

Stressed Out or Stress Hardy?

Part I

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In my last two columns I discussed a common feature of people who are successful in both their personal and professional lives, namely, the ability to be empathic. In this and my next two articles I will examine another characteristic of the mindset of successful people, namely, how effectively they deal with difficult and seemingly stressful situations.

I vividly recall a comment made several years ago at the end of one of my workshops for educators. A participant said to me, "I really like many of the ideas and strategies you described today, but I feel too stressed out to try them." While this statement was expressed with a hint of humor, it also contained a strong feeling of frustration and doubt about being able to make changes necessary to lessen a stressful job situation. As we discussed her comment, this teacher said that a part of her believed that if she were to apply the strategies, some of the factors contributing to pressure in her work would improve. Yet, she realized that a powerful feeling existed within her that overshadowed her sense of hope, a feeling permeated by a lack of optimism, energy, and motivation to implement change.

Over the years I have heard similar comments from others, whether in their roles as parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, or business people. As I have listened to these individuals who feel trapped and stressed, unable to muster the energy to facilitate change, I think about Martin Seligman's research related to the concept of "learned helplessness," a concept which basically captures the belief that "regardless of what I do nothing really will change, so why even put in any effort to change." Once a feeling of learned helplessness begins to dominate one's mindset, most difficult situations elicit feelings of resignation, defeatism, and stress. Yet, in contrast there are other individuals, faced with seemingly similar situations, who remain more optimistic and more positive and as a result are able to solve problems with greater effectiveness.

These differences among individuals in how well equipped they are to handle stress are apparent in a variety of situations including one's job or one's role as a spouse or a parent. As a psychologist who sees as one of his main goals assisting patients to develop more effective ways of coping with stress, I have often wondered what were the

differences in the mindset between less stressed and more stressed people. I believe that the more we can articulate and understand these differences, the more we can focus on taking steps to replace negative features of our mindsets with a more positive outlook. In addition, in my work with parents, I thought it would be helpful for parents to appreciate the components of the mindset of successful people so that they would have guidelines not only for improving their own lives but also for developing this mindset in their children.

One approach that I have found particularly helpful is based on the research of Suzanne Kobasa and her colleagues. Kobasa defined three characteristics of what she called the "hardy personality." Individuals who possessed these characteristics experienced and responded to stressful events in a much healthier and more effective way than those who did not demonstrate these personality characteristics. I prefer to refer to these characteristics of a "stress hardy" person as features of a mindset, a mindset that defines the way in which we understand and approach all aspects of our life. Why cast this concept of "stress hardiness" in the framework of a mindset? The reason I do so is my strong belief that mindsets can be changed, that they do not have to remain fixed ideas that are cast in stone. I realize that many people have held on to certain self-defeating ideas for years, but with insight, courage, and support these ideas can be changed.

I call the components of "stress hardiness" as outlined by Kobasa the "3 C's" since the first letter of each of the words of the mindset begins with the letter C. In this column I will discuss one of the "3 C's" and will devote each of my next two columns to the other "C's." As I describe the "3 C's" I hope that each one of you reading this and my subsequent articles will reflect upon your own life and how you are using or not using these features of stress hardiness. I am well aware that change even for the better is not always easy to accomplish, but as a therapist I have witnessed too many individuals tolerate the status quo even when the status quo is filled with unhappiness and an absence of a zest for life.

The "C" I will examine in this article represents "commitment." Kobasa described commitment as being involved rather than alienated from aspects of one's life. When commitment is present, individuals have a sense of purpose and meaning for why they are doing what they are doing. When we have a purpose, when we are guided by a vision, when we never lose sight of why we are doing what we are doing, an energy and passion are triggered that give meaning to our lives and lessen the impact of stress. Let's look at several examples of this sense of commitment in various parts of our life.

For those of us who are parents, it is helpful, especially when we are feeling stressed in our parental role, to reflect upon why we became parents and to think back to when our children were born. While most children never turn out to be exactly what we hoped they would be (many prospective parents have very ideal images of how their children will behave and how they will succeed), it is important to re-visit the question of why we made the decision to become parents. For this reason, in many of my counseling activities I have requested parents to bring in their child's baby book and read what they wrote in the book and view the photos of their child as an infant and toddler. I have always been impressed how this activity stirs up poignant feelings. As a personal example, when my older son Richard was an adolescent and had a four year period where he was not doing his homework--a situation that was very distressing to me, perhaps even more so than for other parents, since I was lecturing throughout the United States on the topic of how to motivate children--I decided to follow my own advice and look at his baby book. Baby books are written before children get grades, a time before you are concerned about issues of homework. In perusing Richard's baby book I thought about why I had become a parent and what being a father meant. I realized that when my wife and I were making that very important decision about whether to have a child, we never once said, "Let's have a child so she or he can get all A's in school, get into an Ivy League college, and make us feel that we have succeeded as parents." Who even thinks about grades when we make a decision to have children?

As these thoughts about fatherhood flooded my mind, I realized that I had lost perspective about what it meant to be a parent and that Richard's grades had blinded me to what a truly wonderful son I had. While I was imploring parents in all of my presentations to focus on their child's "islands of competence" or areas of strength, I failed to do so with my own son--all I saw were his lackluster grades and none of his many admirable qualities. I had to reacquaint myself with the purpose and passion I had experienced years before as a parent when Richard was born. As I engaged in this exercise, I became less stressed and I more easily focused on Richard's strengths. As I changed, as I became supportive about his schoolwork rather than critical, our relationship improved significantly and we continue to have a very loving relationship today. I should note that Richard owns [his own company](#) designing Web sites for small businesses and professionals and he designed my Web site (okay, I am a very proud father).

In my consultations with teachers, healthcare professionals, or business leaders, I often ask people to think about why they entered their chosen fields and what they see as the purpose of their work. If time permits and the group is small, I ask them to share their thoughts with each other. To reinforce this sense of commitment, I especially review for teachers and healthcare providers the research about resilience that indicates that one of the most important factors that helps at-risk children to overcome adversity and lead more successful lives is the presence of one adult in their lives who truly believes in them and stands by them. In the day-to-day hassles of our jobs as educators or healthcare providers, we must remind ourselves that everything we say or do everyday may make the difference between whether some children and adults survive and thrive in the world while others go down a path of self-destruction.

While someone once wondered if this kind of responsibility places more stress on a person, I have found the exact opposite, namely, when you realize what an important role you play, when you realize that there is meaning to what you do, you actually become less stressed, more energized, and more motivated. I believe that exercises to examine why we entered our chosen field and what impact we can have should be built into staff meetings or supervision sessions. It is a sad situation when a teacher or therapist going to work in the morning is dominated with such negative thoughts as, "Oh, I've got to face those students today!" or "I have to see that angry patient this afternoon!" I know it is not easy to change such thoughts, thoughts that are typically arise out of feelings of frustration and helplessness, but reminding ourselves of our mission, our purpose, and the positive impact we can have on others will increase our commitment and lessen our stress.

Obviously the same issues exist in the business world. I have seen many individuals in therapy whose resumes looked stellar but who went to work each morning feeling drained, devoid of passion or commitment for their job. I should note that sometimes it may not be possible to improve this situation given the nature of one's work--a condition that I will address in a subsequent article about stress hardiness--and it may be necessary for one's mental health and quality of life to leave a position; however, I have found that many individuals can reorganize an existing job so that the job requirements are in concert with feelings of commitment and purpose.

As I talk with business leaders, I am reminded of Daniel Goleman's new book "Working with Emotional Intelligence" in which he emphasizes the importance of

commitment. Goleman states, "The essence of commitment is making our goals and those of our organization one and the same. Commitment is emotional: We feel a strong attachment to our group's goals when they resonate strongly with our own. . . .

Commitment can even express itself in unpopular decisions that are made to benefit the larger group, even if these decisions rouse opposition or controversy. . . . High levels of commitment are, of course, more likely in companies where people see themselves as 'shareholders' (or actually are shareholders) rather than simply as employees. But workers who are inspired by a shared goal often have a level of commitment that is greater than any financial incentive."

To offer another personal example, not in my role as a father but rather in my professional career, I always keep in my possession several stories written by children about their lives or letters written by parents or professionals who have attended my workshops. These written documents describe examples in which some of my ideas have impacted on the lives of others. What wonderful therapy it is to read this material, especially if I am feeling down because something has not gone smoothly. These stories and letters are a concrete reminder that there is a purpose to my work and that I am making a difference. While some may ask why must we rely on these external sources to remind us of the importance of our contributions, I would say that for me these stories and letters are not crutches, but rather are powerful catalysts that serve to heighten my sense of passion and commitment and reinforce my inner strength and purpose.

I believe that it is important for each of us to reflect upon the various roles and responsibilities we assume in our personal and professional lives and to appreciate the values upon which these responsibilities rest. The more we keep in mind such questions as "why we do what we do," "what are our values," "what do we wish to accomplish," "what do we hope to leave as our legacy to our children, our family, our colleagues," the more easily we can bring purpose and passion to our lives and replace everyday stresses with an air of excitement and enthusiasm. As noted earlier, you may find it helpful to reflect upon and answer these questions about commitment and purpose, either by yourself or with your spouse if you are married or with your colleagues.

In my next two articles when I describe the remaining 2 C's, I will also explore other aspects of themes related to commitment, purpose, and passion. The next column will focus on "challenge." Until this column appears next month, I hope each of you will think

about the "C" representing commitment in your relationships and in your responsibilities as parents, spouses, and in your work life. I can honestly say that as I focused on commitment and purpose I experienced a decrease in stress and I began to appreciate more fully the truly important things in life.

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