

Developing Stress Hardiness

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Different people going through identical crises can either thrive or deteriorate, grow or become bitter and resentful, display increased confidence and take on greater challenges, or grow more fearful and diminished? Why is the impact of stress different for people going through the same situation?

Many factors can contribute to this difference (age, health, gender, accumulation of stress; past history in coping with this kind of pressure, etc.). However, there are some things we can all do to increase our tolerance for stress, and our ability to turn the stress into growth opportunities.

A three-legged stool

We can look at the development of stress hardiness as a stool with three legs: awareness, initiative and taking action with practical commitments.

1. Awareness

The first of these three legs is awareness, which includes the identification of both the normal and unusual stressors that are facing us right now, as well as the recognition of how our bodies, minds, attitudes and behaviors are reacting to these stressors. What symptoms am I displaying?ⁱ

Self-awareness also has to do with understanding the internal tendencies and patterns we developed in the past which have become ingrained and automatic (whether they are effective or not). These may include negative patterns such as thinking critically and making negative judgments of ourselves, unrealistic expectations, compulsiveness, perfectionism, procrastination, and unproductive self-talk. Identifying and evaluating the usefulness or destructiveness of these patterns can be a first step in effecting change.

Sharing these insights with others (friends, associates, supervisors) who accept and support us, but are sturdy enough to give us feedback and perspective is helpful. In order for this step to be helpful, we must be willing to allow them to give us truthful feedback.

These aspects of awareness then are:

- Identifying our stresses and stressors
- Identifying symptoms I'm displaying
- Identifying strategies I'm currently utilizing
- Choosing to share with people I can trust and accepting their feedback

2. Taking Initiative to Develop Healthy Perspective and Practices

The second leg upon which stress hardiness rests is taking initiative. This initiative will lead a sturdy person to manage thoughts and attitudes, discarding those not useful and developing alternatives. Above all else, it will include the development of a healthy personal perspective. In step one, awareness; we assess ourselves, gathering feedback from others to aid us in this process. Initiative leads us to discover the tools with which to build our own foundation of belief. Here are five key tools available to us which can help us develop a perspective that is faith-filled, realistic, and positive.

Hope

We must realistically assess the present, while knowing that 'this is not all there is'. II Cor. 4 demonstrates how Paul did that--indeed we are fragile containers in a crowded marketplace, susceptible to breakage, but things are not as bad as they might be, and even if they are, there is still eternity. Our God DOES reign. (Isa. 52:7; Ps. 9:7; 47:8; 93:1; 97:1; 99:1; 146:10).

History

As we look back over our history, we see that we have coped quite well with uncertainty and ambiguity, have good memories of working with leaders who were trustworthy, did well in situations of danger and with few resources. We are more resilient than we thought! The danger will be to minimize those days, "Oh, we were young then!" rather than take them as evidence of adequate self-esteem and good creativity.

Health

Exercise is the first line of self-defense in times of depression, discouragement, sleep deprivation, and distorted thinking. Health of the body is often reflected in health of the mind, the spirit, the soul, and every other aspect of life.

Humor

Many of us struggle with being too sober and discreet - it seems to be our natural state of mind. We need to choose laughter, relaxation, enjoyment, seeing the bright or the funny side and sharing it, even dwelling on it.

Truth

We need to tell ourselves the truth. We are good at telling ourselves lies, because they come disguised as humility, or meekness, or building others up. We fail to realize that we are offending the God of truth, and giving in to the father of lies (John 8:44) when we waver in our commitment to the things that are true (Phil. 4:8), as well as the persons who are true. A commitment to speaking truth, living truth and practicing truth is an essential tool in developing a perspective that works in time of crisis--and in all other times as well.

The truth must include the fact that difficulties will come. Heb. 12:2 says that our model is our Lord, “who for the joy that was set before Him endured. . .” Let us also identify the joy set before us, and in that joy find strength to endure! (II Cor. 4:1).

Dan. 3:16-18 gives us the example of the three Hebrew young men who announced some truths about their God--He is able; whether He acts on our behalf or not does not make Him less able, or less caring. ‘We stand right here on this truth.’

Phil. 1:29 reminds us that suffering is a part of this life; that truth helps us not to be surprised when it comes.

Acts 14:22-23 lets us know that true encouragers will remind us of hardship as well as of joy. These are truths that will give us perspective and strength.

3. Taking Action with Practical Commitments

Finally, in the composition of the three-legged stool for developing stress hardiness, we need to make some commitments and act on them.

- a. **Health.** Regular exercise of at least 30 minutes a day will furnish the beginning of good health. Jogging or playing sports may not always be possible. But calisthenics, jumping rope, doing stretching exercises--these can be done with minimal equipment, in minimal space. This must be followed up, of course, by sensible eating habits, sufficient rest and relaxation, enjoyable activities, regular medical check-ups, and good habits of cleanliness and bodily care.
- b. **Music.** (Poetry and beauty are also in this category). Good rhythms, exquisite harmony, skilled instruments, meaningful words--these things stick in our souls and our minds. We can listen to music or we can develop skill on an instrument or use our voice to sing praise songs.
- c. **Self-knowledge.** The more accurate knowledge we have of ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, the things that get us down and build us up, the coping mechanisms we use and how effective they are, the more they can be utilized or their power diminished (if they are ineffective or destructive).
- d. **Take care of sin; take care of our relationship to God.** Few things are more draining than unconfessed, unresolved, undealt with, or unforgiven sin. There is a remedy. We don't have to live with this weight any longer. Ps. 32 clearly tells of the weight being gone and the lightness that comes when sin is forgiven. If there is something between us and our God, let's take care of it. Then we will have the sense of His unclouded face smiling at us, supporting us with love and availability.
- e. **Establish priorities.** Everything can't be done at once; everything does not have to be done now; everything does not have to be done by me. Some things do not have to be

done at all. Let's be sure our priority system includes relationships and responsibilities as well as tasks. These may seem less urgent, but they may in fact be our most important priority.

- f. **Avoid competitiveness and comparisons.** II Cor. 10:12-18 makes it very clear that those who compare and measure themselves by others in the group are not wise. Gal. 6:4 talks about validating ourselves based on our own work. There's a place for self-approval (demonstrated by God Himself in the 8 validations during his Creation Week, Gen. 1). When we compete, we may be tempted to belittle another. When we compare, we either inflate or depress ourselves, forgetting that we're all at different places in our lives. A steady commitment to avoid these two distortions will serve us well.
- g. **Diminish the surprises.** Those who maintain external awareness are tuned in to the current climate--be it political, organizational, interpersonal. In Prov. 22:8, "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it."
- h. **Avoid exaggeration or magnification of the minuscule.** Making big ones out of little ones makes a lot of sense when it comes to opportunities, but no sense when we're dealing with complaints, grievances or difficulties.
- i. **Maintain margins.** Don't spend all of our energy all the time. Something held in reserve leaves us room for interruptions, for reflection, for repairing the resources when needed. This does not mean to prioritize self-protection above everything else, but it does promote wise living, allows for the ebb and flow of energy, and gives time for reflection. It helps us to have room for the unexpected brother in need just as the Good Samaritan responded while on his journey.
- j. **Develop spiritual resources.** We need to seek relationships with those who can guide and mentor us in the spiritual disciplines of fasting, Scripture memory, prayer, tithing and generosity.
- k. **Guard our primary relationships.** Value our relationship with God above and beyond all others, living in tune with Him and seeking to please Him. But, in addition, treasure and treat well those who are close to us--spouse, dear friend, family members. Develop and maintain these relationships. Study how to turn our children into lifelong friends. Make new friends but keep the old. Honor and nurture them and be vulnerable givers in these relationships, not just receivers.
- l. **Manage the information flow.** We don't need to know everything about everything, and must learn to sort, to skim, to listen, and to remember.
- m. **Use technology, but don't let it become either seductress or master.** The stress of learning to use well all that computer technology is capable of doing for us can add a

dimension that is big, never-ending, consuming and seductive. Boundary-setting is necessary when we consider staying on top of the latest in technology.

These three legs - awareness, initiative, and taking action with practical commitments - can serve well to develop stress hardiness in us and those we lead. Let's not be deceived because they're so practical and so simple. They are gifts from our loving Father and will help us become more like His Son and remain faithful in our service.

Reflection Questions

Which legs of the 3 legged stool do you need to pay more attention to?

Ask God what commitments he wants to you to make in order to increase stress hardiness?

Additional Resources/Supporting Documents:

ⁱ Cross-Cultural Worker Stress Inventory (4.5)