

## **Stressed Out or Stress Hardy?**

### **Part II**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In my last column I continued to describe the attributes of people who are successful in their personal and professional lives by examining the concept of “stress hardiness” as proposed by Suzanne Kobasa. Kobasa articulated three characteristics of what she called the “hardy personality.” Individuals who possess these characteristics compared with those who do not, experience and respond to stressful events in a more adaptive and effective way. I referred to these characteristics of a “stress hardy” person as features of a mindset, a mindset that defines the ways in which we understand and approach life. Not only is it important to appreciate the power of this mindset in improving our own lives, but if you are reading this column as a parent or teacher or mentor, I hope that you will apply this mindset in your interactions with youngsters in your care so as to strengthen their “stress hardiness” as well.

There is a reason that I use and emphasize the word “mindset.” It is rooted in my strong belief that people can learn to adopt more hopeful, successful strategies for dealing with difficult situations and stress. Mindsets can be changed; they do not have to be dominated by fixed, rigid, outdated ideas that force us to repeat the same ineffective behaviors day after day. Being burdened by a pessimistic, anxious outlook today need not be one’s portrait of tomorrow. I recognize that it is not an easy task to replace stress with stress hardiness or pessimism with optimism, but mindsets can be modified.

I call the mindset of the stress hardy person the “3 C’s” since the first letter of each of the words of the mindset begins with the letter C. I devoted my last article to examining one of the three C’s, namely “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 provide meaning to our lives and lessen the impact of stress. I encouraged readers to reflect upon the ways in which they might achieve this sense of commitment and purpose, offering several suggestions. In this article I will consider one of the other “C’s,” namely,

“challenge.”

Challenge is based on the belief that change is a constant in one’s life. Successful people tend to see change as challenges to confront and master rather than as stress to avoid. They do not deny problems, but instead appreciate that change is an opportunity for self-reflection and growth. It is interesting to note that in the Chinese language, the same word symbolizes both “crisis” and “opportunity.” While opportunity is housed in many difficult situations, in my consultation and therapy activities I have witnessed countless individuals who react to these situations with dread, who would rather remain frozen in a “comfort zone” even if that zone brings them little satisfaction or joy.

Reflect upon situations or changes in your personal or professional life that are causing you stress. If you wish, write down what these situations are and what makes them stressful. Also, consider what steps you have taken to lessen this stress and how successful have these steps been. Finally, ask yourself whether any of these stressful situations present opportunities for positive change and growth. I have worked with many people who immediately answer “no” to this last question, but I always ask them to take a few days to think about it further. Interestingly, with a little thought, many are able to discover some positive outcome in those situations and changes that at first glance seem filled only with distress.

As an example, I recall a man who came to see me after the company for which he had worked for 20 years was downsized and his position was to be eliminated within a month. Although he obtained a generous severance package providing him with months to search for another position, in response to the loss of his job and the financial security it provided he began to experience intense anxiety, which prompted him to call me. His anxiety was heightened since he had two children in high school, one of whom was to begin attending a private college within the year with a hefty tuition cost. While some anxiety was certainly understandable, two things impressed me. One was how paralyzed and lost he seemed to be (his wife was the one to encourage him to call me) and the other was how much he had disliked his job for the past 10 years, a job that brought him little satisfaction but much stress.

We began to focus on the question of why he had remained in a job for 10 years that had such a negative impact on him. He said, “I was making a good living, it was scary to look for another job.” In essence, he preferred to remain in the safety of his “comfort zone”

even though this zone was pervaded by negative feelings. He said that if his job had not been eliminated, he was certain he would have stayed in the position until it was time for him to retire. His response was similar to many people with whom I have consulted, namely, an inertia caused by fear of the unknown. In this man's case, an outside force, namely, the elimination of his job, prompted him to leave his comfort zone and venture forth into new terrain. In my meetings with him, we considered the steps that he could take in his search for a new job. As he made a list of these steps and began to follow through on the list (e.g., consulting with an executive search firm, defining the kind of job he would like to have and was qualified to do, developing a resume), his anxiety decreased. Each small step reinforced a sense of success and after a few months he found a position more suitable to his style and temperament. After several months in his new job, he said to me, "I don't know why I stayed in my other job for so long."

Stress hardy people make their own opportunities. They are not afraid to take realistic risks in order to disengage themselves from unsatisfying, stressful situations.

As another example of perceiving difficult situations as a challenge, parents consulted me about their six-year-old child whom they described as oppositional. As an illustration of his defiant behavior they said that he did not listen to them at dinnertime when they asked him to stay seated. They noted that he moved constantly, often falling under the table or dropping his silverware. The parents felt that it was important for him to learn to remain seated. However, as I reviewed his development, it was obvious that he was a hyperactive child and requesting him to remain seated for a half-hour would almost be the equivalent of asking the parents to remain seated for 24 hours. Dinnertime was becoming increasingly stressful and angry, not to mention the indigestion that each family member was experiencing. At the point I became involved, I thought the parents stress was based in great part on (a) the unrealistic expectations they had for their son, (b) the continued ineffectiveness of their approach, and (c) their belief that if they allowed him to move around, they would be "giving in" and encouraging his not listening to authority. In essence, they had difficulty in viewing the situation as a challenge to think of alternative solutions but rather were stuck in an unproductive, stressful approach.

I was empathic with the parents by acknowledging their frustration. However, I asked them, as I do with most parents, to take a "helicopter view" of their son's life. Assuming this view involves parents observing their children's lives from above, thinking

about their children's past behaviors, their current behaviors, and their hopes and expectations for their children's future behaviors. Many times parents discover that when viewed from a distance certain behaviors such as staying seated at the dinner table are inconsequential compared with other more significant behaviors; parents who have become blinded by one particular behavior, which they feel is an indication that their child is irresponsible, often are amazed by the number of responsible behaviors in which their child is engaged.

Thus, I asked this boy's parents what their goal was in terms of having him sit still at dinnertime. They recognized that he was hyperactive, but talked about his having to learn responsibility. I agreed with their goal, but questioned their expectations, offering the following challenge: "Is there a way you can begin to teach him responsibility, while accepting that he is not yet ready to remain seated for the entire dinner meal?" As I have observed with many parents, this kind of question helped them to think of the problem in a new light, reframing it as a challenge. This change in perspective prompted them to say to their son that they knew it was not easy for him to stay seated during all of dinner (an empathic statement) and they did not want to yell at him to do so. Consequently, they said that if he needed to get up and walk into the next room that was okay as long as he did not bother his two older siblings; they added that his meal would be left on the table for one-half hour for him to finish. The parents asked me if I thought they should make the same offer to their son's two siblings and I suggested that they do so.

One can never predict how a strategy such as this will turn out. However, when a family practice is not working and is causing stress, I believe that it is far healthier to assume a "challenge" perspective and attempt a new approach. In this particular case, things worked out very well. The boy got up once or twice during the meal, but quickly returned. The siblings, who were apparently amused and relieved by the parents' change in behavior since they no longer yelled at dinner, didn't bother to leave the table. The parents were prepared to clear the table after a half-hour had expired even if their son had not finished his meal, but they never had to resort to this consequence since he always managed to finish everything on his plate. They said to me, "Why didn't we think about doing this before." In addition, given their goal of increasing their son's sense of responsibility, they discovered by providing him with the option of getting up from the table, he became more responsible and less bothersome. What these caring parents

discovered is that sometimes our own stress increases rigidity and inflexibility, adding fuel to an already difficult situation.

The final example of the importance of perceiving difficult situations as challenges was recently communicated to me by Marti Hurst, a school social worker from the Grant Wood Area Education Association in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who had attended one of my workshops. During the workshop, which focused on strategies for lessening anger and increasing motivation in students, I had discussed the success that I and others had experienced with seemingly resistant youth by providing them with opportunities to help others in the school setting and by involving them in developing solutions to problems they were encountering. Ms. Hurst wrote to me that she was asked to deal with a high-risk group of students who were frequently absent. In her note to me, it was obvious that she turned what could have easily been a stressful situation into a challenge, a challenge that involved using some of what she had learned at the workshop into her own very creative, successful intervention.

She designed a program that involved having five of the students with the worst attendance records to join a committee to do “research” on why students were reluctant to come to school. The students were told that their research would be helpful to the school, to parents, and to other students having difficulty attending school. Ms. Hurst observed that the students were excited about the committee and have provided the staff with “wonderful” information. Also, they are willing to help any incoming first graders who begin to have problems with attendance. The committee will be making a presentation to the administrative team and their own attendance has improved significantly. As I read Ms. Hurst’s note, her excitement and satisfaction were very apparent.

I hope these examples serve to highlight the importance of developing a mindset that responds to seemingly stressful situations as challenges and opportunities for positive change. Stress hardy individuals do not deny or ignore problems. Instead, they skillfully develop a plan of action that involves articulating the problem, reflecting on any past solutions that have not proven effective, thinking of at least a couple of other solutions, considering what might be the most effective solution, and then engaging in this solution. If their selected course of action is not effective, they do not become pessimistic but instead learn from their efforts and employ another strategy.

In the days and weeks ahead, select one situation that is causing you stress. View it

as an obstacle to be overcome. Think of what you can learn in confronting this obstacle. Also, don't try to change everything at once. It has been my experience that taking small steps that lead to success is a far more effective approach than tackling too much immediately. Each small step of success builds on the next and in the process confidence is increased and stress is lessened.

As we reflect upon what is important in our lives, as we fortify our sense of commitment and passion, and as we reframe difficult situations into challenges, we will strengthen our courage and ability to change any "negative mindsets" or "negative scripts" that we have. In essence, we will assume greater responsibility and control of our lives. This path towards gaining increasing control of our lives leads us to the third and final "C" of stress hardy individuals, one that I will address in my June column.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**