What Affects the Way Individuals Cope with Stress?

- Hardiness (Commitment, Control and Challenge)
- Optimism versus pessimism (see chapter 3)
- Coping options
  - Change environments
  - Change the environment
  - Change me (improve my coping skills)
Personality and Health: Hardiness

When Suzanne Kobasa looked at stress-resistant business executives who reported high levels of stressful events, and had relatively few illnesses, she identified three traits that made them hardy.

**Hardiness** (as defined by Suzanne Kobasa), comprises of three beliefs that makes them more resilient to psychological distress and physical illness in the face of stress.

- **Commitment**—hardy individuals are committed to their work and families. They *believe* that what they are doing is important
- **Control**—They *perceive* themselves as having control over their outcomes instead of feeling powerless to influence events (see Learned Helplessness)
- **Challenge**—They view the demands of the situation as a challenge or opportunity instead of a threat. As a result, the situation is seen as less stressful and provided an opportunity to excel.

These hardy people had relatively exceptional coping skills. In hardiness training, participants were encouraged to examine their stressors, develop action plans for dealing with stress, explore their bodily reactions to stress, and find ways to compensate for unchangeable situations without falling into self-pity.
How Hardy are You?

Write down how much you agree or disagree with the following statements, using this scale:

0 = strongly disagree  
1 = mildly disagree  
2 = mildly agree  
3 = strongly agree

___ A. Trying my best at school makes a difference.

___ B. Trusting to fate is sometimes all I can do in a relationship.

___ C. I often wake up eager to start on the day’s projects.

___ D. Thinking of myself as a free person leads to great frustration and difficulty.

___ E. I would be willing to sacrifice financial security in my work if something really challenging came along.

___ F. It bothers me when I have to deviate from the routine or schedule I’ve set for myself.

___ G. An average citizen can have an impact on politics.

___ H. Without the right breaks, it is hard to be successful in my field.

___ I. I know why I am doing what I’m doing at school.

___ J. Getting close to people puts me at risk of being obligated to them.

___ K. Encountering new situations is an important priority in my life.

___ L. I really don’t mind when I have nothing to do.

Kobasa’s research has led her to believe that there are three important characteristics of a stress-resistant personality:

(1) Commitment is shown in items C, D, I, and J. If you have given yourself:
   • high ratings on items C and I or
   • low ratings on D and J,
   you are high in a sense of commitment, and should be more resistant to stress than someone who is low in this quality.

(2) Your sense of control over your life is shown by items A, B, G, and H. If you have:
   • high ratings on items A and G and
   • low ratings on items B and H,
   you have a high sense of control. More stress-resistant people tend to be high in control.

(3) Stress-resistant people see change as a challenge, as shown by items E, F, K, and L. You are more likely to be stress-resistant if you gave yourself
   • high ratings on items E and K and
   • low ratings on items F and L.
Psychological factors: Personal control

Stressors challenge you to do something to eliminate or overcome the stressor. Events are more stressful when there is nothing to do—no way to deal with the challenge.

If you perceive control over stressful events, it can reduce the stress of the event.
**Perceived Control over Stressful Events**

Having a sense of control over a stressful situation reduces the impact of stressor and decreases the feelings of anxiety and depression.

- Your sense of control had to be realistic to be adaptive. Unrealistic perceptions of control over debilitating diseases can add to the stress. Sometimes the control needs to be refocused.
  - Well-adjusted cancer patients accepted that they could not control the disease, but they could control the consequences.

Deciding what you can control and what you can’t control is hard.
Perceived Control over Stressful Events

When residents of a nursing home were involved in the decision making process (e.g. deciding daily activities, where they received visitors, when they would attend a movie screening, etc), they were more active, alert, sociable, healthier and lived longer compared to residents where the decisions were made for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nursing Home “Engaged”</th>
<th>Nursing Home “Disengaged”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involved in deciding</td>
<td>Not involved in deciding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• daily activities</td>
<td>• daily activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where they received visitors</td>
<td>• Where they received visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When they would attend movie screenings</td>
<td>• When they would attend movie screenings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The decisions were made with the input of the residents</td>
<td>These decisions were made for them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More active, alert, sociable, healthier, and lived longer lives</td>
<td>Less active, alert, sociable, healthier, lived shorter lives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three Coping Options

Coping options
• Change environments
• Change the environment
• Change me (improve my coping skills)

Change environments
• Change cities, neighborhoods, jobs, friends, spouse, landscaping, or the arrangement of your living room.
• Your thoughts, beliefs and environment are intertwined (reciprocal determinism)

• If you are in a more supportive environment (friends, family, counseling services are available, financial aid is available) in coping with stress, you are more likely to think you can handle the stress, which leads to taking steps to deal with the stress.
Change the environment
• Advocate for more financial aid, advocate for more counseling services, teach your family members to be more supportive

Change me (improve your coping skills)
• Understand what factors are more effective and ineffective in
  o dealing with stress,
  o providing a good relationship,
  o coping with stressors
  o dealing with conflict
  o being assertive
  o reaching your goals
  o being happy
If you don’t understand what is effective and what is ineffective, it can lead to learned helplessness
(chapter 3)