

The Hardiness Effect: An Invisible Resilience Shield Against Stress

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Abstract

Modern military forces operate in complex environments and circumstances marked by high levels of uncertainty and change. This increases the stress levels for military personnel who must live and work in these environments. It is thus more important than ever for military organizations to be able to select and develop personnel who can cope effectively with high levels of stress. This presentation begins with the observation that people vary widely in their ability to cope with stress. Some individuals are more resistant or resilient than others, and continue to perform well and stay healthy despite high stress levels. Studies of these highly resilient people show that they share several features which can be described as personality hardiness. This includes commitment, being deeply engaged and involved with life; control, believing one's actions can influence outcomes; and challenge, the tendency to see changes and problems as valuable opportunities for learning. In the lecture, I describe hardiness further, and present some theoretical background and sample research findings. In multiple studies, hardiness has been found to be a buffer or protective factor that shields against the negative effects of stress. For example, U.S. soldiers in the Persian Gulf War who were high in hardiness showed lower levels of PTSD symptoms than soldiers low in hardiness. More recent studies show that the effects of hardiness are often mediated by coping style, with low hardy persons using more avoidance coping approaches in dealing with stress. I provide a number of practical suggestions for what leaders can do to increase hardiness across the entire military organization. For example, providing awards and recognition when a job is well done can boost up the sense of commitment and engagement among the military personnel. Control is increased when soldiers are kept well-informed, and have some input into the decision making process. Challenge is built up by providing freedom and encouragement to try new things, and by treating failures as valuable opportunities to learn. Finally, leaders engender hardiness throughout the unit by demonstrating it themselves, providing visible role-models for how to cope positively with stressful conditions. The best way to increase hardiness for resiliency under stress is not through training programs, but rather by providing a unit social climate that reinforces hardy attitudes and behaviors for everyone across the organization.