

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

### **Part III**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In my last two newsletters I discussed a particular attribute of individuals who are successful in their personal and professional lives, namely, their ability to be “stress hardy.” Stress hardiness is a concept proposed by Suzanne Kobasa in which she describes three characteristics of what she called the “hardy personality.” Individuals who possess these characteristics are less likely to experience stress and more likely to respond effectively to problematic situations than those who lack these traits. I referred to these characteristics as a mindset that determines the ways in which we perceive and approach life’s events; since the first letter of each of the components of the mindset begins with the letter C, I termed this mindset the “3 C’s.” I devoted my April and May newsletters to examining two of these “C’s.” The first focused on “commitment” or a feeling of purpose and meaning for one’s life rather than a sense of alienation. Individuals are less stressed when their actions are guided by and in concert with their values and they feel a passion for what they do. A sense of purpose is an antidote to feelings of anxiety and despair.

In the second newsletter I reviewed “challenge.” Successful people appreciate that change is a constant in life and interpret change as a challenge to confront and master rather than as a stress to avoid. When confronted with difficult situations such individuals do not deny problems, but rather they understand that these situations often serve as opportunities for self-reflection and growth. I noted that while opportunity may be housed in many problematic situations, a large number of individuals react to these situations with fear and paralysis, leaving little, if any, room for growth; while they complain about their state of affairs, they seem unwilling or unable to venture from their “comfort zones” and assume a more active role in changing their lives.

Closely related to these first two “C’s” is the third, which represents “control.” Since the word “control” may be incorrectly interpreted as “controlling” others, I typically refer to this third “C” as “personal control.” The feeling of control or ownership is at the root of almost every theory of effectiveness and motivation. When individuals possess this third “C” they tend to focus their energy on those events that they have control over rather than on situations beyond their control. They believe that they are active participants in plotting

the course of their own destiny, of solving problems and making decisions about their own life, of wasting little time worrying about things that are beyond their influence. People become more stressed when they attempt to alter uncontrollable circumstances, often feeling that they are hitting their heads against the wall. When individuals delineate a clear plan of reasonable action for situations that they can alter, their stress lessens. Even when their actions do not lead to success, they at least feel a sense of accomplishment in knowing that they have not passively sat back and, in addition, they are likely to adopt the view that they can learn from what went wrong. They do not assume a martyr stance wondering “why me?” but rather believe that one is capable of turning lemons into lemonade.

Based upon what I have heard in my clinical practice and at my workshops, most people believe that they focus on what they have control over; unfortunately, more often than not this is not the case. To assess whether you expend your time and energy on controllable events, you might wish to do the following exercise. Make a list of the four or five things you would like to see changed in your personal and/or professional life, noting what, if any, action you have taken or can take to make these changes. Then ask yourself whether you actually have control over what you are trying to change. Let me offer several examples.

Several years ago I was consulting with a group of teachers who were experiencing stress and burnout. I discussed stress hardiness theory as well as related ideas offered by Stephen Covey in his book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.” I emphasized the importance of focusing on what one has control over and I asked the group if they felt they were exerting their energy in this direction. They responded in the affirmative, believing that they were using their time and energy on areas of personal control. I next asked what they thought would help their jobs to be less stressful. Their answers were very revealing and in actuality contradicted what they had just stated to me. They said that their jobs would be less stressful if “the students came from less dysfunctional families, if the students’ parents placed a higher value on education, if there was more effective discipline used at home, and if the students had developed a more responsible attitude towards school.”

I listened to their response, but decided not to say anything, instead waiting to see if one of the group would pick up on the contradiction. Fortunately, I didn’t have to wait

long. In fact, one of the teachers, smiling and then actually laughing, said, “Can you believe this? We just told Bob that we only focus on what we have control over, but almost every solution we mentioned that would make our jobs less stressful are things that we have little, if any, control over.” Given the funny way in which she said this, I said, “No, wait. You do have control over the examples you used. You could place an ad in the paper that says, ‘I am a teacher looking to work in a school that only has students from functional families who are already motivated to learn, have already developed self-discipline, and place a very high value on education and respecting teachers.’” We all had a good laugh, but the teachers recognized something very important, namely, if you are working with unmotivated, undisciplined students then you have to ask, “What is it that I can do differently to create a classroom environment in which even unmotivated, angry students will become more motivated and respectful?” In recommending that these teachers focus on what they can do to improve the classroom climate, I am not suggesting that the teachers were to blame for the current attitude of their students. What I am suggesting is that the teachers may have more success in altering the students’ negative perception of school if they shift their focus from what they have little control over (e.g., dysfunctional families) to what they have much more control over (e.g., their educational strategies in working with seemingly unmotivated youth).

As another example, I typically ask a couple in marital therapy what they believe will help their marriage. I continue to be impressed by how many focus on changes that they believe their spouse should make. One husband said, “Our marriage would be much better if my wife were more affectionate and loving.” Upon hearing this, the wife did not thank her husband for his opinion but rather responded in an angry tone of voice, “This marriage would be much better if my husband spent more time complimenting me about the things I did well rather than always criticizing me.” While there may have been some validity in both of their observations, it has been my experience that when people look for their happiness by having someone else change, they are moving away from “personal control.” It is for this reason that if couples suggest that their marriage will be improved if their spouse makes changes, I ask each partner to think about what she or he can do to strengthen the marriage.

Some couples are so entrenched in the view that the spouse is to blame for problems in the marriage that even as they offer suggestions about what they each can do differently,

they qualify their statements by saying that they could make these changes more easily if their spouse first changed his or her behavior. One reason for this lack of flexibility is that many individuals think that if they modify their behavior they are “giving in,” rather than viewing it as empowering themselves. What I attempt to explain is that when we have the courage to make changes, we are not “giving in.” Instead, well-thought out changes reflect a sign of personal power that often creates a climate in which others may show a greater willingness to change.

As an illustration of this last point, I was consulting with a business woman who complained that her office environment was “filled with negativity.” She said, “People are quick to tell you what you have done wrong, but almost no one goes out of their way to compliment you when you’ve done a good job.” I empathized with her but then I asked in a caring way, “Do you recall the last time you went out of your way to give special thanks to someone?” Her response was very revealing. She said, “Why should I do it for someone else when no one does it for me?” Without realizing it she had fallen into the trap of looking for her happiness in the behaviors of others rather than asking what is it that she had control over that might begin to change her office environment.

As we continued our discussion, she increasingly focused on what she could do to change the office environment and in the process became more energized and optimistic. She planned to find opportunities to give positive feedback to colleagues. We spoke about the importance of not becoming discouraged if some of them did not respond enthusiastically to her compliments or if they wondered if she had an ulterior motive. I said, “You have control over what you say and do, but not over the response of others. However, I have found that when we change our behaviors it often sets the stage for others to change theirs.” In fact, as many business leaders have discovered, if they adopt a more positive approach, most of their staff will do the same. With this particular business woman, the results were very positive and dramatic. A couple of weeks later she said that her office environment had changed significantly, noting, “I can’t believe how a few small changes on my part resulted in such a positive change. I don’t know why I didn’t do it sooner.”

One final example centers on experiences I have had in airports. As some of you know, I give workshops throughout the United States and in other countries as well. Consequently, I am frequently on planes. When I first started flying with some regularity, I

could feel my anxiety build up when I heard such announcements as, “There is a delay due to weather conditions” or “There is a delay due to mechanical problems.” Rather than become more anxious at these times, constantly looking at my watch, I have attempted to follow what I preach, reminding myself that I have no control over the weather or mechanical problems (I just hope that the airline mechanics have control over the latter). I began to incorporate “challenge” and “control” into my response, telling myself that delays are opportunities for me to catch up on some reading or to answer correspondence or to do some writing. Buying a laptop computer helped to reinforce this change of mindset (I am actually writing part of this column using my laptop on a plane trip to California).

As you consider these various examples from this month’s newsletter as well as from my last two columns, return to the exercise I recommended earlier. Think about what you would like to change in your life and ask what it is that you can do differently (not what someone else can do differently). Also, as I wrote in my last newsletter about “challenge,” as you reflect upon situations that you believe are within your power to change, don’t attempt to do too much at once. Select one or two problematic situations, develop reasonable and achievable goals, think of a couple of strategies to attain these goals, and then implement one of the strategies. Remember, if that strategy doesn’t lead to positive results, you have the power to select another strategy.

Given the amount of stress that most of us experience, I hope that you will keep the “3 C’s” in sharp focus as you develop a mindset that is better equipped to deal with this stress. If we can keep in mind the reasons we do what we do, the passion and purpose of our activities, the opportunities for change and growth that are present when we are confronted with difficult situations, and if we have the courage to look for change within ourselves rather than from others, I believe we will become “stress hardy” people who live life with greater energy, enjoyment, and success.

My best wishes for a relaxing summer.

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