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The mindset that makes or breaks you

Resilience is an outcome—it doesn't tell us how to get there. Hardiness does.

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Let's get something straight from the start: life can be amazing, but it isn't meant to be easy. Yet we've done a remarkable job of convincing ourselves that it should be. Our modern culture has become obsessed with comfort, convenience and quick fixes. If even a hint of challenge emerges—mentally, physically, emotionally—we often rush to eliminate it.

But here's the uncomfortable truth: comfort doesn't prepare you for the inevitable challenges of life. Hardiness does.

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Understanding the importance of hardiness

Hardiness is more than just being tough or resilient. It's a specific psychological construct representing a pattern of attitudes and skills that provides the courage and strategies to turn unexpected change and stressful circumstances from potential disasters into growth opportunities. First identified by researchers Salvatore Maddi and Suzanne Kobasa through a groundbreaking 12-year study at Illinois Bell Telephone during massive industry disruption (and outlined in their 1984 book *The Hardy Executive: Health Under Stress*), hardiness has emerged as the key factor that distinguishes those who thrive under extreme stress from those who succumb to it.

While two-thirds of employees in Maddi and Kobasa's study experienced significant health and performance deterioration during their workplace disruption, one-third not only maintained their health and performance but also flourished. What made the difference? These resilient individuals demonstrated three interrelated attitudes that together constitute hardiness:

- *Challenge:* The view that change is normal and a challenge that presents opportunities for growth and learning, and the willingness to lean into challenges rather than shy away from them.
- *Control:* The belief that you can influence outcomes and your overall destiny through your efforts, rather than feeling powerless in the face of external forces.
- *Commitment:* A tendency to involve yourself deeply in whatever you're doing with a genuine sense of purpose, rather than feeling detached or alienated from your life and work.

In this chapter, I outline how the 3Cs of hardiness work together as a buffer against stress, helping you transform potential crises into opportunities for personal growth, improved performance and better health. You'll discover how, in the decades since the initial hardiness study, hundreds of studies have confirmed that hardiness is a powerful predictor of both physical and mental health. You'll learn how it also influences performance under pressure, and overall life satisfaction across diverse populations.

I also explain why I have decided to add a fourth 'C', connection, into the mix due to the sheer amount of compelling research behind its benefits —but more on that later.

The Stoics: Hardiness pioneers

Long before clinical psychology gave us terms such as 'resilience' and 'hardiness', the Stoics were living and breathing these principles. They didn't just write about adversity—they ran headfirst into it, wrestled it to the ground and asked for another round.

If a Hall of Fame existed for the 3 Cs—challenge, control and commitment—the Stoics would be on the podium with laurel wreaths and dusty sandals.

Challenge orientation: Seeing adversity as opportunity

The Stoics believed that adversity wasn't something to be avoided; instead, it was the forge where character was made. They didn't just expect challenges; they welcomed them.

Take the great Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Born into slavery, crippled early in life and later exiled from Rome, he didn't complain

about his misfortune. Instead, he taught his students that difficulties are things that show a person who they are.

Or consider Cato the Younger. Famous for his moral integrity (and his stubbornness), Cato deliberately wore simple clothing, walked barefoot in Rome's chaotic streets and even subjected himself to public mockery—all as training to endure hardship without losing his dignity.

The Stoics understood that challenge wasn't punishment. It was an opportunity. For them, a good life wasn't about avoiding hardship, but about leaning into it with Aretê (virtue and character) and growing stronger through it.

Control orientation: Mastering what you can, letting go of what you can't

The Stoics gave us one of the most powerful psychological tools ever: the dichotomy of control. What is up to us? What is not? Knowing the difference is the first rule of sanity.

Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor and reluctant philosopher-warrior, put it simply: 'You have power over your mind, not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength.'

The Stoics understood what modern hardiness research confirms: focusing on what you can control while accepting what you cannot is the foundation of psychological resilience.

Commitment: Living according to core values, no matter what

Commitment is the glue that holds the Stoic philosophy together. It's the fierce loyalty to live according to one's highest values, even when life gets brutal—and even when nobody is watching.

Seneca, who navigated the treacherous court of the Roman Emperor Nero before ultimately being ordered by him to commit suicide, wrote: 'It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it.'

For the Stoics, commitment wasn't passive. It was fierce, deliberate and urgent. It was measured not in big promises but in small, consistent actions, especially when those actions were painful, tedious or invisible.

The Stockdale paradox: Hardiness tested in the crucible of war

No discussion of hardiness would be complete without examining the extraordinary case of Vice Admiral James Stockdale, whose experience as a prisoner of war in Vietnam represents perhaps the most profound real-world test of hardiness principles in modern times.

Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam on 9 September 1965. He spent the next seven and a half years in Hỏa Lò Prison (sardonically nicknamed the 'Hanoi Hilton' by American POWs), including a mind-boggling four years in solitary confinement and two years in leg irons. He was also tortured 15 times.

What makes Stockdale's story remarkable is not just that he survived, but also how he survived—by consciously applying the principles of Stoic philosophy he had studied before his capture. Stockdale had learned about the Stoics from a philosophy lecturer during his time at university, where the American Navy had sent him to study a master's degree in international relations to prepare him for senior roles. Stockdale was so impressed by the teachings of the Stoics

that he brought a copy of the book *The Enchiridion*, by Epictetus, to war with him.

'I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus', Stockdale whispered to himself as he parachuted into enemy territory after his aircraft had been shot down early in the war. This wasn't just a poetic thought; it was a profound psychological shift that would prove crucial to his survival.

In the prison, Stockdale put the principles of hardiness into action:

- *Challenge:* He viewed his imprisonment not just as suffering to endure, but also as a test of character with meaning and purpose. He saw himself as responsible for maintaining the honour of his fellow prisoners and upholding the military code of conduct.
- *Control:* He focused relentlessly on what he could control — his own responses, his leadership of other prisoners, his internal discipline — while accepting what he couldn't control, such as his captivity and the torture.
- *Commitment:* He remained deeply engaged with his role as the senior officer among the prisoners, establishing a chain of command, creating the mission 'To return with honour', and developing a code of conduct that helped many prisoners maintain their integrity under extreme duress.

Stockdale later articulated what became known as the 'Stockdale Paradox', which embodies the essence of hardiness:

> *You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.*

This cognitive balancing act of maintaining unwavering faith while facing hard truths is precisely what hardiness research reveals about resilient individuals: they simultaneously accept the reality of their situation while maintaining the belief that they can eventually overcome it.

Hardiness in military psychology

The torch of hardiness research within military contexts was carried forward significantly by Paul Bartone, a military psychologist and retired U.S. Army Colonel who has conducted dozens of studies on hardiness over the past three decades, and been a mentor for me in the area of hardiness.

Bartone's research has consistently found that psychological hardiness is a key predictor of success in military training and operations. In one notable study, he found that U.S. Army Special Forces candidates with higher hardiness scores were significantly more likely to successfully complete the rigorous selection process. Those who scored lower in hardiness at the start of the course were much more likely to fail. Similar findings have been reported in other military and law enforcement contexts. For example, a 2013 study of Norwegian Armed Forces candidates confirmed that hardiness was a strong predictor of success in a border patrol selection course, and particularly the commitment and challenge components. And in a 2019 study of a law enforcement special operations selection course, hardiness was shown to be a predictor of success.

Bartone's research also revealed that hardiness serves as a protective factor against post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In studies involving soldiers deployed to combat zones, those who scored high in hardiness were significantly less likely to develop

PTSD symptoms after combat exposure, even when facing life-threatening situations.

Perhaps most striking is Bartone's research from 2021 (co-authored with psychologist Stephen Bowles, also retired from the U.S. Army) focused on severely wounded American servicemen who had lost limbs in combat. They found that hardiness significantly predicted post-traumatic growth (PTG) and wellbeing among these individuals and their spouses. Despite facing arguably one of life's most devastating challenges, those high in hardiness were able to find meaning in their experiences and even identify positive changes in their lives, such as stronger family connections and new perspectives on what truly matters.

This is not an isolated finding unique to this group. A study by Salvatore Maddi and colleagues in 2023 found that individuals with high hardiness were more likely to develop PTG after experiencing stress or trauma, suggesting that the hardy personality not only consistently protects against stress and trauma, but also promotes growth and development in the aftermath.

Hardiness in business and organisational settings

Hardiness has also been extensively studied in relation to how it mitigates the effects of stress in business. Researchers Vickie and Clinton Lambert and Hiroaki Yamase explored the relationship between hardiness and workplace stress, finding that individuals high in hardiness were better equipped to handle stress, because they were less likely to suffer from burnout than those lower in hardiness. Importantly, they also demonstrated through their research that hardiness can be learned.

Hardiness has also been linked to leadership effectiveness and organisational resilience. Leaders who exhibit high levels of hardiness are better able to navigate challenges, inspire their teams and maintain composure under pressure. Research has emphasised that fostering hardiness in the workplace could lead to more resilient organisations, capable of thriving in the face of adversity.

As an example of this, a recent systematic review conducted by Dr Sherrica Senewiratne and colleagues in April 2025 looked at all of the workplace studies on hardiness conducted over the last few decades, and the results are conclusive. The team highlighted hardiness as a key determinant of individuals' capacity to cognitively appraise and adapt to stressors. Being high in hardiness fostered a range of both psychological and performance-related resilience outcomes across multiple workplace sectors, as shown in table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Effect of being high in hardiness across different workplace contexts

Workplace context	Area of improvement
Performance outcomes	• Enhanced leader performance • Improved perseverance during stressful activities • Greater work effort and service engagement • Decreased burnout and improved retention
Work behaviours	• Increased organisational citizenship behaviours • Better adaptation to new cultural environments • Greater moral courage and small-unit cohesion • Improved competence and coping self-efficacy • Enhanced leadership effectiveness and adaptability • Reduced workplace injury and turnover intention
Work attitudes	• Improved job satisfaction and embeddedness • Enhanced organisational commitment • Reduced employee cynicism and presenteeism • Greater dedication and vigour

(continued)

Table 1.1: Effect of being high in hardiness across different workplace contexts *(cont'd)*

Workplace context	Area of improvement
Health and wellbeing	• Reduced anxiety, depression and psychological distress • Decreased burnout and emotional exhaustion • Lower risk of eating disorders and alcohol abuse • Improved general and spiritual health • Enhanced basic need satisfaction and happiness • Better sleep quality and shift work tolerance

It's a bloody impressive list, right? And this is why I call hardiness 'resilience 2.0'—and why it's such an important factor in the workplace.

Hardiness in academic settings: From playground to classroom

While I've so far explored hardiness in military and organisational contexts, its benefits for children and young students in academic settings deserve special attention. After all, school can be its own special kind of battleground, complete with tests that feel like ambushes, playground politics that would make Machiavelli blush and the sheer terror of being called on when you weren't paying attention. (We've all been there, haven't we?)

Academic hardiness is essentially the same core construct—commitment, control and challenge—applied to educational settings. It represents a student's ability to persevere through academic pressures while maintaining enthusiasm for learning. And the research is compelling: students with higher levels of hardiness demonstrate significant advantages across several domains.

First and foremost, hardy students simply perform better academically. Research shows a positive correlation between hardiness and academic achievement in university students, with psychological hardiness directly predicting academic success and indirectly predicting it through academic engagement. Hardy students are more likely to persevere through difficult coursework, manage their time effectively and maintain a positive attitude toward their studies—all contributing to higher grades and overall performance.

But the benefits extend far beyond grades. Students with higher hardiness levels show increased academic engagement—that magical state of being enthusiastic, dedicated and absorbed in learning activities rather than staring blankly at the clock waiting for the bell to ring. In the 2024 article 'Sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy and hardiness: Their impacts on student engagement in distance learning courses', Suping Yi and colleagues outline their findings that academic hardiness positively and significantly impacts cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement, particularly in distance learning environments—something that became critically important during the pandemic when children suddenly found themselves trying to learn maths while the family dog barked at the postie in the background.

Perhaps most significantly for young learners, hardiness serves as a powerful buffer against academic burnout. We've all seen that glazed-over look when a child has simply had enough of times tables and spelling lists. Research has found that hardiness is negatively associated with academic burnout, with hardy students less likely to experience the burnout components of cynicism, emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. In other words, these students maintain their spark for learning even when facing challenges.

Hardiness also equips young students with effective coping mechanisms. Research reveals strong inverse correlations between hardiness and maladaptive schemes such as vulnerability and distrust. Hardy students are less likely to rely on avoidant strategies (like a tummy ache appearing out of the blue on exam days) and more likely to engage in problem-focused coping, such as seeking support or developing effective study habits.

The good news is that hardiness isn't simply an innate trait—it can be developed and enhanced by adults and kids alike with the strategies provided in subsequent chapters.

By fostering hardiness in children and young students, we're not just helping them achieve better grades—we're also equipping them with a psychological toolkit that will serve them throughout life's inevitable challenges. Because let's face it, if they can handle the pressure of a spelling bee or a trigonometry exam, they're building the capacity to handle whatever life throws at them later on.

The physical benefits of hardiness

The benefits of hardiness extend well beyond psychological resilience to also include significant physical health advantages. Further studies from Paul Bartone (from 2008 and 2016) demonstrate that hardiness predicts better cardiovascular health in individuals, as indicated by higher levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol and lower body mass index (BMI). These studies suggested that hardiness may influence cholesterol metabolism, thereby reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Further evidence comes from studies examining immune response. Research has found that individuals with high levels of hardiness had stronger immune responses, as measured by a range of biomarkers.

This suggests that hardiness may help mitigate the physiological impacts of stress and enhance immune function while reducing vulnerability to illness.

Additionally, research on physical fitness and hardiness in military personnel has shown that those with higher hardiness levels not only perform better in physical tasks but also recover more quickly from stress-related physical challenges. This relationship highlights the intertwined nature of psychological and physical resilience, where hardiness serves as a critical factor in maintaining both mental and physical health — and I explore this mind–body hardiness connection in more detail in part II of the book.

Clearly, psychological hardiness plays a crucial role in fostering resilience, enhancing performance and promoting health in various high-stress environments. Whether in the military, law enforcement, healthcare, business or educational settings, hardiness provides individuals with the tools to manage stress, overcome challenges and thrive under pressure. The extensive body of research on hardiness underscores the importance of understanding and cultivating hardiness if you want to deal with the inevitable shit-sandwiches from the universe!

A fourth dimension: Connection

While the original hardiness model focuses on the 3Cs (commitment, control and challenge), I've added a fourth crucial component based on overwhelming research: connection. This captures the quality of our relationships with others and our sense of belonging within a community.

This component recognises that human resilience is not solely an individual trait but is also deeply embedded in our social

connections. The research is clear: social support is one of the most potent buffers against trauma and stress. In fact, the Vietnam veteran studies showed that social support was a further variable that predicted resilience in the face of extreme stress.

These four components of hardiness interact with each other, and the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Whether you're facing everyday pressures or life-altering challenges, hardiness will help you emerge stronger, wiser and more fulfilled. This is not about avoiding discomfort—it's about embracing the right kinds of stress and learning how to transform pressure into progress.

Putting it all together: Bouncing forward with hardiness

The journey through hardiness research reveals a powerful truth: resilience isn't just about bouncing back—it's also about bouncing forward. From the ancient Stoics to modern military personnel, from corporate boardrooms to classroom settings, the evidence is overwhelming: hardiness represents one of the most significant predictors of success, health and wellbeing under pressure.

The four components of hardiness—challenge, control, commitment and connection—work synergistically to transform how we experience and respond to stress. Rather than seeing difficulties as threats to be avoided, hardy individuals view them as opportunities for growth. They focus their energy on what they can influence while accepting what lies beyond their control. They remain deeply engaged with their values and purpose, even when the path gets rocky. And they cultivate meaningful relationships that provide both support and accountability.

What makes hardiness particularly compelling is its breadth of application. Whether you're a student facing academic pressures, a leader navigating organisational change, a parent juggling multiple responsibilities or simply someone wanting to live more fully, hardiness provides a robust framework for thriving rather than merely surviving.

Perhaps most encouraging is that hardiness isn't a fixed trait you either have or don't have. It's a set of learnable skills and attitudes that can be developed and strengthened over time. The Stoics understood this centuries ago, and modern research has validated their insights with rigorous scientific evidence. In the chapters that follow, we'll dive deep into each component of hardiness, exploring practical strategies for developing these crucial capabilities.