

Changing Mindsets about Stress

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More than 35 years ago I began to address the theme of resilience in my writings and workshops. At the same time I became increasingly interested in the closely related concepts of stress and burnout. This interest was prompted by several sources, including my own experiences of doubt and stress shortly after assuming the position of head of the school in the locked door unit of the child and adolescent program at McLean Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital, as well as by the accounts of stress I was hearing regularly in both my clinical practice and consultations.

My perspective about managing stress is intertwined with my thoughts about resilience. Several of my earliest website articles (April, May, and June, 1999) focused on the concept of “stress hardiness.” This concept, based in great part on the work of psychologist Dr. Suzanne Kobasa, was prominently featured in a book I co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein about resilience in adults, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*.

Kobasa defined three characteristics of what she labeled the “hardy personality,” possessed by individuals who experienced and responded to stressful events in a much healthier and more effective manner than those who did not display these personality qualities. In my writings and approach I substituted the word *personality* with that of *mindset*. The reason I did so was rooted to some degree in my training. I was taught that one’s personality (whatever that term might mean to different people) was difficult to modify. However, I viewed mindsets as being more open to change. As such, the image of mindsets represented an optimistic outlook, conveying the belief that change is possible, that we are not chained to past thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

In addition, I had begun to identify what I referred to as a “resilient mindset,” a concept that Sam and I elaborated upon in our books; thus, I desired to have a parallel concept when referring to stress hardiness. Just as Kobasa was essentially asking, “How do people who are stress hardy see themselves and the world differently from those who are overcome by stress?” I was asking, “How do people who are more resilient and better

equipped to cope with and bounce back from adversity view themselves and the world differently from those who are not resilient?”

These questions not only touched on the topic of mindsets but also emphasized that different behaviors are associated with different mindsets. I often define mindsets as “the assumptions and expectations we possess for ourselves and others that guide our behaviors.” Mindsets direct what we say and do and, in turn, the consequences of our behaviors impact on our mindsets so that a dynamic relationship between mindsets and behaviors is constantly at work.

The interest in resilience and stress has burgeoned during the past 35 years as evidenced by the number of “self-help” books (full disclosure: I have co-authored several of them) that dominate bookstores or Amazon lists or the increased number of citations that appear when words such as “resilience” or “stress” are “googled.” The popularity and publications linked with the growth of “positive psychology” offer additional proof of an appreciation of the need to place the spotlight on the strengths or what I call “islands of competence” of individuals rather than on their deficits and weaknesses. I wish to emphasize that the strengths housed within a “resilient mindset” are not confined to academic or work achievements but also include such qualities as empathy, self-discipline, compassion, and caring.

Characteristics of a Stress Hardy Mindset

The three characteristics of what Kobasa labeled a “hardy personality” included commitment, challenge, and control. “Commitment” encompasses a sense of purpose for why we do what we do. Activities that are guided by values and a vision generate energy and passion, providing meaning to our lives and lessening the impact of stress. Commitment may be expressed in many forms: commitment to a cause, to strengthening our own physical and emotional well-being, to enriching the lives of others.

“Challenge” is based on the belief that change is a constant in one’s life. This is displayed by people who perceive difficult situations as challenges to confront and master rather than as stress to avoid. Such individuals do not deny problems, but instead they understand that seemingly stressful events invite opportunities for self-reflection and growth. They are willing to leave their comfort zones to achieve new goals.

I have come to refer to “control” as “personal control” so that it is not confused with an image of controlling others. Personal control involves focusing our time and energy on situations over which we have some influence rather than attempting to change situations that are beyond our control. People who display personal control believe they are active participants in determining their own destiny, of solving problems and making decisions about their own life. As I have often stated, they believe they are “the authors of their own lives” and eschew the role of a victim. They subscribe to a basic tenet of resilience and stress hardiness, namely, while we will all encounter events over which we have little, if any, control, we also recognize that we have far more control than many of us realize in terms of our attitude and response to these events.

In the past several years research findings have emerged that not only add support and elaboration to these earlier views of stress hardiness, but they also help to identify additional strategies for successfully managing stressful occurrences and reinforcing resilience. These findings resonate with recommendations Sam and I have offered about adopting a more resilient lifestyle. The innovative and thought-provoking work of such psychologists as Drs. Shawn Achor, Alia Crum, Kelly McGonigal, and Peter Salovey offer ample evidence of the power of mindsets in impacting on our emotional and physical well-being, on our response to stress, and on our becoming resilient.

Last month I referred to the work of Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*. Achor defines happiness “as the experience of positive emotions—pleasure combined with deeper feelings of meaning and purpose.” In my previous article, which centered on the school environment, I emphasized Achor’s position that it is not success that leads to happiness but rather as he asserts, “New research in psychology and neuroscience shows that it works the other way around: We become more successful *when* we are happier and more positive.” Predicated on this and other research, I advocated that teachers adopt as a primary, initial goal the creation of a classroom atmosphere that nurtures positive emotions together with a sense of purpose and meaning; I offered several strategies for doing so. Such an atmosphere promotes more effective learning.

Examining Mindsets and the Stress Response

Achor, Crum, and Salovey published a paper in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2013 titled “Rethinking Stress: The Role of Mindsets in Determining the Stress Response.” They advanced the position that while previous research clearly indicates the adverse impact of stress on our lives, perhaps it is our mindset that “paradoxically may be contributing to its negative impact.” If you expect stress is harmful, then it will be. But what if you had a different mindset and viewed stress as beneficial, as contributing to rather than depleting our well-being?

These researchers developed a “stress mindset” questionnaire, defining *mindset* similar to psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck’s definition in her book *Mindset*, “as a mental frame or lens that selectively organizes and encodes information, thereby orienting an individual toward a unique way of understanding an experience and guiding one toward corresponding actions and responses.” They proposed that “in the context of stress, one’s *stress mindset* can be conceptualized as the extent to which one holds the belief that stress has enhancing consequences for various stress-related outcomes such as performance and productivity, health and well-being, and learning and growth (referred to as ‘stress-is-enhancing mindset’) or holds the belief that stress has debilitating consequences for those outcomes (referred to as ‘stress-is-debilitating mindset’).”

The results of their study found that individuals who subscribe to a stress-is-enhancing mindset “reported having better health than those who endorse a stress-is-debilitating mindset: specifically, respondents reported fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety while also reporting higher levels of energy.” Their performance in the workplace and their overall satisfaction were positively related to having an enhancing stress mindset.

Follow-up research examined strategies for changing stress debilitating to stress enhancing mindsets and measuring the results of such a change. It is beyond the scope of this article to review the procedures used to accomplish a shift in mindset, but Achor, Crum, and Salovey concluded, “The findings of these studies indicate that people can be primed to adopt a stress-is-enhancing mindset, which can have positive consequences related to improved health and work performance.” This conclusion captures a basic

belief I have advanced for many years—mindsets impact on our behavior and mindsets are open to modification.

Stress as Your Friend

Dr. Kelly McGonigal, a health psychologist and author of several books including *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It*, provides a view similar to Achor, Crum, and Salovey. Her perspective is detailed in her books as well as her very popular 2013 TED Talk “How to make stress your friend.”

In her TED presentation McGonigal cited one study that indicated that people who had experienced a great deal of stress the previous year had a higher mortality rate the following year than those whose lives were less stressed. However, as McGonigal emphasized, “That was only true for the people who also believed that stress is harmful for your health. People who experienced a lot of stress but did not view stress as harmful were not more likely to die.” This and other studies led McGonigal to believe that changing the ways in which we perceive stress changes our body’s response to stress.

McGonigal ended her TED Talk by referring to research conducted by psychologist Dr. Michael Poulin at the University of Buffalo and several colleagues that was published in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The findings of this study, “Giving to Others and the Association Between Stress and Mortality,” reinforce another position I have long advocated—being engaged in helping others is a powerful force in adding purpose and meaning to our lives and strengthening our ability to cope more effectively with seemingly stressful situations.

Poulin’s study involved 846 individuals between the ages of 34 to 93. The participants were requested to report stressful events they had encountered during the previous year such as serious, non-life-threatening illness, death of a family member, loss of a job, and financial struggles. They were also asked to indicate assistance they had provided to family, friends, or neighbors during the year that involved such activities as giving them rides or helping them with their shopping, housework, errands, babysitting, or other tasks.

The researchers then collected information about which participants died during the five-year follow-up period, adjusting for age, baseline health, and psychosocial variables. In analyzing the data, Poulin notes that there was “a significant interaction

between helping behavior, stressful events, morbidity, and mortality. . . . Helping others predicted reduced mortality specifically by buffering the association between stress and mortality.”

In citing this study, McGonigal concluded, “Caring created resilience. And so we see once again that the harmful effects of stress on your health are not inevitable. How you think and how you act can transform your experience of stress. When you choose to view your stress response as helpful, you create the biology of courage. And when you choose to connect with others under stress, you can create resilience.”

A Cautionary Note

In my November, 2014 monthly article “Is the Process of Aging Significantly Influenced by Our Mindset?” I cited the work of psychologist Dr. Ellen Langer of Harvard University who found that our mindsets play a significant role in the process of dealing with illness and aging. She referred to one study in which survivors of breast cancer who described themselves as “in remission” displayed poorer general health and experienced more pain than those who viewed themselves as “cured.” Langer also took issue with the use of words such as “fighting” a “chronic disease,” arguing, “When you’re saying ‘fighting,’ you’re already acknowledging the adversary is very powerful. ‘Chronic’ is understood as ‘uncontrollable’ —and that’s not something anyone can know.”

As Langer discovered during one of her presentations, her position could be interpreted to imply that people who succumb to illness or are prone to depression or experience a decline in their physical or emotional health, demonstrate weakness and a negative mindset in which they feel defeated and are prone to giving up. In response to her asserting that when we use the word “fighting” to describe our response to cancer we actually turn over power to the disease, a man angrily told Langer that his wife had died of breast cancer. Langer reported, “He said she had fought it, and I made it seem that it was her fault.”

Langer apologized to this man. “Those are good points, and I’m sorry I didn’t address them. But let me explain to you that it’s the culture that teaches us we have no control. I’m not blaming your wife. I’m blaming the culture.” I’m not certain how helpful this distinction was to this man, but as much as I believe in the power of mindsets

in influencing our physical and emotional well-being, I also believe that it is essential that we recognize that this power has certain boundaries and limits. If this recognition is lost, we are likely to convey messages that are interpreted as accusatory and judgmental, adding stress to people who are already experiencing a great deal of stress.

In contrast to a position that might be perceived as accusatory, I believe that a main focus of the researchers and clinicians I have cited in this article is to highlight that we have far more “personal control” over stressful situations that transpire in our lives than we may have appreciated. I view their goal as empowering us and suggesting strategies for adopting a more positive mindset, a mindset that eventuates in proactive positive behaviors that not only lessen stress but contribute to a more satisfying, meaningful, resilient life.

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