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## Turning Lemons into Lemonade: Hardiness Helps People Turn Stressful Circumstances into Opportunities

**Research shows hardiness is the key to the resiliency for not only surviving, but also thriving, under stress. Hardiness enhances performance, leadership, conduct, stamina, mood and both physical and mental health.**

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### Findings

Why do some people suffer physical and mental breakdowns when faced with overwhelming stress while others seem to thrive? A landmark 12-year longitudinal study by psychologist Salvatore R. Maddi, Ph.D., and colleagues at the University of Chicago involving one of the biggest deregulation and divestiture cases in American history provides some answers.

In 1981 Illinois Bell Telephone (IBT) downsized from 26,000 employees to just over half that many in one year. The remaining employees faced changing job descriptions, company goals and supervisors. One manager reported having 10 different supervisors in one year. Dr. Maddi and his research team were already studying more than 400 supervisors, managers and executives at IBT before the downsizing occurred and they were able to continue following the original study group on a yearly basis until 1987. Results shows that about two-thirds of the employees in the study suffered significant performance, leadership and health declines as the result of the extreme stress from the deregulation and divestiture, including heart attacks, strokes, obesity, depression, substance abuse and poor performance reviews. However, the other one-third actually thrived during the upheaval despite experiencing the same amount of disruption and stressful events as their co-workers. These employees maintained their health, happiness and performance and felt renewed enthusiasm.

What made the two groups so different? Dr. Maddi found that those who thrived maintained three key beliefs that helped them turn adversity into an advantage: commitment, control and challenge attitudes. The Commitment attitude led them to strive to be involved in ongoing events, rather than feeling isolated. The Control attitude led them to struggle and try to influence outcomes, rather than lapse into passivity and powerlessness. The Challenge attitude led them to view stress changes, whether positive or negative, as opportunities for new learning.

There is no more extreme example of workplace stress than the battlefield. Research by psychologist Paul T. Bartone, Ph.D., of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point found that hardiness protected Army reserve personnel mobilized for the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990's. In this study, the higher the hardiness level, the greater the ability of soldiers to experience life- and combat-related stress without apparent negative health consequences, such as post traumatic stress disorder or depression. So, hardiness at least partially explains why some soldiers remain healthy under war related stress.

### Significance

Results from the IBT study and other research shows that hardiness enhances performance, leadership, conduct, stamina, mood and both physical and mental health by giving people the courage and capability to turn adversity to advantage.

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### Practical Application

Dr. Maddi and his team used what they learned in the IBT case to develop a training program to help stressed-out employees, including those still at IBT. Those that took part in the training program reduced their anxiety, depression and other signs of strain, while increasing their job satisfaction and morale. These changes persisted after the training course was over. The training program, offered through the Hardiness Institute, is now widely used by organizations to improve worker performance and health. The company also offers an assessment test that is currently used in screening applicants for jobs (such as the U.S. Navy Seals) and placing employees in the right positions. In addition, the institute offers a training program for students that motivates them to do well, and to stay in and graduate from school.

Hardiness and resiliency research is also being used by the American Psychological Association (APA) to help children, teenagers and adults to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and other significant sources of stress. In the fall of 2003, the APA launched "Resilience for Kids & Teens," a school-based campaign which focuses on teaching the skills of resilience for problems ranging from adapting to a new classroom to bullying by classmates or even abuse at home. The campaign included the distribution of a special issue of Time for Kids Magazine to more than two million fourth- through sixth-graders and their teachers to help children learn the skills of resilience, using "kid-friendly" language.

The APA has also partnered with the Discovery Health Channel for a national, multi-media campaign designed to help Americans work through personal tragedies by learning strategies for resilience. The partnership was forged in the wake of the September 11th 2001 tragedy.

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### Additional Sources

American Psychological Association's resilience projects:  
<http://helping.apa.org/>

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