

Stressing the positive by changing the way many view stress

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For more than three decades, UCI professor Salvatore R. Maddi has conducted pioneering research on stress. He's found it can be an agent of personal growth, if one develops the right coping skills. Photo: Daniel A. Anderson

(PhysOrg.com) -- Professor Salvatore R. Maddi has changed the way many view stress. Not only is it an unavoidable part of life, he argues, it can be good for us.

Psychologist Salvatore R. Maddi remembers when one of his graduate students at the University of Chicago showed him an article in *Family Circle* that warned, "[Stress](#) can kill you, so you need to stay away from it." That was a popular theory in the 1970s, but Maddi was skeptical. He'd already done studies indicating that stress could be a good thing: It fostered creativity in people who didn't shy away from change.

"It just didn't make sense," says Maddi, now a psychology & social

behavior professor at UC Irvine. "So I decided to study how people respond to stress."

His pioneering research over the past three decades has changed the perception of stress from an evil to be avoided to an intrinsic part of life that can be beneficial when treated as a challenge. Maddi has identified key traits of those who handle stress well, and he's developed training methods for students, firefighters, police officers, corporate executives and others who want to foster "hardiness attitudes and skills."

Current unemployment figures and economic uncertainty cause stress for everyone from college students to retirees.

"In an era in which a Jet Blue employee captured widespread media attention by getting angry with a passenger, grabbing some beer, popping an evacuation slide and walking away from his job, we are reminded of the importance of understanding the complex relationship between personality and stress management," says Valerie Jenness, social ecology dean.

"For years, Professor Maddi has been at the forefront of empirically investigating this relationship and providing important lessons for all of us as we try to manage stress in positive, rather than negative, ways. His well-known work is commendable as social science and valuable in real-world terms."

Maddi bases his research on existential psychology — and the idea that stress is unavoidable. "From the time you're pushed out of your mother's womb, you're dealing with change, and that's the definition of stress," he says.

"College students experience a lot of change — they're away from home for the first time and facing all these new social and academic pressures.

You need to accept that life is stressful and do the hard work to turn stress into an advantage, rather than bemoan the absence of easy comfort and security."

From 1975 to 1987, Maddi conducted a landmark study on stress in which he followed midlevel executives at Illinois Bell Telephone who — halfway through — faced losing their jobs in the wake of the federal government's breakup of AT&T in 1981.

"Two-thirds of the managers fell apart from the stress of the company's downsizing. They divorced, had heart attacks and strokes, and suffered depression and anxiety," Maddi says. "But the other third didn't just survive — they thrived. They rose to the top of the heap, either at their company or a competitor's.

"From then on, I wanted to continue exploring why some people are undermined by stress and some are resilient."

Utilizing data from the Illinois Bell study, he found that those who cope effectively under pressure share three attitudes of hardiness: commitment, control and challenge.

"No matter how bad things get, if you're committed, you stay involved and give your best effort rather than pull back," he says. "If you exert control and tend to perceive yourself as in charge, you try to influence the outcome of events rather than lapse into passivity. And if you believe change is normal, you're more able to treat it as simply a challenge. Together, these three attitudes provide the courage and motivation to turn stress from a disaster into a growth opportunity."

Maddi has developed a [HardiTraining program](#) for those who want to master stress, as well as training classes at UCI that teach students hardiness skills such as problem-solving, building a strong support

network of friends and family members, and caring for themselves through healthy eating, exercise and meditation.

In addition, he founded The Hardiness Institute, which holds workshops and seminars on coping habits for frazzled executives and others, and in 2005 published a book with Deborah Khoshaba called *Resilience at Work: How to Succeed No Matter What Life Throws at You*.

"You learn to reconstruct the stressful situation and consider how you can make it better," he says. "Then you construct an action plan and carry it out."

At UCI's Hardiness Research Lab, Maddi studies how academic and recreational resources such as counseling and career centers help students manage college life. In 2002, he conducted a study of 1,200 UCI undergraduates that showed improved grades among those who had undergone hardiness training.

In 2009, he published a [study](#) in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* of 1,200 UCI undergraduates in which he found that hardiness trainees subsequently improved their grades compared with a control group.

His recent analysis of 1,250 West Point cadets found hardiness to be the second-best indicator (after high school performance) of who would survive and thrive, rather than drop out. Two other factors — grit and emotional intelligence — had no bearing.

"Professor Maddi is renowned as the creator of and leading authority on psychological hardiness as a predictor of effective coping and emotional well-being," says Daniel Stokols, Chancellor's Professor of psychology & social behavior and planning, policy & design. "He has produced important and sustained scholarly contributions to this area of research, bridging the fields of personality, health, existential and positive

[psychology](#)."

The son of illiterate parents who immigrated to New York City from Sicily before World War I, Maddi is himself a prime example of someone able to channel stress into the motivation to improve one's life. While coping with poverty and gangs as a youth, he focused on his schoolwork, eventually earning a doctorate at Harvard University. He joined UCI in 1986.

"What I learned is that life is stressful, but you have to do the best you can — and if you do, it'll work," Maddi says. "You may see yourself doing things you never thought you could do."

Provided by UC Irvine

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