Seyle developed his model of the general adaptation syndrome as a result of research with rats and other animals. In rats, certain stressors, such as painful tail-pulling, consistently led to the same sorts of stress reactions. In humans, however, it is harder to predict what will be stressful to a particular person at a particular time. Whether a particular stimulus will be stressful depends on the person's subjective appraisal of that stimulus. How threatening is it? How well have I handled this sort of thing in the past? How well will I be able to handle it this time? For one person, being called on to give a talk in front of a class is a highly stressful stimulus that will immediately produce such elements as a pounding heart and a dry mouth. For another person, being called on to give a talk is not threatening at all, but facing a deadline to complete a term paper is extremely stressful. In humans, moreover, the specific stress reaction is likely to vary widely; some stressful situations give rise predominantly to emotions of fear, some give rise to anger, and some give rise to helplessness and depression.

For some, not winning may be a stressful event; for others, coming second may not be a stressor at all.