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EPIGENETIC REPROGRAMMING OF GENE EXPRESSION UNDER ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS CONDITIONS

Nivashini G R[1], Dr. Prithvikumar H. Ahir[2], Valli Nachiyar C[3], Saravanan Manoharan[4], Prakriti Kapoor[5], Subathra M[6], Ramachandran Thulasiram[7], Aishwarya J Ramalingam[8]

[1]Second Year Postgraduate, Department of Radiology, Saveetha Medical College and Hospital, Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences (SIMATS), Saveetha University, Chennai – 602105, Tamil Nadu, India, Email: gidle6308@gmail.com,
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3498-1236
[2]Medical Officer, Faculty of Homoeopathy, Gokul Global University, Sidhpur, Gujarat, India, Email: phahir.bhms@gokuluniversity.ac.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6772-9188
[3]Professor, Department of Research, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research
[4]Assistant Professor (Research), Central Research Laboratory, Meenakshi Medical College Hospital & Research Institute, Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research
[5]Centre of Research Impact and Outcome, Chitkara University, Rajpura – 140417, Punjab, India,
Email: prakriti.kapoor.orp@chitkara.edu.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0877-3545
[6]Assistant Professor, Department of Biotechnology, Aarupadai Veedu Institute of Technology, Vinayaka Mission's Research Foundation (Deemed to be University), Tamil Nadu, India, Email: subathra.biotech@avit.ac.in, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2565-3943
[7]Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, Email: t.ramachandran@jainuniversity.ac.inm, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6991-0403
[8]Professor, Microbiology, Sree Balaji Medical College and Hospital, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9616-8913

ABSTRACT

Biotic and abiotic stressors like temperature extremes, drought, salinity and pollutant (environmental stress conditions) and biotic stressors like pathogens (environmental factors) have a great impact on cellular functioning and the survival of organisms. In order to be able to adapt to such dynamic environments organisms use highly complex regulatory systems that can regulate the expression of genes without changing the underlying DNA sequence. DNA methylation, histone modifications, chromatin remodelling, and non-coding RNA activity constitute the primary addicts in mediating these adaptations and are referred to as epigenetic regulation. The review gives a detailed overview of the processes involved in stress-induced epigenetic reprogramming of gene expression in various biological systems. It emphasizes the manner in which environmental signals are converted to epigenetic changes, which regulate the activity of transcription and also play a role in the phenomenon of plasticity. Moreover, the review summarizes the existing evidence on the epigenetic memory and its contribution to allowing sustainable or transgenerational reactions to stress. The nature of epigenetic changes, which are dynamic and reversible, is addressed and their implications in respect to adaptation, resilience and survival, discussed. Lastly, the new directions and challenges of research are described, and integrative approaches should be viewed as the way to improve on the complexity of the epigenetic regulation when faced with environmental stressful circumstances.

KEYWORDS: Epigenetic regulation, Environmental stress, Gene expression, DNA methylation, Histone modification, Non-coding RNA

1. INTRODUCTION

The environmental stress involves a very wide range of external stimuli, such as abiotic ones, which include temperatures, drought, salinity, and environmental pollutants, and biotic ones, including pathogens, pests, and microbial interactions, all of which may contribute greatly to the disruption of the cellular homeostasis and organism activity (Onaga and Wydra, 2016; Fedoroff et al., These stressors present significant limitations to the existence, increase, yield, and ecological fitness in plants, animals, and microorganisms. As climate change and anthropogenic activity continue their effects, the variety of environmental conditions has achieved a greater level, and it is important to know how organisms perceive, process, and react to stress on molecular and cellular levels (Fedoroff et al., 2010). One of the underlying elements of stress adaptation is the capacity of organisms to dynamically, reversibly, and context-dependently regulate gene expression, otherwise known as gene expression plasticity (Cavalli & Heard, 2019). This has been demonstrated to enable cells to quickly perform transcriptional network re-programming to adapt to changing environmental conditions to maintain physiological stability, and increase resilience. Although classical models of gene regulation have focused on the action of transcription factors and signaling pathways, the action of these mechanisms alone cannot account fully the complexity, persistence and heritability of stress responses that are evident in many biological systems. Epigenetics, in this case, has been seen as a key control layer, which regulates the expression of genes without modifying the existing DNA pattern (Allis and Jenuwein, 2016; Cavalli and Heard, 2019). Epigenetic processes, such as DNA methylation, histone modification, chromatin remodeling, and the regulation via non-coding RNA, have crucial roles in the regulation of gene activity during a stressful condition (Law & Jacobsen, 2010; Bannister &

Kouzarides, 2011; Ariel et al., 2015). These processes act as molecular switches which may be activated, or repressed, upon environmental signals to allow quick and adaptable adaptation. Notably, epigenetic changes are, in most instances, reversible but may also be long-lasting, which leads to the creation of stress memory and, in some instances, transgenerational inheritance of adaptive traits (Baeurle and Trindade, 2020; Quadrana and Colot, 2016; Heard and Martienssen, 2014). Recent findings have confirmed that epigenetic reprogramming, which occurs as a result of stress is not only critical in short-term response but also important in long-term adaptation and evolutionary mechanisms (Mirouze & Paszkowski, 2011). This interaction between the various epigenetic processes forms an extremely coordinated regulatory network, which combines the environmental cues with transcriptional and phenotypic consequences. Nevertheless, though it has made significant strides, the existing knowledge is still disconnected, and most studies are on single processes, a particular organism, or a single stressor. This failure of integration prevents the creation of an all-inclusive framework of interaction between various epigenetic layers to manage the expression of genes in different environmental challenges. Thus, there is an increasing demand to have a comprehensive approach that links environmental stressors with the epigenetic changes and subsequent changes in the gene expression in various biological systems. In this respect, the current review would attempt to give a synthesis of the mechanisms of epigenetic reprogramming of gene expression under environmental stress conditions. It also looks at the key epigenetic processes involved, their molecular mechanism and their contribution to adaptation, resilience and formation of memory. In addition, the review illustrates the existing issues, states the key gaps in the research, and explains the promising directions of the enhancement of the knowledge and use of epigenetic regulation in stress biology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of research has built over the last twenty years helped to make the claim that the environmental stress conditions provoke deep epigenetic changes, which govern the expression of genes in plants, animals, and microorganisms (Cavalli & Heard, 2019; Sun et al., 2021). DNA methylation is one of the many mechanisms studied that are the core processes of stress adaptation (Law & Jacobsen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2018). Research has shown that modifications in cytosine methylation patterns that are caused by stress can either stimulate or inhibit the expression of genes to ensure that organisms respond dynamically to stress-induced environmental conditions. Indicatively, its versatility is illustrated by the association of changes in methylation status with drought tolerance in plants and with gene regulation in mammalian systems, and it is conserved. Besides DNA methylation, histone changes have become very important in determining the chromatin structure and transcriptional control in stress conditions (Bannister and Kouzarides, 2011). The general response is that histone acetylation is related with transcriptional activation and histone methylation can activate or suppress the expression of genes, depending on the position of the specific residues. Empirical studies have shown that the histone modification patterns can be quickly changed under the influence of environmental stimuli, which changes chromatin accessibility and alteration of gene expression patterns. Moreover, chromatin remodeling complexes are fundamental in the repositioning of the nucleosomes, hence, enabling or limiting the activities of transcriptional machinery on DNA (Allis and Jenuwein, 2016). Another complex to epigenetic regulation is non-coding RNA, including microRNAs, small interfering RNAs, and long non-coding RNAs (Ariel et al., 2015; Erdmann and Picard, 2020). These molecules are also becoming known to play a fine tuning role in gene expression in response to stresses by both degrading or translational repressing specific mRNAs, and orchestrating epigenetic changes in specific regions of the genome. The way non-coding RNAs interact with other epigenetic processes supports the fact that gene regulation is extremely coordinated in response to the environmental stress. Nonetheless, despite these great achievements, the literature that is available today has a number of limitations. The key problem is that the current research remains very fragmented and in many cases it is limited to particular species, particular stressor or only to one epigenetic process. This methodology of compartmentalization restricts the derivation of an overall observation of how various epigenetic layers deal with each other in a well-coordinated way. In addition, a lot of research is based on short-term experimental observations, and there is a lack of focus on the effects of the long-term permanence and inheritance of epigenetic alterations. This means that the processes of epigenetic memory and transgenerational inheritance are not fully studied (Quadrana & Colot, 2016; Heard and Martienssen, 2014). As a result, a number of critical gaps on research still exist in the area. There is a strong demand of an integrative and coherent approach that would link the presence of environmental cues to epigenetic alterations and ensuing changes of gene expression in various biological systems. Specifically, it is crucial to comprehend how various epigenetic processes interact to control multifaceted stress responses in order to develop the field. Moreover, the molecular mechanism and functional implication of epigenetic memory is still to be explored further in order to understand how organisms store information regarding previous environmental exposure (Baeurle and Trindade, 2020; Sintaha, 2025). Lastly, the problem of translating the basic understanding of epigenetics into the practice, i.e. creating stress resistant plants, enhancing environmental flexibility, or constructing epigenetic-based therapeutic approaches, is a major challenge that requires interdisciplinary and multi-scale studies (Jones et al., 2016; Hasin et al., 2017; Hirayama and Mochida, 20

3. ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS AND CELLULAR RESPONSE

3.1 Abiotic Stress

The adverse environmental conditions, which cause negative impact on cellular homeostasis and physiological processes but do not involve living organisms, are called abiotic stress. Some of the most notable abiotic stress factors are temperature changes, drought, salt, and environmental pollution which affect gene expression and cell activity to a great extent. Extremes of temperature i.e. heat and cold interfere with protein stability, integrity of membrane and enzyme activity. The aggregation of proteins and their denaturation caused by heat stress usually results in the expression of heat shock proteins (HSPs), whereas cold stress influences the fluidity of the membranes and metabolism. The conditions cause rapid cellular reprogramming of transcription to stabilize cells. Water scarcity, which is a stress factor, is among the most important limitations to the growth and yield of plants. It causes osmotic imbalance, decreased turgor pressure and photosynthesis. In its turn, organisms switch on stress-sensing signaling pathways, including abscisic acid (ABA)-mediated pathways, to control water conservation-related genes and stress tolerance. Salinity stress is caused by over accumulation of soluble salts especially sodium ions in the cellular environment. This condition leads to ionic imbalance, osmotic stress, and toxicity and eventually, this condition affects metabolic and physiological functions. The cells react by controlling ion transporters, osmoprotectants, and genes that react to stress to restore homeostasis. Pollution of the environment by heavy metals (cadmium, lead, and mercury) and chemical pollutants causes oxidative stress by producing reactive oxygen species (ROS). These stresses have the potential to destroy the DNA, proteins, and lipids and as a result stress requires strong mechanisms of defense through antioxidant systems and stress-responsive networks of gene. A combination of abiotic stress causes intricate cellular signaling pathways that eventually result in epigenetic alterations and reprogramming of gene expression and allows organisms to adapt to environmental changes.

3.2 Biotic Stress

Biotic stress is the interaction with living organism, pathogens, bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites, herbivorous pests and insects. These stresses are a major threat to organism health, survival as well as productivity, especially in plants and agricultural systems. Biotic stress, in contrast to abiotic stress, is dynamic and can be described as host-pathogen or host-pest interactions, which in most cases elicit complex host responses. Innate immune responses are usually triggered by the invasion of the pathogen and this involves the identification of the pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) using pattern recognition receptors (PRRs). This results in the generation of PAMP-triggered immunity (PTI) and the generation of more precise and vigorous response referred to as effector-triggered immunity (ETI). Such immunological reactions are linked to the expression of defense-related genes, antimicrobial compounds, and localized cell death to the inhibition of the spread of a pathogen. Likewise, pest onslaughts including those of insects or herbivores trigger mechanical damages and biochemical signaling cascades that trigger defense reactions. They involve the synthesis of secondary metabolites, proteinase inhibitors and signaling molecules like jasmonic acid and salicylic acid that help in controlling gene expression related to defense. Recent literature has underscored the importance of epigenetic regulation in regulating the biotic stress responses. The regulation of the expression of immune-related genes and fine-tuning defense pathways is regulated with the help of DNA methylation, histone changes, and non-coding RNAs. These epigenetic modifications permit fast and reversible modifications in expression of genes, which enables organisms to react effectively in relation to biotic challenges. Stress-induced epigenetic modification in certain cases leads to priming effects in which previous exposure leads to increased response to similar stressors in the future. On the whole, biotic stress triggers very organized molecular and epigenetic reactions that reprogram gene expression, which contributes to defense, adaptation, and survival in complicated biological conditions.

3.3 Cellular Signaling Mechanisms

Cells perceive environmental stress conditions via specialized sensing mechanisms which cause complex intracellular signaling cascades. These signaling pathways are involved in signaling external stress signals into co-ordinated molecular responses eventually resulting in the re-programming of gene expression and adaptive physiological responses. Reactive oxygen species (ROS) are one of the most common reactions to the environmental stressor since they act both as harmful species and as communication molecules. Although too much ROS may lead to oxidative damage of cellular components including DNA, proteins, and lipids, moderate ROS generation is a major pathway of signaling, which triggers downstream pathways of stress response. Mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) signal transduction pathways are among the most important signaling cascades in stress signal transduction. These kinase cascades enhance the response of external stimuli and control transcription factors that modulate the expression of stress responsive genes. MAPK signaling has been extensively found in the response to abiotic and biotic stress states as well as the rapid and coordinated cell response to these states. Signaling pathways are also important hormonal mediators of stress response. Phytohormones, including the abscisic acid (ABA), salicylic acid (SA), jasmonic acid (JA), and ethylene, are involved in various stress responses, including drought tolerance, pathogen defenses and wound signaling, in plants. Animal systems also use stress hormones and signaling molecules to co-ordinate physiological and cellular adaptations. All these signaling pathways comprise a stress perceptionresponse cascade, in which environmental stimuli are perceived, transduced, and converted into a set of molecular responses. Notably, these cascades play a close interaction with epigenetic regulatory processes, allowing reversible and dynamic regulation of gene expression in the environment. Table 1 summarises the key environmental stressors and associated epigenetic responses in each of the biological systems.

Table 1. Environmental Stress Types and Associated Epigenetic Responses

Stress Type	Environmental Factor	Epigenetic Mechanism	Key Pathways/Genes	Model Systems

Abiotic	Drought	DNA methylation changes	ABA signaling, RD29A	Arabidopsis, crops
Abiotic	Heat stress	Histone acetylation	HSP genes (HSP70, HSP90)	Plants, mammals
Abiotic	Salinity	Chromatin remodeling	SOS pathway genes	Plants
Abiotic	Heavy metals	DNA methylation + ncRNA	Oxidative stress genes	Plants, microbes
Biotic	Pathogen infection	Histone modification + ncRNA	PR genes, SA signaling	Plants
Biotic	Pest attack	ncRNA regulation	JA pathway genes	Plants
Abiotic/Biotic	Hypoxia / combined stress	Chromatin remodeling	HIF pathway	Mammals

4. EPIGENETIC MECHANISMS IN GENE EXPRESSION REPROGRAMMING

4.1 DNA Methylation

Among the most researched epigenetic events in the regulation of gene expression in the environment during stressed conditions is DNA methylation. This is mainly through the incorporation of a methyl group at the fifth position of the cytosine residues, which usually takes place in the CpG dinucleotides in animals and CpG and non-CpG (CpHpG, CpHpH, H = A, T, or C) in the plants. This covalent change is catalyzed by a set of enzymes called DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs) and might be typically linked to transcriptional repression when found in regions of genes promoters. The patterns of DNA methylation change dynamically in response to environmental stress conditions, causing gene expression to change in response to environmental stimuli, to provide adaptive responses. As an example, hypomethylation induced by stress can initiate expression of stress-responsive genes, and hypomethylation can also repress genes that are not needed under certain circumstances. These reversible changes allow the organisms to modify their transcriptional programs completely without any changes in the genetic code. DNA methylation is an important process in plants where it governs the process of abiotic stress responses, like drought, salinity, and extreme temperatures. It has been demonstrated that locus-specific or genome-wide methylation alterations under the conditions of stress can occur, including those of hormonal signaling, osmotic regulation, and antioxidant defense. Correspondingly, under animal systems, environmental stressors like hypoxia, toxins and nutritional imbalance have been associated with changes in DNA methylation patterns which have an effect on gene expression and cellular functioning. Additionally, DNA methylation has a close relation to epigenetic memory in which stress-induced changes in methylation can be sustained with time and in certain instances passed across generations. It is the phenomenon which allows organisms to remember past experiences with the environment and respond more effectively to stress situations which occur again. The permanency of such methylation marks, and their inheritance, are, however, open to research. All in all, DNA methylation is an essential and dynamic control mechanism which connects environmental cues with gene expression reprogramming and is a key regulator of adaptive stress and phenotypic plasticity.

4.2 Histone Modifications

The topic of histone modifications is an essential control of epigenetics that regulates chromatin organization and gene expression to changes triggered by environmental stress. DNA is wrapped around the core proteins known as histones and the access of DNA by transcriptional machines is regulated by post-translational modification of these proteins. These changes mainly take place on the N-terminal tails of the histone proteins and they are acetylation, methylation, phosphorylation, ubiquitination and sumoylation. Among them, the histone acetylation and methylation are the most widely analyzed in the situation of the stress-induced reprogramming of gene expression. Histone acetylation which is catalyzed by histone acetyltransferases (HATs) normally results in a relaxed chromatin structure and, as a result, transcriptional activation occurs. On the other hand, histone deacetylation an event facilitated by the histone deacetylases (HDACs) leads to transcriptional repression and chromatin condensation. Sub-optimal environmental stress situation, including heat, drought and attack by pathogens, has been known to cause rapid fluctuations of histone acetylation levels to gene loci responsive to stress in order to activate genes on a timely manner. Histone methylation, however, has a tighter regulatory apparatus, since it may activate or suppress the gene expression in accordance with the amino acid residues and the extent of the methylation. As an illustration, the active transcription is normally linked to H3K4me3, and gene repression to that of H3K27me3. These methylation marks can be dynamically changed under the influence of stress conditions to regulate the chromatin states and shape the results of transcription. Along with the individual changes, a combination of various marks of histone is a concept that proposes that such changes co-ordinate with each other to regulate gene expression. The control of transcriptional responses through this combinatorial regulation enables specific and environment- dependent regulation of transcriptional responses in response to different environmental conditions. Moreover, the histone modifications tend to be complemented by other epigenetic processes, including the non-coding RNA pathways and DNA methylation, and can be considered an integrated regulatory network. Significantly, histone alterations are very vivid and reversible with the result of quick reaction to momentary environmental conditions. In other instances these changes play a role in causing memory to stress whereby the poised chromatin state is retained enabling the stress-responsive genes to be activated more rapidly to stress in the later instances. All in all, a role played by histone modifications in responses to environmental stress in mediating chromatin remodeling and transcriptional regulation is a primary modulator of plasticity in gene expression and adaptation.

4.3 Chromatin Remodeling

Chromatin remodeling is an inherent epigenetic process through which genes are regulated by changing the structural arrangement of chromatin, as a result of which accessibility to transcriptional factors is determined. In contrast to the chemical alteration of DNA or the histone proteins via the process of DNA methylation and histone modifications, chromatin remodeling is mostly associated with the dynamic exchange, expulsion, or rearrangement of the nucleosomes. The ATP-dependent chromatin remodeling complexes mediate these processes, and use energy gained through ATP hydrolysis to adjust nucleosome positioning of the DNA. Environmental stress conditions have been found to be critical to chromatin remodeling to enable quick transcriptional reactions. The chromatin remodeling complexes may be recruited to certain genomic loci in response to stress signals resulting in chromatin structure relaxation or compaction. Transcription factors and RNA polymerase can be able to access DNA in relaxed (euchromatic) regions which facilitates the process of activating genes, and cannot access DNA in condensed (heterochromatic) regions, leading to gene repression. Various chromatin remodeling complexes have been found to play a role in responsive genes to stress, such as SWI/SNF, ISWI, CHD and INO80. The mechanisms of action of these complexes include sliding nucleosomes in DNA, expelling histones or including histone variants thus regulating chromatin structure. Indicatively, the SWI/SNF complex is demonstrated to mediate the induction of stress-responsive genes through increased chromatin accessibility, and other complexes could be part of transcriptional repression in certain circumstances. The process of chromatin remodeling has a lot of coordination with other epigenetic processes, especially the histone modification processes. Particular histone marks may be used as an indication of remodeling complexes recruitment, forming a highly integrated regulatory network. Such interaction provides accurate space and time regulation of gene expression upon environmental signals. Along with providing an immediate response to stress, chromatin remodeling plays a role in epigenetic memory by ensuring the retention of the altered states of the chromatin that may be exhibited even after elimination of the stimuli of stress. Such an orientation of the chromatin allows quicker and deeper activation of genes when the person is subjected to the same stress situation again. Comprehensively, chromatin remodeling is a dynamic and flexible process that links environmental cues and transcriptional control, is important in facilitating organism adaptation to changing environmental factors via directional gene expression reprogramming.

4.4 Non-Coding RNAs

The non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs) are another important element in the epigenetic processes which plays an important part in the regulation of genes expression when under environmental stress conditions. Contrary to protein-coding RNAs, ncRNAs operate at both the transcriptional and post-transcriptional levels, and are able to regulate gene activity by a wide range of regulatory mechanisms. The big categories of ncRNAs are microRNAs (miRNAs), small interfering RNAs (siRNAs), and long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs) and each plays its own role in the regulation of stress-responsive genes. MicroRNAs are short pieces of RNA, which control gene expression by degrading or repressing messenger RNAs (mRNAs). Environmental stress causes miRNAs to be differentially expressed and be involved in fine-tuning the adaptive responses to stress, such as the response to oxidative stress, hormonal signaling, and defense. In the same manner, it is also known that siRNAs are also found in RNA interference pathways and are important in gene silencing, usually directing the DNA methylation status and histone modification at certain loci in the genome. Long non-coding RNAs have varied regulatory activities, such as chromatin remodelling, transcriptional regulation and protein complex interaction. These molecules can also serve as scaffolds, guides or decoys and thus can modulate the recruitment of epigenetic modifiers and change the state of chromatin. The concerted effort of ncRNAs and other epigenetic processes increases the specificity and versatility of gene answers when pertinent due to stressful situations. Notably, ncRNAs have a broad connection with the DNA methylation and histone modification pathways forming a regulatory network with a comprehensive regulation that allows dynamic and reversible changes in gene expression. Such a multi-layered regulation is crucial in the quick adaptation to changing environmental factors, and it leads to stress memory in some biological systems. Figure 1 represents a coordinated response of the non-coding RNA-mediated regulation of gene expression, histone modifications and chromatin remodeling in response to environmental stress in interaction with DNA methylation. Figure 1 shows how cells perceive the presence of environmental stressors (abiotic, heat, drought, salinity, pollutants) and biotic (pathogens, pests) agents to activate intracellular signaling pathways, such as reactive oxygen species (ROS), mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK), and hormonal signaling pathways. The event of these signaling triggers epigenetic changes such as DNA methylation, histone changes, chromatin changes, and non-coding RNA regulation. Combined effects of these processes change the chromatin structure and accessibility, and cause stress-responsive genes to be transcriptionally activated or repressed. As illustrated in figure 1; these molecular adaptations eventually lead to adaptive phenotypic effects such as increased tolerance to stress, metabolic acclimatization and physiological acclimatization.

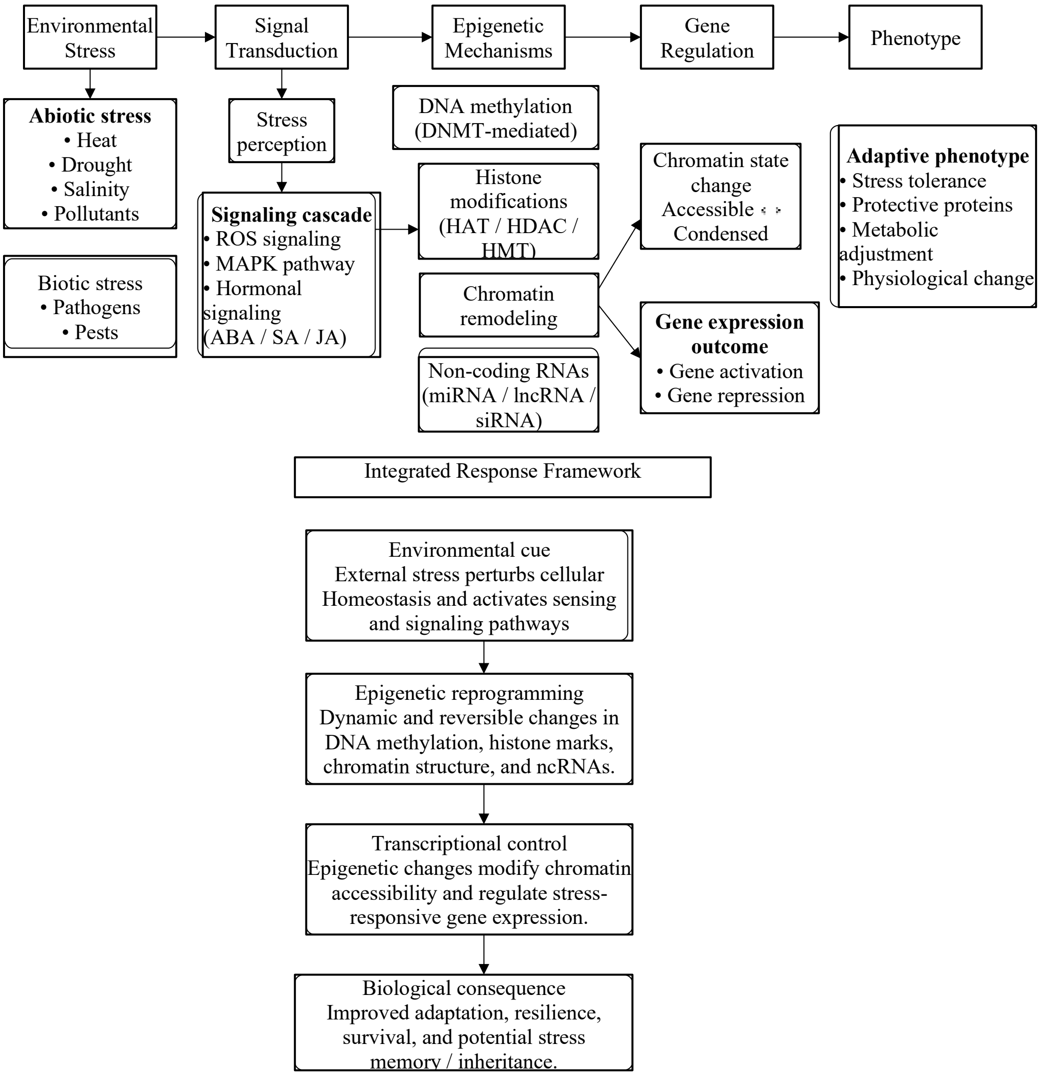

Figure 1. Epigenetic Regulation of Gene Expression Under Environmental Stress Conditions

5. Molecular Basis of Epigenetic Regulation

Environmental stress triggers the process of gene expression regulation by a complex of molecular processes through the coordinated action of particular enzymes and protein complexes regulating epigenetic changes. These molecular controllers are important in setting, sustaining, and adjusting the epigenetic states hence shaping chromatin arrangement and the transcriptional action. One of the most important enzymes is DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs) which are important in the process of adding methyl groups to the cytosine residues within the DNA. The enzymes are directly involved in silencing of the genes by facilitating the condensation of chromatin and by blocking the binding of transcription factors. The process of DNMT-mediated methylation is not fixed, and it can respond to the stress exerted on the environment, which undergoes transcriptional re-programming. Histone-modifying enzymes The addition or removal of chemical groups to histone tails is regulated by histone-modifying enzymes and include histone acetyltransferases (HATs), histone deacetylases (HDACs), and histone methyltransferases (HMTs). These changes affect chromatin accessibility, with acetylation being mostly accompanied by transcriptional activation and deacetylation and some types of methylation marks being associated with gene repression. It is needed that the equilibrium between these conflicting activities of the enzymes be regulated with extreme precision to control the expression of genes. Complexes of chromatin remodeling especially the ATP-dependent remodelers are instrumental in repositioning the nucleosomes and modifying the chromatin architecture. The complexes mediate chromatin condensed to relaxed state, and vice versa, and is involved in access control of transcriptional machinery to DNA. Their action is highly controlled and highly usually synchronized with histone modifications. Small RNAs (miRNAs and siRNAs) are part of a group of molecules known as RNA interference (RNAi) machinery, which is involved in silencing genes in post-transcriptional regulation and directing epigenetic changes to particular genomic sites. These molecules co-operate with other epigenetic regulators to tune up the gene expression during stress conditions. Figure 2 illustrates the molecular processes and enzymatic regulation of epigenetic modification and how their expression work together to modify chromatin state and gene expression.

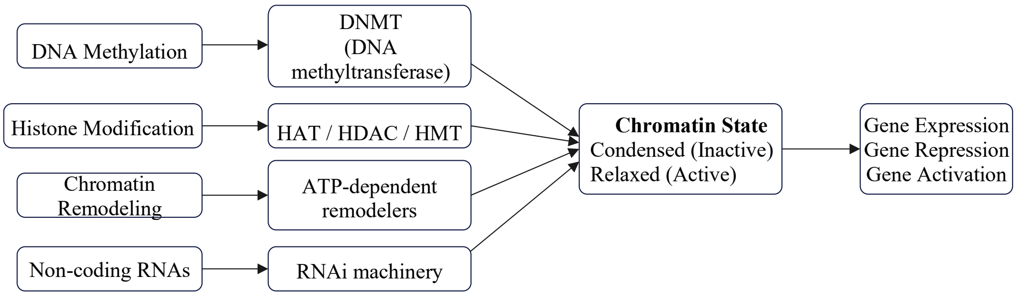

Figure 2. Molecular Mechanisms and Enzymatic Control of Epigenetic Modifications

Figure 2 presents the major epigenetic mechanisms, including DNA methylation, histone modification, chromatin remodeling, and non-coding RNA-mediated regulation, along with their associated enzymes such as DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs), histone-modifying enzymes (HATs, HDACs, HMTs), ATP-dependent chromatin remodeling complexes, and RNA interference machinery. These mechanisms collectively regulate chromatin state, resulting in either condensed (inactive) or relaxed (active) configurations, which ultimately lead to gene repression or activation.

6. Epigenetic Adaptation and Memory

Dynamic changes in epigenetic responses to environmental stress are pivotal in the regulation of gene expression and have an adaptive response. These epigenetic alterations that result due to stress such as DNA methylation, histone modification, chromatin restructuring, and non-coding RNA-driven regulation help organisms to adapt quickly to unfavorable environmental conditions. Changing the chromatin structure and transcriptional activity, these mechanisms facilitate the activation of stress-responsive gene and inhibition of non-essential ones, increasing cell efficiency and survival. In addition to immediate reactions, epigenetic processes have a role in the formation of epigenetic memory, where exposure to stress in the past leads to a long-lasting or primed transcriptional condition. This memory is what enables the organisms to react faster and better to the similar stress conditions. The formation of epigenetic memory is commonly linked with stable chromatin states and enduring regulatory marks that preserve change in patterns of gene expression despite the removal of an original stimulus of stress. In some situations, epigenetic changes that are triggered by stress can go beyond the principal organism and be passed on to subsequent generations in a process termed transgenerational inheritance. This encompasses the maintenance of epigenetic identifications in germ cells or the reproductive organs, which allows offspring to acquire stress-adaptive characteristics, without alterations in the underlying sequence of DNA. These inheritance processes have been found in other plant and animal systems, and have been noted to play a role in both long term adaptation and evolution. The adaptive mechanisms that are brought about by epigenetic regulation comprise increased resistance to stress, metabolic adaptation, and physiological adaptation that lead to the increased resilience to adverse environmental conditions. Combining stress-related epigenetic modifications, memory development, and inheritance highlights the importance and multifaceted nature of the epigenetic regulation in adaptive responses in the environment. Figure 3 shows the correlation between environmental stress, epigenetic changes, adaptive responses, epigenetic memory and transgenerational inheritance.

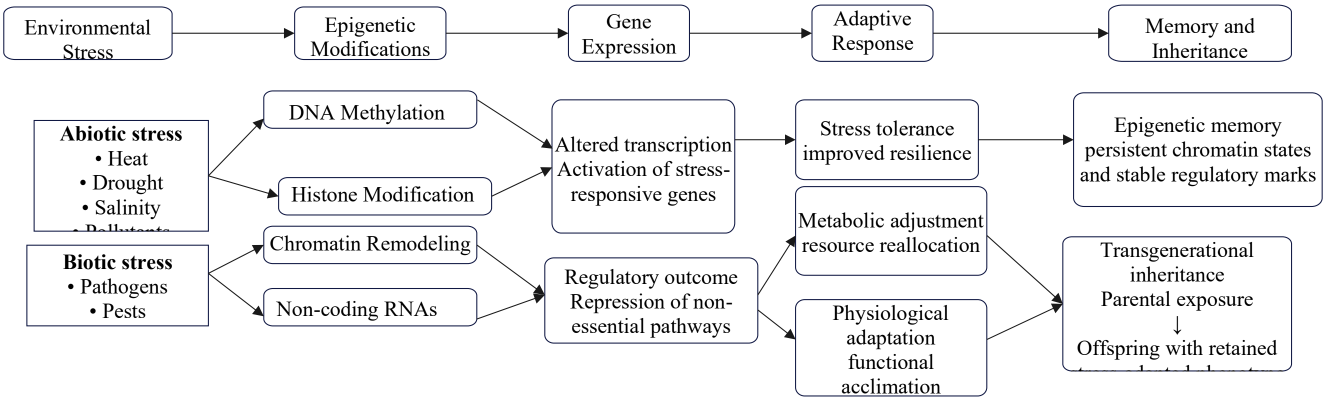

Figure 3. Epigenetic Adaptation and Inheritance Under Environmental Stress Conditions

7. Applications and Future Directions

The increased knowledge on epigenetics regulation during environmental stress has presented new opportunities in practical use in the fields of agriculture, biomedicine and environmental sciences. Epigenetic tools provide future opportunities to improve stress resilience, better disease management, and environmental concerns on the global level. The epigenetic alterations are important in the agricultural sector to make resistant crops that can endure the unfavorable environments, including drought, salt, and extreme temperatures. Epigenetic methods can be used to increase crop productivity and sustainability by regulating gene expression without changing the genetic code. Epigenetic breeding and stress priming are the techniques that are under investigation to enhance the adaptability and yield of plants to changing climatic conditions. Epigenetic regulation has important consequences in the area of biomedicine in comprehending the processes of diseases as well as the creation of therapies. The abnormal epigenetic alterations relate to different diseases, such as cancer, neurological and metabolic disorders. Inhibition of epigenetic regulators, including DNA methyltransferases and histone-modifying enzymes, has become one of the opportunities in disease treatment and precision medicine. In addition to the fields of agriculture and medicine, epigenetic knowledge can be applied to the environment and industry. These are bioremediation, where adaptive epigenetic organisms are applied to overcome environmental pollutants, and industrial biotechnology, where epigenetic regulation can be applied to improve the performance of microorganisms in improving production processes. In the future, it is possible that more sophisticated methods like epigenetic engineering (controlled alteration of epigenetic marks) will be prioritized in the future studies, where epigenetic engineering tools, including CRISPR-based systems, can be used to target specific areas of interest. Also, the combination of the modern profiling methods, such as the multi-omics and high-throughput sequencing technologies, will help to obtain more profound understanding of the complexity of epigenetic regulation. The developments will help in making a more holistic view on how epigenetic mechanisms can be exploited to establish sustainable and innovative solutions in various areas.

8. Challenges and Limitations

Although there has been significant advancement in the study of epigenetic regulation during environmental stress conditions, a number of issues still restrict the in-depth knowledge and effective use. One is that it is quite hard to tell the difference between causality and correlation. Although many studies find correlations between epigenetic changes and gene regulation changes, it is not possible to determine the direct causation of the former because the process of epigenetics is complicated and dynamic. Research in this field is also hindered by technical constraints. Even though high-throughput methods like bisulfite sequencing, ChIP-seq, and RNA sequencing have been developed to study epigenetics, they are commonly linked to high prices, low resolution, and possible experimental biases. Fluctuations in experimentation protocols and methods of analysis can also have an impact on the consistency of data and interpretation. The other big challenge is data multi-dimensional integration. Several layers are inter-related in epigenetic regulation where DNA methylation, histone modification, chromatin accessibility, and non-coding RNAs are involved. The necessity to unite various data sets to gain the coherent picture of regulatory mechanisms demands complex computational methods and generalized structures, which is currently developing. Reproducibility is one of the most important issues because the patterns of epigenetics are very sensitive to environmental conditions, biological variability and experiment design. Variability in the results of studies reduces the reliability and generalisability of the results, especially in the context of translational studies. To overcome these obstacles, better experimental designs, standard methods and integrative tools will be needed to improve the strength and applicability of epigenetic studies when endangered by environmental stress.

9. CONCLUSION

Epigenetic regulation is an essential part of allowing organisms to adjust to environments that have stress conditions by dynamically and reversibly regulating gene expression. This review has identified the most important processes involved in epigenetic reprogramming such as DNA methylation, histone, chromatin, and non-coding RNA-based regulation and coordinated contribution to transcriptional responses. These pathways are a very vital point of interaction between the environmental cues and the cellular reaction, enabling the living beings to achieve homeostasis and increase their survival likelihood in the unfavorable surroundings. Combination of epigenetic activities with cellular signaling pathways allows quick and adaptable alteration of gene expression, which leads to phenotype plasticity, stress resilience, and long-term adaptation. Moreover, the development of epigenetic memory and its possible role in transgenerational inheritance makes the fact that epigenetic regulation could have a much wider biological role than just immediate responses to stress. Even though there have been significant advances, a number of issues are still found, one of them being the necessity to develop the causal relationships, enhance methodological accuracy, and combine the multi-omics data in order to have a more in-depth view. The solutions to these limitations will be necessary to further the field and to be able to convert the knowledge of epigenetics into practical use. In the future, epigenetic engineering, high-throughput sequencing, and also computational modeling technologies will be able to bring more understanding on the complexity of epigenetic regulation. These advancements promise a lot of applications in the field of agriculture, medicine and environmental sustainability and eventually lead to the innovative application in solving global problems.

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