

Who Are the Hardy?

Some employees cope well with stress where others fall apart. Here's a guide to help identify less stress-resistant employees, why they have trouble coping, and what can be done to help them.

By KENNETH M. NOWACK

Today it is widely known and accepted that stress has negative effects on the health and productivity of some employees. What is *not* well known is what makes some so resistant to stress and others so vulnerable. Who are the hardy employees and what makes them so resistant to stress? Are these differences learned or inherited? Can organizations begin to screen and select these types of employees reliably? Can organizations train employees to become more stress resistant?

These questions were so intriguing to me that for the last several years I have attempted to identify, interview, test, and study hardy employees. It is increasingly clear that these employees can be

characterized reliably and that they are more productive and healthy in the face of work and life stress than their less resistant counterparts. Furthermore, these hardy individuals appear less susceptible to the adverse effects of stress, such as physical illness and burnout.

Burnout: one outcome of stress

Like stress, burnout is a difficult concept to define. There are nearly as many definitions of burnout as there are measures of it. Nonetheless, there is general agreement that burnout is an outcome of stress, and is characterized by emotional exhaustion, frustration, cynicism, interpersonal sensitivity, detachment, negativity, irritability, low morale, and lack of commitment.

Recent development of standardized instruments such as the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI)¹ has enabled practitioners and researchers to investigate who is most susceptible to burnout in a variety of jobs

and work environments. Burnout is no longer thought of as a problem unique to human service providers, such as teachers and nurses. In the last few years, a number of studies using the MBI have attempted to uncover the distinct antecedents and consequences associated with this particular stress outcome.

For example, burnout has been associated strongly with a number of stressful job factors such as role conflicts and ambiguity, poor support networks, responsibility for others, handling employee problems, time pressures, and intense interpersonal interactions on a daily basis. In terms of distinct consequences, employees with burnout also tend to experience poor physical and psychological health, job dissatisfaction, poor job performance evaluations, intention to quit their job, and family problems.^{2,3} As such, knowing which individuals are vulnerable to burnout and how it can be minimized may be very important to organizations.

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The hardy employee: a profile

Over the last few years, a profile has begun to emerge describing the stress-resistant, or hardy, employee. Undoubtedly, additional factors will emerge, but this tentative profile of the hardy employee appears to be consistent with recent research findings. Future investigators will be able to determine if these factors act in an independent or interactive fashion in buffering employees from stress.

■ **Type A behavior.** It is well known that individuals expressing Type A behaviors—hard-driving, competitive, impatient, achievement-striving, time-urgent, and emotionally expressive—are at risk for coronary heart disease.⁴ It is also clear that such individuals are more likely to experience other outcomes of stress such as burnout, psychological distress, and somatic complaints. Just as important, recent findings confirm that individuals expressing Type A behaviors are not only at risk for illness, but are less productive on their jobs compared to Type Bs.³

■ **Social support.** When things get tough, the tough seek their social support networks, allowing them to cope more effectively with stress at work. Current findings suggest that hardy employees appear more satisfied with their social support networks both at work and elsewhere. Hardy employees apparently cultivate the essential social contacts for minimizing work hassles and problems which enable them to put their organizational and personal coping skills to good use.

■ **Health habits.** A significant trend toward greater corporate involvement in employee health has been apparent in recent years, reflected by a steady growth in successful employee health promotion programs aimed

at enhancing individual health habits.⁵ It appears that such programs are on the right track. The hardy employees in my studies are those getting adequate rest and sleep, eating properly, exercising regularly, and moderating their use of substances such as alcohol and cigarettes. Such employees repeatedly report less burnout, and less psychological and physical illness than those more negligent in their health habits.

■ **Outlook on life.** Research on mental outlook and attitude shows that high-stress executives experiencing low rates of illness felt "in control," were committed to their family and job, and viewed change in their life as challenging instead of threatening.⁶ In addition to having less physical illness, employees possessing these positive appraisals of work and life also tend to experience less job burnout and psychological distress.

Implications for training

Organizational health promotions and training programs should continue to address such areas as weight reduction, smoking cessation, hypertension screening and control, improved nutrition, physical fitness, substance abuse, employee assistance and stress management. The results of these programs should result in healthier employees, increased morale, improved quality of work life, enhanced productivity, lower medical and disability costs, reduced absenteeism and turnover, and improved job satisfaction.

Although too few evaluations have been conducted of such health promotion programs in the workplace, most appear to help employees cope with stress and ex-

ert greater control over physiological and psychological systems reactive to stressors.⁵ Several suggestions can be made for maximizing the overall efficacy of such programs:

- Define program goals clearly and succinctly before expending energy in development and implementation
- Teach employees multiple coping strategies and approaches within each program (e.g., relaxation, communication, and administrative skills)
- Provide adequate classroom time to acquire targeted health management skills
- Use post-program follow-up and behavioral self-contracts to facilitate transferring coping skills to the work environment
- Avoid overloading program participants with instructional and informational material
- Individualize instruction to insure facilitation of more personalized coping and self-management
- Use multiple evaluative outcome measures in determining the benefits of the program to both individuals and the organization

Implications for employee selection

To the extent that productivity and quality of work life are functions of the proper match between an individual and the job, assessment and selection of hardy employees may be very important to organizations in the future. Although it may appear that stress-resistant individuals would function optimally in high-stress jobs, it might not always follow that an organization would want such employees in every position. Because har-



dy individuals have a high tolerance for ambiguity, change, conflict, and pressure, they might tend to find it or create it if they perceive the job as being not stimulating enough. Thus, careful analysis of both individuals *and* jobs is important when selecting stress-resistant employees. What are needed now are more reliable and valid assessment techniques to measure stress resistance in employees.

The "Health Assessment Audit"

The "Health Assessment Audit," a 300-item, paper-and-pencil inventory measures a variety of factors thought to be predictive of hardy employees, including level of stress, health habits, social support, Type A behavior, family health history, irrational beliefs, expressed hostility, cognitive outlook, coping style, physical health, and psychological well-being.

A number of organizational studies are planned using this comprehensive health assessment instrument. These studies will be aimed at validating the internal structure of the instrument and determining its ability to predict a number of individual organizational outcomes of stress. Those interested in using this instrument for pilot research in their worksite should contact the author at: Office of Residential Life, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

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