



## Reduce Workplace Burn-Out With Hardiness?

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As you sit there and read the title of this article you realize that you might be in a burn-out situation at work. And you're wondering what hardiness has to do with reducing burn-out?

We'll explain in a moment, but first you may find this interesting. Statistically, the current shortage of labor resources has affected most businesses, even yours. So much so that enhancing retention strategies becomes critical for attracting and maintaining quality employees. Put another way, retaining quality staff means creating a workplace that will act as a magnet that pulls more quality people into the organization. Before we go into detail about burnout and hardiness, you're probably asking yourself this:

"Hey, I am quality!" So why do you still feel overworked, stressed and on the verge of burnout?

You're not alone. And the fact that there's not enough of you to go around, you and many employees are experiencing more stress in the work place. Stress builds on itself: when there's not enough of you to perform all the work, you feel a sense of powerlessness and loss of control, which creates a vicious cycle and escalates stress.

### Stress Belongs In The Trenches!

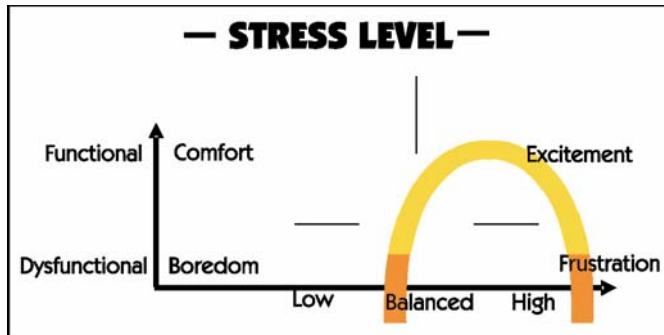
Let's look more closely at stress. Stress as a concept, was first explored scientifically as a result of battle fatigue among soldiers in combats situations. Symptoms of stress lead to failure to fire arms, surrendering without cause and generally becoming ineffective. Selye, often identified as the father of stress research defined stress in terms of eustress and distress. He recognized that although a certain amount of stress, called eustress, is necessary for normal function, too little stress can cause deep issues. For example, in the use of isolation chambers that were popular for some types of therapy, psychosis and other kinds of mental distress increased.

But the opposite is also true. Too little stress can result in boredom and lack of engagement in work activities. So the ideal situation offers optimum levels of stress. Statistics prove that when companies provide optimum stress levels, their employees feel engaged and accept life challenges more readily. Then you enjoy what you do; you are in the moment and have maximum productivity.

Stress follows a bell curve. Figure 1 shows that if you experience too much stress, referred as distress, you feel frustration and burnout.

And burnout becomes the result of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment.

Fig. 1 – Stress Level



(Fig.1). Emotional exhaustion, characterized by feeling drained, frustrated and fatigued, disengages you with fellow employees. The result? Depersonalization. You may operate with a calloused response. Empathy is lost and you and your colleagues feel like you're just an object. Calloused individuals

generally tend to blame other people for their problems, or feel persecuted. When they began to lose productivity and focus they cannot deal with problems effectively, cease to be positive role models, and no longer seek to understand other people's issues. They see work as a chore and are no longer excited about their job. These are the consequences of burnout, which many companies fail to recognize or address effectively. (Fig 2).

Fig. 2 - Individual Consequences of Stress: Burnout

Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Low Personal Accomplishment
Feel drained by work	Have become calloused by job	Cannot deal with problems effectively
Feel fatigued in the morning	Treat others like objects	Do not have a positive influence on others
Frustrated	Do not care what happens to others	Cannot understand others' problems or identify with them
Do not want to work with others	Feel other people blame you	No longer feel exhilarated by your job

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## How Hardiness Puts Out Burnout Fires

So what does hardiness have to do with decreasing burnout? According to a survey by USA Today, people work for their supervisor, not for the senior administrator. By increasing the hardiness of managers, companies are increasing the hardiness of the employee and providing a skill set that, applied effectively, makes a difference. By becoming hardier, individuals are able to perform better and become more productive in all aspects of their lives.

Imagine for a moment, your immediate supervisor feels burned out. How does that make you feel? The problem is exacerbated. As your supervisor no longer models appropriate positive behavior, their frustration and irritability reflects in you.

If you're the supervisor and you feel burned out – imagine how your subordinates feel. The cycle goes round and round, increases workplace stress, creating a toxic workplace environment where absenteeism increases and productivity plummets. Get the picture?

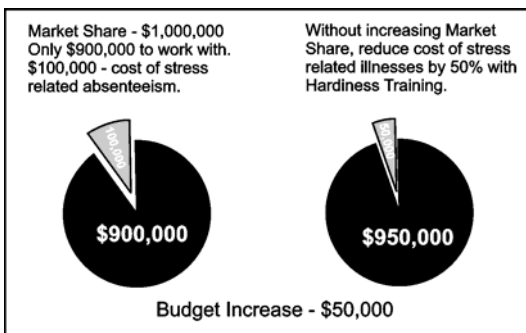
Though companies are quietly aware of this syndrome in their environment, most do not discuss it because they lack the method to correct it.

Thus there is the flavor of the month mentality where thousands of dollars disappear with little or no return. Exacerbating this tendency further, is that very few training methodologies even track the impact of the training over time. These metrics, when measured and trends analyzed, offer gain maximum benefits from this training strategy.

## Proof That Hardiness Reduces Stress

Research has shown that hardy individuals perceive less stress and thrive in challenging environments. Hardiness, first described by Maddi and Kobasa, provides the necessary skill set to address burnout effectively. For many companies, growth is hampered by huge payments they must make to disabilities resulting from stress related illness and accidents. It is reported that by 2008, stress as part of mental illness, will be the number one cause of workplace absenteeism. By not addressing this issue, companies are leaving millions on the table. By decreasing unscheduled absenteeism alone, companies can increase the bottom line without spending a dime to increase market share (Fig. 3).

*Fig. 3 – Market Share*



Hardiness, a personality construct, consisting of commitment, control, and challenge offers a research based answer to these and other workplace issues. Hardiness, shown to reduce unplanned absenteeism (or mental health days), increased productivity and decreased unwanted staff turnover by as much as 63% in a study of nurse managers by Judkins and Furlow.

Amazingly, hardiness can be learned.

However, it is not a flavor of the month since it requires habituation and personal change. Hardiness requires organizational commitment from the senior management: policies and procedures that enhance and foster hardiness adaptive behaviours are an integral part of the equation. As with any change, there is resistance. However, once overcome, the results remain positive through spaced repetition and conditioned learning. Hardiness Development is development in the true sense of the word. It requires planned follow-up for monitoring goal setting activities. Not surprisingly, development hardiness often results in breaking down of “silos” within highly bureaucratic organizations.

## How To Develop Hardiness

Since hardiness is a learned skill that requires practice and follow-up at regular intervals to ensure that it has “stuck”. Planned repetition at regular intervals will ensure that you remember the skills that you learn and apply them to situations you are struggling with, often at the workplace. Moreover, you can apply the hardiness factor in all areas of your life.

Learning hardiness enhances your ability to deal effectively with excessive amounts of stress in the family, home, and in social activities. Although more research is required in this area, hardiness may even prevent workplace illnesses.

The process cannot be one size fits all....reactions to stress is unique, like an emotional fingerprint, so the solution needs to fit individual needs. By incorporating, in the truest sense of adult development theory, the actual challenges you may face and through structured learning in a safe environment... your issues, once explored, convert into solutions. Follow-up on the retention and implementation of hardiness skills is essential to ensure that the learning has taken place.

To track effectiveness metrics are identified prior to initiating any development process. These are client specific and individualistic in nature. Assessment of hardiness and stress are the first steps in the process and repeated throughout the training period. Improvements have lasting impact of them. Such things as reviews of absenteeism rates, organization opportunities for improvement such as high employee turnover, low job satisfaction score, negative corporate culture, and ineffectual management can be tracked and improved.

Companies can show meaningful improvement and determine the success of the hardiness intervention. Scientific research methodologies when applied to demonstrate validity of hardiness, adds much to the body of knowledge in this relatively new and emerging field of human behavior.

### **Ready To Get Off The Ineffective Improvement Rollercoaster?**

For too long companies have ridden the process improvement wave – a rollercoaster of ineffective programs showing little to no results. The time has come to begin addressing the behavioral patterns of individuals within organizations and provide personal improvement interventional strategies. Monies well spent to develop effective management, provides a positive feedback mechanism to instill good coping strategies and model hardiness behaviors to employees.

In hardiness as in health and safety, modeling by management is one of the most effective strategies to ensure change. This leads to a positive impact on compliance with health and safety goals, and a positive impact on the bottom line of the organization.

It is like 360 degree feed back with a twist. The use of skilled facilitators and peer interactions result in a dynamic learning environment where bonds are forged and participants are engaged in a fun yet powerful life transformation. This investment in the company's greatest resource pays enormous dividends in loyalty, reduced turnover and increased productivity. For the twenty-first century this is a vital skill set to learn...often we are victims of organizational culture or an environment that does not affirm us as individuals. Changing organizational culture can be a long and drawn out process, adaptive strategies like teaching hardiness are like broad spectrum antibiotics they kill a wide range of maladaptive strategies that are making individuals and organizations sick.

**Consider this:** Hardiness Training --- the focused and adaptive strategy that may become the next evolution in effective stress management.