Success Over Stress
Distress-Resistant Behaviors

Slide 1: Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Explain how the characteristics of self-esteem, type B behavior, optimism, and hardness relate to stress and outlook on life
- Describe the characteristics of a survivor and a self-actualized individual
- Identify ways to cultivate and reinforce distress-resistant behaviors in your own life

There are some behavior patterns that can actually worsen or lead to more stress in your life. We’ve hinted at some behavior patterns that have just the opposite effect; they can help you perceive and experience less stress and even cope with stress more effectively. These patterns are often called distress-resistant. The good news about all of these patterns is that they can be learned, cultivated, and practiced until they become habits. Even people who have had tendencies towards distress-prone patterns in the past can learn to utilize these distress-resistant patterns. As you’ll see from the descriptions and discussions of each pattern, they may have many characteristics in common. One of the most important common elements is a sense of self-esteem.

Slide 2: Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a multifaceted concept that is important for many reasons, but especially in stress management. Consider the following definition: self-esteem is a confidence in our ability to think, our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life and in our right to be content and happy. People with high self-esteem are inclined to (Branden, 1997):

- move toward life, rather than away from it;
- move toward consciousness about their present situation, rather than ignoring it;
- treat facts with respect, rather than denial;
- operate self-responsibly rather than irresponsibly

Self-esteem must be grounded in realistic thinking. No one can give us self-esteem and it is not a free gift of nature. Similarly, it can’t be attained through praise from others, through surrounding ourselves with expensive clothes and things, or through our achievements. Rather, self-esteem has to be learned and cultivated. At the very basic level, self-esteem centers on believing in your
self-worth, your capabilities, and your value as a person. There are six consciously chosen behaviors or practices that can help us develop and improve our self-esteem.

**Slide 3: Behaviors of Self-Esteem**

Let's review the six practices of self-esteem (Branden, 1997).

- **First** is the *practice of living consciously*. This means respecting facts (even when they’re not pleasant), being present for what you are doing, and seeking and being open to information and knowledge.
- **Second** is the *practice of self-acceptance*. This is the willingness to own, experience, and take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings and actions, without denial or evasion. It also means giving yourself permission to experience your own thoughts and emotions without self-ridicule.
- **Third** is the *practice of self-responsibility*. You must realize that you are the author of your own choices and actions, and avoid blaming others. You and you alone are responsible for your life and well-being and for the attainment of your goals.
- **Fourth** is the *practice of self-assertiveness*. This equates to being authentic and honest in your dealings with others. You should refuse to fake a belief, behavior, or value simply to win the approval of others and stand up for yourself in an appropriate manner.
- **Fifth** is the *practice of living purposefully*. This requires that you identify your priorities and goals and the actions needed to address and attain them. By constantly evaluating your actions, you’ll be certain you are on track to achieve those goals.
- **Lastly** is the *practice of personal integrity*. This means you honor your commitments, tell the truth and live according to the values you profess to admire.

These practices may seem easier said than done. However, if you keep them in mind during your journey through college, they will become easier to practice – and hopefully will turn into habits. Additionally, if you remind yourself regularly that you are a worthwhile person who has a right to be content and happy, your self-esteem just might get a boost!

**Slide 4: VIDEO: What's your secret?**

What is your secret to managing stress?

You’ve just got to find the disconnect. I think if you get revved up and thinking that everything really matters, or that everything’s the end of the world, I think that’s where the stress comes from.
Go to church. Pray. For school, I talk to my advisor.

Putting priorities of what needs to be done first and worrying about the other things later.

My secret to managing stress would have to be using a planner, using resources on campus, um, and making to-do lists.

I hate procrastinating so right when I get my homework I make sure it's done.

At the end of the day it's how efficiently you do the work in the given amount of time.

I try to actually not conflict with anyone. I'm, don't, I try to stay away from that.

Leave my phone somewhere else. I won't have it near me so I can't hear it even ring or vibrate or anything.

**Slide 5: Type B Behavior Pattern**

Recall that quite a bit of research has found that people who exhibit Type A behaviors tend to perceive and experience more stress in their lives than others. Type B behavior pattern stands opposite of Type A. Now, at first glance, you might think that someone who is the opposite of Type A would be laid back, lazy, and rather unproductive. This, however, is not true. Type B folks tend to be productive, responsible people. They also tend to perceive and experience less stress than others. So, what’s their secret? You guessed it...one part of the Type B personality is healthy self-esteem!

**Slide 6: Type B characteristics**

The type B behavior pattern involves having and believing in a healthy self-concept. People who exhibit this pattern believe that they are worthwhile, regardless of their accomplishments or successes in life. In fact, they believe that all of us are worthwhile. This belief leads them to treat themselves and others with respect and empathy. Type B people often make very good leaders because of these qualities.

Type B’s tend to be very productive, but they lack the sense of frenzied urgency that plagues type A’s. Type B’s are very responsible and diligent and the work they produce is often of high quality. They take time for contemplation and time to appreciate the views and opinions of others. They’re great collaborators.
Another thing about Type B’s is that they lack the irritability, impatience, and hostility that is so often exhibited by Type A’s. Type B’s feel no need to control others or their environment; rather, they try to positively influence those around them. Type B’s will view mistakes or setbacks as opportunities for learning and growth – rather than horrible tragedies.

Now, this isn’t to say that Type B people never experience stress. They do. However, the big difference is two-fold:

- First, because their general approach to life and other people is more calm, contemplated, and empathetic, they create less stress than others might.
- Second, when they do experience stress, they tend to address the problem or situation in a rational manner in an attempt to seek a solution, rather than freaking out or flying off the handle as other people might!

Some of us might have more natural Type B tendencies than others, but it is possible for each of us to move toward more Type B functioning in our daily lives. It takes commitment to thinking about your actions and reactions, to considering the views of others, and to deciding that you are a worthy person, no matter what.

**Slide 7: Optimism**

Another distress-resistant behavior pattern is optimism. You may already have an idea of what this means or know someone who seems optimistic. An optimist is a *glass half full* kind of person. These people tend to try to look on the bright side of things, in *all* situations. Some might believe that optimists are unrealistic or out of touch. However, they experience the hassles and tragedies of life just like the rest of us. When life happens, they consciously choose to make the best of things. Think of it this way: an optimist is like Winnie the Pooh’s friend, Tigger, while a pessimist is more like Eyore. When bad things happen, optimists often say things like this:

- This isn’t so bad.
- I can handle this.
- Someone else probably has it worse than I do.
- This will pass.
- I’m thankful I have my friends to help me cope.
- I know something good will come from this bad situation.

These simple statements reflect an attitude of thankfulness and self-confidence, which will often serve to help the optimist cope with stress.

**Slide 8: The Optimistic Life**
People who are optimistic tend to view bad events in their lives as *externally-caused, temporary, and limited*. In other words, when something unpleasant happens, optimists do not assume that it’s their fault. They tend to view life’s trials and stresses as temporary – they won’t last forever. Finally, they also see these events as limited. In other words, the occurrence of a bad event does not make them automatically assume that more bad events will follow.

So, how do optimists view good events? They explain good events as being *internally-caused, permanent, and pervasive*. If something good happens and they somehow influenced it, then they are proud of their involvement. They rarely see good events as being brought about by sheer luck. Additionally, optimists will view good events as having an element of permanence and pervasiveness; they expect the situation will continue and flourish. They also expect that good things will happen in other areas of their lives. As we mentioned in another lesson, research has shown that belief in a positive future sometimes is a big factor in making it come true (Seligman, 2006).

Remember all of the other benefits of optimism? When compared to pessimists, optimists tend to:
- Enjoy higher quality of health
- Be more satisfied with life, work, and relationships
- Engage in less risky behavior and experience fewer accidents
- Achieve more goals in work, school, activities, sports, and other things
- Be happier overall

**Slide 9: Cultivating Optimism**

Numerous studies have highlighted the fact that some of our optimistic tendencies are rooted in our childhood experiences (Monmaney, 2000). Children who are disciplined negatively or in a shame-invoking manner have been found to be more pessimistic, as are children who endure hardship and tragedy. However, it is possible for these people – and all of us – to foster optimism in our own lives. This starts with a change in perception. If you catch yourself stuck in negative thinking, try a few thought-stopping strategies. Catch the negative thoughts, stop them, and replace them with more realistic – and optimistic – conclusions. This may not always be easy to do, but it is well worth the effort.

Another thing to keep in mind is that it’s much easier to cultivate a positive attitude if you’re surrounded by positive people and things. Limit your time with people who are overwhelmingly negative. Turn off the news if it brings you down. Spend more time with people who are optimistic and funny. A healthy sense of humor is always a good thing! You can find a plethora of books and articles that offer tips for developing optimism.

Some of our recommendations include:
Slide 10: VIDEO: Cultivate Optimism

How do you cultivate optimism? Where does it come from?

It has to start with yourself. Like, you have to make the decision that you're going to be positive no matter what.

I just have to stay positive and just get through and push myself through everything because I know that there is an end and there's a goal that I want to reach.

The optimism comes from my parents. They both, um, started their own business and basically worked their way up from nothing. So, if they can do it I know I can do it.

Going to church, believing in God, believing that I have a purpose here on this earth, and everything kinda stems from that.

Thinking that in the big grand scheme of things that it'll all work out in the end.

You gotta take whatever's good and take it for what it is.

Slide 11: Hardiness

In 1979, researcher Susan Kobasa and her team published the results of a study, which has changed the way we view behavior patterns and stress. In evaluating stress, illness, and other factors, a pattern was discovered: Those people who coped most successfully with stress overwhelmingly possessed these traits:

- Challenge
- Commitment
- Control

These are now referred to as the “Three C’s of Hardiness.”

Slide 12: The 3 C’s of Hardiness
According to the Three C’s principle, people who are hardy – compared to people who are not - are likely to perceive less stress, manage stress more effectively, and suffer fewer outcomes associated with stress. To understand this, we have to explore the Three C’s of hardiness a bit further:

- The first C is challenge. Hardy people tend to view change as a natural event in life. They see change as an opportunity or challenge, rather than a threat or a negative event. In short, hardy people not only expect change in their lives, they welcome it. They view change as having the potential for positive outcomes, even if the change was initially unwanted or resulted in loss or sadness.

- The second C is commitment. Hardy people take pride in what they do. They become involved in work and activities that interest and motivate them. Hardy people are committed to these activities. They let their decisions flow from their priorities and tend to organize their time and energy around these commitments. Because of these tendencies, hardy people are often more content with their obligations than other people might be. They give maximal attention and effort to their commitments and generally regard them in a positive light.

- The third C is control. People who exhibit hardiness believe that they have the ability to direct the course of their lives. They aren’t control freaks, but they do feel that the decisions they make can help determine their success and satisfaction in given situations. Hardy people have a strong sense of initiative and a high sense of personal influence. They feel that they have a choice in how they react to life’s challenges and opportunities. They believe in their ability to accomplish their goals and steer events.

**Slide 13: Cultivating Hardiness**

Researchers have found that people who exemplify hardiness also report the following:

- Happiness
- High self-esteem
- Abundant energy
- Optimism
- Wellness
- A sense of meaning and purpose
- High quality of life

**Slide 14: Kobasa’s Example**

Why do hardy people experience these benefits? Kobasa (1979) provides the following example and explanation:
A male executive having to deal with a job transfer will serve as an example. Whether hardy or not, the executive will anticipate and experience the changes that the transfer will bring about—learning to cope with new subordinates and supervisors, finding a new home, helping children and wife with a new school and neighborhood, learning new job skills, and so on. The hardy executive will approach the necessary readjustments in his life with (a) a clear sense of his values, goals, and capabilities, and a belief in their importance (commitment to rather than alienation from self) and (b) a strong tendency toward active involvement with his environment (vigorousness rather than vegetativeness). Hence, the hardy executive does more than passively acquiesce to the job transfer. Rather, he throws himself actively into the new situation, utilizing his inner resources to make it his own. Another important characteristic of the hardy executive is an unshakable sense of meaningfulness and ability to evaluate the impact of a transfer in terms of a general life plan with its established priorities (meaningfulness rather than nihilism). For him, the job transfer means a change that can be transformed into a potential step in the right direction in his overarching career plan and also provide his family with a developmentally stimulating change. An internal (rather than external) locus of control allows the hardy executive to greet the transfer with the recognition that although it may have been initiated in an office above him, the actual course it takes is dependent upon how he handles it. For all these reasons, he is not just a victim of a threatening change but an active determinant of the consequences it brings about. In contrast, the executive low in hardiness will react to the transfer with less sense of personal resource, more acquiescence, more encroachments of meaninglessness, and a conviction that the change has been externally determined with no possibility of control on his part. In this context, it is understandable that the hardy executive will also tend to perceive the transfer as less personally stressful than his less hardy counterpart. (p. 9)

From this example, you can see that much of the ability to cope with stress stems from your attitude towards change and your reactions to it. These same ideas can be applied to students in transition. The good news is that hardiness can be developed and fostered, so if you find that you don’t always respond to stress in the hardiest way, don’t get discouraged. Just like everything else in life, cultivating hardiness takes time and practice.

**Slide 15: The Survivor**

Have you ever known someone who experienced a major crisis or challenge, surmounted that challenge in part due to personal effort, and then emerged from that experience with newfound strengths and an insightful
perspective? In retrospect, maybe this person now sees value in the experience, even though it was terribly difficult at the time.

If you do know a person like this, then you know a survivor. The survivor’s approach is another distress-resistant behavior pattern. Survivors tend to take very little for granted and they often approach life with an attitude of gratitude. They are quick to count their blessings and often comment that things could be worse. They tend to have much in common with optimists in that they usually look on the bright side of things. Life has taught them many invaluable lessons and they don’t take these lessons for granted. Rather, they put them to good use for themselves and others.

Resource Link:

Slide 16: Survivor Characteristics

Some of the hallmark characteristics of survivors include (Seibert, 2010):
- Flexibility in responses to people and situations
- Patience, insight, and wisdom in reaction to life’s demands
- Acceptance of themselves and others
- Great intuition about events, circumstances, and people
- Competence under pressure
- An ability to utilize humor, even in difficult circumstances
- A habit of leaving most situations better than they found them
- A strong sense of ethics
- An optimistic outlook

You don’t have to wait for a crisis to cultivate some of these skills. You have an opportunity to practice them in your day-to-day life.

Slide 17: Self-Actualization

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs – often depicted in the form of a pyramid—describes five levels of personal needs starting with the most basic: physiological. This category includes food, water, and sleep to name a few. The next highest is safety. Within this category you will find things like employment, resources, health, and security of property. Above safety is belonging. Friends, family and intimate relationships fit here. Then comes esteem. This encompasses confidence, respect, achievement and self-esteem. Lastly, at the top of the pyramid, is self-actualization. This represents all a person can aspire to be and is another distress-resistant behavior pattern (Maslow, 1949).
Self-actualization is the instinctual need of humans to make the most of their unique abilities and to strive to be the best they can be. Maslow (1949) describes self-actualization as the growth of what the organism already is. The self-actualized person exhibits the best qualities of hardiness, type B behavior, and optimism. A person who is self-actualized operates at their highest possible state of functioning. This only occurs when all lower order needs in the physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem categories are being met.

Characteristics of self-actualized people include the following:
- They embrace the facts and realities of the world, including themselves, rather than denying or avoiding them.
- They are spontaneous in their ideas and actions.
- They are creative.
- They are interested in solving problems; this often includes the problems of others. Solving these problems is often a key focus in their lives.
- They feel a sense of closeness to other people, and generally appreciate life.
- They have a system of morality that is fully internalized and independent of external authority.
- They are objective, not judgmental.
- They cope with stress in a healthy and productive manner.

It may take many life experiences before reaching self-actualization. In fact, Maslow (1949) suggested that one couldn’t achieve self-actualization until the age of 60! However, he also believed that each and every one of us should begin cultivating the habits needed to meet our basic needs and cope with
life’s challenges successfully from an early age. He viewed life as a journey, and achievement of self-actualization as a life-long process with many benefits to be realized along the way.

**Slide 19: VIDEO: Advice For Stress**

What advice would you give to other college students about managing their stress?

I think the biggest secret to managing stress is to really, just like, prioritize your life.

It's good to have support systems in place and I have great coworkers and I have great friends and that has really helped me out.

You just have to make time for things you enjoy doing.

Yeah, and I workout and that's really a huge release and I think that's very important too.

Just have a little bit of balance on like, uh, academic life. Just having fun with friends and having a hobby.

It helps to talk to people. I mean, if you don’t have time to you can always just call up a friend and just talk to ‘em.

Just make sure you have a good support system around you and that, you know, you’re surrounding yourself with good energy and people that will support you.

**Slide 20: Summary**

In this lesson, we’ve discussed several behavior patterns that you can cultivate and develop to help you cope with stress and life’s challenges. If you reviewed the slides of this lesson, you’d probably be able to develop a list of qualities that seem to enable people to effectively manage their stress. Your list might include the following qualities:

- Self-esteem
- A sense of internal control
- Flexibility
- Tolerance
- Optimism
- Humor
- The ability to embrace change
- A sense of meaning and purpose in life
You are capable of developing each and every one of these qualities – believing in yourself and your capabilities is the first vital step in this cultivation!

References