

Lesson From Stress Thrivers

- **Factors That Determined Health**
- **During Extreme Change**

In the early 1980's there was a combination of economic and political events that drove extreme change into and through several industries. The banking industry went through deregulation and the huge monopoly AT&T went through divestiture, allowing the growth of numerous competing phone systems.

Top level executives at the Bank of America and at AT&T were studied to learn the effects of such a high degree of stress as they experienced during these unprecedented changes. Many of the employees (approximately 20% became ill during this stressful time. 5% of that group of 20% died. A study team from the Univ. of California at San Francisco, headed by Dr. Kenneth Pelletier discovered that those who made it through this experience in good health, and in fact "thrived", all shared several attitudinal and lifestyle factors.

As valid today as they were at the time of this study, fourteen factors emerged as being the common ground upon which the "thrivers" stood. Look for ways to benefit from what was learned, and how to apply it to your life, your stress, and your changes.

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FOURTEEN FACTORS FOR STRESS THRIVING

(Throughout the text below, those who were identified in the study as doing well will be referred to as "thrivers", and those who became ill as the "ill's")

ATTITUDE – Belief Systems were fundamentally different for thrivers.

The Three "C" 's CHALLENGE - COMMITMENT - CONTROL

1. Challenge – Thrivers saw life (and the stressful change) as a challenge to be met. Ill's saw the stressful change as a problem, a threat, a nightmare. Thrivers as it as an interesting opportunity to make some good changes, to benefit.
2. Commitment – Thrivers had a commitment to action: taking a risk, getting involved. Ill's operated out of denial and evasiveness. "It's not really going to happen, especially to me!" Ill's sometimes sought (unconsciously?) secondary gain through disease, passively removing themselves from dealing with the problem. Some Ill's turned mercenary and would lie, scapegoat... "Anything to keep my job!" Thrivers kept a high degree of internal commitment. Thrivers did not compromise their values. They might modify, but would not let go of commitments to family, regular exercise, etc.
3. Control – Control of their lives. Ill's felt helpless and hopeless (one definition of depression). "I don't LIKE the changes. I don't know where I'm going. I feel adrift, like giving up, overwhelmed." Thrivers felt more in control. Despite being in the midst of circumstances where they had no control, they felt like they still could control the direction of their own lives. They did not resort to manipulation. "I feel like I'm the director of a play, rather than an actor in it." Thrivers functioned from some higher vision.

One conclusion is that the level of control that you perceive affects the level of stress that you experience.

4. Social Support (SS)

The study found that the idea that having a supportive spouse is all that's needed is a myth. SS within the work environment was found to be more important than at home (though both are of help).

Those with the highest SS at home combined with the lowest ratings of SS at work had the worst health rates. This was known as the "Poor Dear" syndrome. "You're right dear, they're all wrong at work."

Those with the highest SS at both home and work had the best health.

Isolated individual were most at risk. (Pelletier quotes a separate study that shows that isolated working women have breast cancer rates twice normal.)

5. Stress Management – The major precondition for illness or health

Thrivers recognized the imperative value of doing some kind of practice on a regular basis to relax. They more consciously created opportunities to balance themselves out.

6. Exercise

Thrivers almost all had some sort of regular exercise practice. They tended to be life-long exercisers and their commitment to their involvement in exercise did not diminish during high stress times. Ill's tended to let what exercise routines they had go by the wayside during stressful periods.

7. Breakfast

Thrivers tended to eat breakfast regularly. Ill's did not.
Ill's had higher levels of caffeine intake and this increased under stress.

8. Fiber

Thrivers had markedly higher fiber intake. They were more conscious of what they were choosing to eat.
Ill's had a higher incidence of gastrointestinal problems and concerns. Their fiber intake was very low.

9. Meals At Regular Intervals

Ill's under more stress began skipping meals. Their patterns of consumption changed a lot. Thrivers kept on their own regular patterns even during increasing stress.

10. Vitamin & Minearal Supplements

Thrivers used them regularly. Ill's did not.

11. Limits On Alcohol

Thrivers were not necessarily teetotalers but did regulate their alcohol use and did not increase it under more stress.

12. Smoking

A disproportionate number of thrivers never smoked or virtually all had quit. More Ill's were smokers and their smoking increased under more stress.

13. Regular Sleep Pattern

Most Americans are chronically sleep-deprived. Thrivers maintained their regular pattern though the number of hours between individuals varied.

14. Sense Of Humor

Thrivers were known for their sense of humor. They often used modest, slightly self-deprecating humor. They did not put others down. Thrivers loved telling stories. Ill's were too serious, dour, never used humor towards themselves.

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The factors discovered in this study correlate nicely with the factors found in other health risk reduction studies and studies that Kenneth Pelletier has been involved in regarding longevity. In fact, Pelletier states that the same factors that determine quality of life also determine quantity of life.

This information is from *Healthy people in unhealthy places : stress and fitness at work* / Kenneth R. Pelletier. New York, N.Y. : Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, c1984.

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