

Be “Hardy” To Resist Job Stress

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It was mid afternoon on a bright, sunny Sunday and it was beginning again. Every week about this time Jenna’s stomach began to slowly twist until it was one solid knot. She knew her weekend was coming to an end and before long she would have to return to her busy office where the impatient and often disgruntled customers would be competing for her attention. She fantasized about breaking a leg or perhaps coming down with some serious (but non-fatal) illness. Anything that would allow her to stay home for a couple of weeks.

Jenna is by no means alone. Estimates are that about one-third of all workers report high levels of stress on their jobs and fully one-fourth say that their job is the primary source of stress in their lives. But despite the challenges of today’s economy, not everyone reacts to the pressures and uncertainties of their work as Jenna does. Robin works in an office similar to Jenna’s but she has a completely different reaction. “Yes, things have gotten much more hectic over the past year – we’ve been unable to fill two vacant positions because of budget cuts – but I don’t really mind. Trying to get everything done by 5:00 o’clock makes the time fly by and I see it as a challenge to help our stressed-out customers leave feeling better than when they came in.”

What can explain the difference between Jenna and Robin? According to University of Chicago psychologists Salvatore Maddi and Deborah Khoshaba, the critical difference may well be that Robin has a *Hardy Personality*. These researchers conceptualized this personality style while they were studying executives at AT&T in the early 1980s when the federal government

deregulated the communications industry and stripped the company of its status as a protected monopoly. As you might imagine, it was a time of tumultuous change. Executives did not know where they might be reassigned or even if they would be able to keep their jobs. Many experienced severe stress, to the point where they became physically ill. But some seemed to thrive under the challenging conditions. Maddi and Khoshaba reported that the latter group, like Robin, had a Hardy Personality. And the best news? Maddi and Khoshaba found that people like Jenna, people who experience stress and have trouble coping with challenging conditions, can learn to be “hardier.”

The hardy personality can be broken down into three attitudes; the first of these is **Commitment**. People with a sense of commitment are fully involved with their lives and their work. They are not simply going through the motions. Robin, for example, realizes that the people and the activities in her life are important to her personal satisfaction. She values her relationships with her colleagues at work and she believes that her efforts can have a beneficial effect on the customers she serves. She is committed to doing her job well and she experiences a quiet, but deep sense of pride when, on those rare occasions, one of her customers expresses his or her gratitude for her help.

Control is the second attitude. People with a sense of control know that their efforts can make a difference, that they can influence the outcome in those situations in flux. Jenna is a prime example of the consequences of not having a sense of control. She believes that there is nothing that she can do to improve her situation. She feels that she is a helpless victim of a poor economy and a dead-end job. She does not understand that her work days could be much more pleasant if she made more of an effort to form relationships with her co-workers. She

does not appreciate that her work situation may not be so dead-end if she made more of an effort to do her work well or to improve her skills. And she fails to realize that her options are severely limited by her own near-sightedness. Robin, on the other hand, goes to work every day confident that her efforts will make her own life, and the lives of her customers, better.

The final component of the hardy personality is **Challenge**. People with a sense of challenge welcome change and uncertainty because it provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate their competencies and skills. The executives at AT&T who suffered during the transition had the attitude, “why did this have to happen to me? Why couldn’t they have waited until I retired to make the change?” Those executives who thrived saw the transition as an opportunity to show what they were made of, to make a big jump in their career trajectory.

Since their original research, Maddi and Khoshaba have made a cottage industry of teaching employees to become hardier. It’s not an easy task but it can be done. If you would like more ideas as to how you can be hardier, there are any number of web sites that can give you lots of specific ideas. Try googling “hardy personality.” One that I particularly liked is: http://www.truestarhealth.com/members/cm_archives10ML3P1A45.html.

One last thought. Maddi and Khoshaba described people who have a sense of commitment, control and challenge as resilient, as being resistant to experiencing stress in the face of difficult and uncertain conditions. But hardy personalities are not immune to stress. I like to think of myself as a hardy personality but there are times when my nerve endings are a little ragged. Perhaps a research project is not going well, or perhaps I have not allowed enough time to prepare a lecture. Some degree of stress is inevitable so we all need ways to deal with it no matter how hardy or resilient we may be.

Over the past few decades, an impressive body of research has documented the effectiveness of a simple strategy to not only reduce stress but also to improve mood and energy level. Simply put – get moving. Take a brisk walk, play tennis, racquetball, or golf. Visit the gym and tone your abs while you untie those knots in your stomach. If you can take thirty minutes each day to be physically active to the point where you get your heart going, the odds are excellent that you will experience a significant improvement in your stress level and your mood.