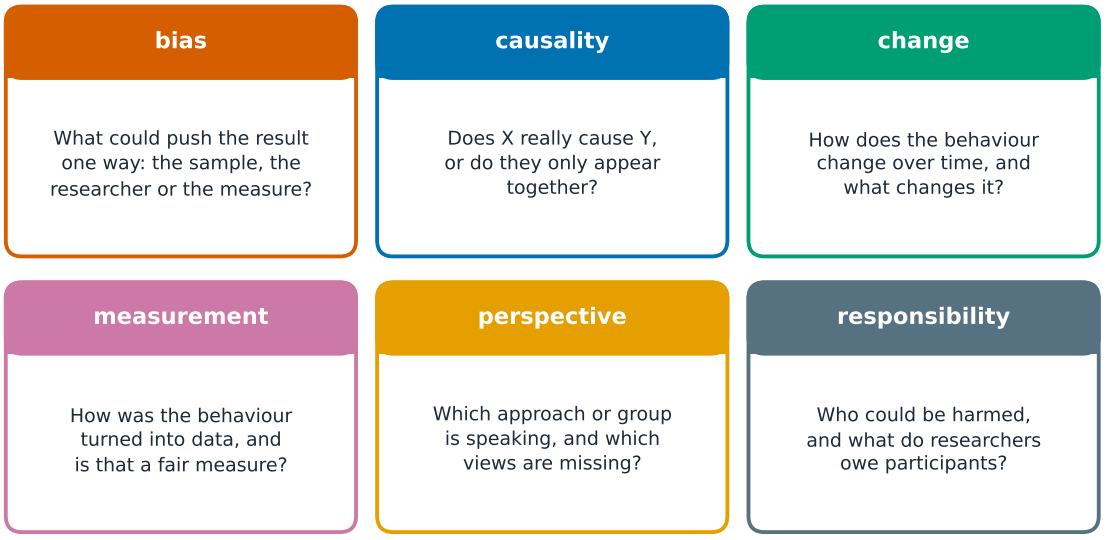
The World Health Organization estimates that about 280 million people live with **depression** . Is it a brain disease, a way of thinking, or a result of hard lives? Each answer leads to a different treatment: pills, therapy, or changes to work and family life. The concepts help you judge such claims; the contexts give you the cases to judge.

Must-know for this topic:

Part	Key content
concepts	bias, causality, change, measurement, perspective, responsibility
health and well-being	stress and the body; explaining and treating depression; diagnosis
human development	theory of mind and how to measure it; attachment
human relationships	helping (bystanders); obedience and conformity; prejudice and conflict
learning and cognition	conditioning; social learning; testing and spacing; technology

The six concepts

Each concept is a question to ask. In an essay, you use them to evaluate, not just to describe.



The six concepts as six questions to ask of a study or a claim

Concept	What it asks	Example
bias	What could push a result one way?	Asch tested only male American students.
causality	Does X cause Y, or do they only occur together?	Maguire's taxi drivers: a correlation.
change	How and why does behaviour change?	Draganski: the brain grew, then shrank.
measurement	How was behaviour turned into data? Is it fair?	Trust measured as money in a game.
perspective	Which approach or group is speaking?	Depression as genes, thoughts or poverty.
responsibility	Who could be harmed? What do we owe them?	Milgram's participants were very stressed.

Two related words appear in many questions. **Validity** means a study measures what it claims to measure. **Reliability** means it gives the same result when repeated.

Context 1: health and well-being

■ Stress and health

Stress is not only a feeling; it changes the body. Kiecolt-Glaser et al. (1995) made a small wound on the arms of 13 women who cared for a relative with dementia and 13

similar women who did not. The carers' wounds took 48.7 days on average to heal, against 39.3 days. Long-term stress, through hormones such as cortisol, weakens the **immune system** .

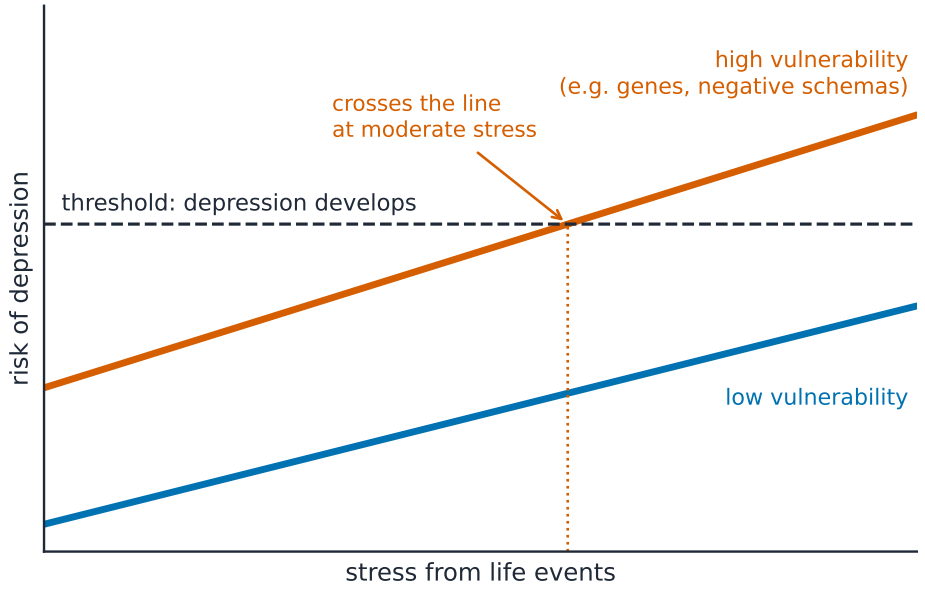
■ Explaining depression

Each approach explains depression in its own way:

Approach	Explanation	Evidence
biological	genes and serotonin	twin heritability about 38% (Kendler, 2006); Caspi's 5-HTT study
cognitive	negative thinking: Beck's **cognitive triad**	depressed people think badly of themselves, the world and the future
sociocultural	hard life conditions and weak social support	Brown and Harris (1978)

Brown and Harris (1978) interviewed working-class women in London. Women became depressed after a serious life event more often if they also had **vulnerability factors** : no close person to talk to, three or more children under 14 at home, no job outside the home, or losing their mother before age 11.

The **diathesis–stress model** - joins these views. A diathesis is a weakness, such as certain genes or negative schemas. It does not cause depression by itself, but it lowers the amount of stress needed.



Diathesis–stress: the same stress affects a vulnerable person more

Treatment and diagnosis

Treatments follow the explanations. Antidepressants such as SSRIs act on serotonin. **Cognitive behavioural therapy** (CBT) teaches people to notice and test their negative thoughts. Social treatments improve support, for example through community groups. Many patients do best with a combination.

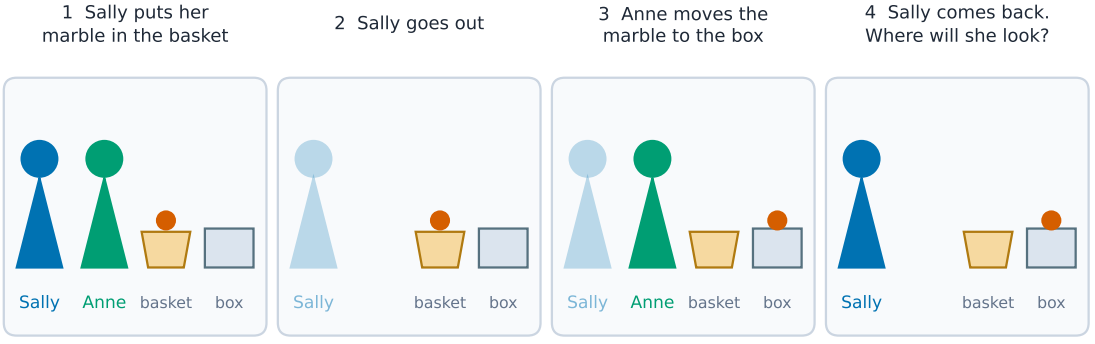
Diagnosis uses manuals such as the DSM-5, which list symptoms. This is a measurement problem: in some cultures people describe depression mainly through body pain or tiredness, so a symptom list written in one culture can miss cases in another (bias).

Context 2: human development

Theory of mind

Theory of mind is understanding that other people have beliefs, wishes and knowledge that can differ from your own. Most children show it by about age 4 or 5.

Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith (1985) used the Sally–Anne task. Children watched two dolls act out the story below, then were asked where Sally would look for her marble. 85% of typical children (mean age about 4½) and 86% of children with Down syndrome said "the basket". Only 20% of autistic children did, although their mental age was higher. The researchers concluded that autism involves a specific difficulty with theory of mind.



A child with theory of mind answers "the basket": Sally did not see the move, so she believes something false.

The Sally–Anne false-belief task

How should we measure theory of mind? This is a common Section C question, and it is a measurement question:

Strategy	Strength	Limit
verbal false-belief task (Sally–Anne)	simple, standard, easy to compare	needs language and memory, so it may underestimate young children
eye-gaze: where the child looks first (Clements and Perner, 1994)	children look at the right place before they can say it	looking is harder to interpret than an answer
looking time with infants (Onishi and Baillargeon, 2005)	15-month-olds looked longer when an actor searched in the "wrong" place	we must infer surprise; other explanations are possible

The results suggest that the answer depends on the measure: the verbal task says age 4, but non-verbal measures suggest earlier understanding.

■ Attachment

Attachment is the emotional bond between a child and a carer. Ainsworth's **Strange Situation** observes a one-year-old as the mother leaves and returns, and classifies the child as secure, avoidant or resistant. In her American sample about two thirds were secure. A review of studies from eight countries (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988) found more avoidant children in Germany and more resistant children in Japan. A Japanese baby rarely left alone may be very upset in the test for cultural reasons, not because of insecure attachment, so the measure may carry an American bias.

Context 3: human relationships

■ Helping others

Darley and Latané (1968) let students talk over an intercom and heard another student have a seizure. When students believed they were the only listener, 85% went for help before the seizure ended; when they believed four others could hear, only 31% did. This is the **bystander effect** : the more people present, the less each person feels responsible (**diffusion of responsibility**).

■ Obedience and conformity

In Milgram's study (1963), 40 men were told to give a "learner" electric shocks for wrong answers. The shocks were not real, but the men believed they were. 65% continued to the highest level, 450 volts. Obedience fell when the learner was in the same room or when another "teacher" refused first. The study raises the concept of **responsibility**: many participants were in real distress, and today it would not pass

an ethics review in this form.

CONFORMITY — matching a group

rises with group size, up to a point
rises when the group is unanimous
falls sharply with one ally who dissents
rises when the answer is ambiguous

OBEDIENCE — following an authority

rises with the authority's legitimacy
rises with distance from the consequence
falls when someone else refuses first
falls when responsibility is made personal

A dissenter can reduce group pressure. The effect depends on the setting; these conditions do not guarantee a particular response

Conditions that raise or lower conformity and obedience

■ Prejudice and conflict

In Sherif's Robbers Cave study (1954), two groups of 11- and 12-year-old boys at a summer camp competed for prizes and soon became hostile. Simply meeting did not reduce the conflict. It fell when the groups had to work together on **superordinate goals** , such as fixing the camp's water supply. Schools use the same idea in cooperative group work.

Context 4: learning and cognition

■ Learning by conditioning and observation

In **classical conditioning** , a neutral signal is paired with something that already causes a response, until the signal alone causes it (Pavlov's dogs learned to salivate at a sound). In **operant conditioning** , behaviour that is followed by a reward becomes more frequent (Skinner). Social learning theory (Topic 1) adds that we also learn by watching others.

■ Learning that lasts

Roediger and Karpicke (2006) had students learn short texts. One group read the text four times; another read it once and then tried to recall it three times. After one week, the "testing" group recalled 61% of the ideas and the "re-reading" group only 40%. This is the **testing effect** . Spacing study over several days also helps more than one long session.

■ Technology and cognition

Sparrow et al. (2011) found that people remembered less of some new facts when they expected the computer to save them; they remembered instead where the facts were saved. This is often called the "Google effect". HL students study technology in more depth in Topic 4.

Answering Paper 1 Sections B and C

Section B (6 marks). You get a short new situation. Pick the right content, explain it, and use details from the situation. Do not just describe a study; show how it applies.

Section C (15 marks): plan. *"One claim in health and well-being psychology is that one perspective is not enough to explain mental health. Discuss this claim with reference to one biological explanation of one or more disorders."*

1. Define the claim and the concept: perspective = the approach used.
2. Biological explanation: genes, with Kendler (2006): about 38% of the risk comes from genes.
3. So genes alone leave most of the variation unexplained.
4. Caspi (2003): the gene mattered only with stressful life events, so biology and environment work together.
5. A counter-point: SSRIs help many patients, so biology gives a useful treatment.
6. Conclude: the evidence supports the claim; diathesis–stress joins the perspectives.

Checklist

- The six concepts as questions; validity and reliability.
- Health and well-being: stress and the immune system (Kiecolt-Glaser); three explanations of depression (Kendler, Caspi; Beck; Brown and Harris); diathesis–stress; treatments; culture and diagnosis.
- Human development: theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al.) and three ways to measure it; attachment and the Strange Situation across cultures.
- Human relationships: the bystander effect (Darley and Latané); obedience (Milgram) and conformity; prejudice and superordinate goals (Sherif).
- Learning and cognition: classical and operant conditioning; the testing effect (Roediger and Karpicke); the Google effect (Sparrow).
- Section B: apply to the situation. Section C: use a concept to build an argument, with evidence on both sides and a conclusion.