



## EXECUTIVE VITALITY™: PERSONAL EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Can you think about a time when you were in a situation where life dealt you some difficult blows? In our own personal lives as coaches, we have experienced stressors such as illness of a loved one, loss of a friend, witnessing a fatal accident, and nearly becoming a casualty of that same accident.

What do great leaders do in the workplace when a crisis or traumatic event occurs in their personal lives? Pretend you are fine? Drink, eat, or sleep too much? Withdraw? Our point of view is that healthy leaders take a different road.

We have encountered many executives whose organizations have advised them to get counseling after a traumatic event. We support that route. Frequently, they choose “soldier on” instead. And, often, neither their health nor their careers survive that choice.

Hans Selye, MD (1907 to 1982) studied the many physiological changes that result from positive or negative life event stressors. He also came to understand that we do not have an unlimited supply of reserves to deal with stress.

Holmes and Rahe in 1967 defined these life event stressors in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (aka the [Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale](#)). The scale lists 43 life changes that could result in illness if several occur in a short period of time. The items are given relative values denoting the strength of their contribution to illness. The top items, in order of decreasing potency, are: death of a spouse (value = 100), divorce (73), marital separation (65), jail term (63), death of a close family member (63), personal injury or illness (53), marriage (50), getting fired (47), marital reconciliation (45), and retirement (45). Further down on the list are Christmas (12), vacation (13), change in residence (20), and outstanding personal achievement (28). Many of the items begin with “change in,” e.g., change in financial situation (38)...none of these say whether the change is positive or negative—just *change* is sufficient to produce the stress. If you were to calculate your own score today, what would it be?

What happens if you ignore stress? NIH notes that when stress is not relieved, the triggered nerve chemicals that are life-saving initially (e.g., for flight or fight) can suppress functions that are not needed for immediate survival. Immunity is lowered. Digestive, excretory, and reproductive systems stop working normally.

If you had pneumonia, you would go to a doctor. Why not take equally good care of yourself if your well-being is affected by a psychological event?

It does not take an MD or PhD in physiology to know that the work outcomes of excessive, unalleviated stress will likely be distorted judgment, diminished composure, drained vitality, and reduced effectiveness as a leader.

Great leaders in great companies demonstrate compassion and empathy to deal with these stressors—compassion for themselves as well as for others. Smart leaders make good choices when stress happens personally and also grant those around them the opportunity to take care of themselves when crisis hits.

Not only is it the right thing to do, it is also the only way to ensure that employees, customers, and the organization you lead are not negatively impacted.

What kind of “emergency-preparedness kit” do you need to have? Make a list. Assemble the resources. Some things to consider when crises hit you personally:

- Take time off.
- Confide in work associates and other people.
- Intensify your self-care: exercise, sleep, healthy eating, recreation, and spirituality.
- Know what recharges your batteries and do it.
- Journal your feelings and ideas to move forward.
- Get help from professionals or other support groups/systems if you need it.

In research with executives aged 40 to 49, those executives who became ill when faced with stressful life events were compared with those who had similar stress but remained healthy. Those who remained healthy were characterized by a stronger commitment to self, a sense of meaningfulness, and a belief that they control events that happen to them.<sup>1</sup>

*What is in your emergency preparedness kit for when crisis hits? Do you have a strong commitment to yourself? If you cannot control the actual events that happen to you, what can you control about what happens to you afterward?*

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<sup>1</sup> Kobasa, Suzanne, “Stressful life events, personality and health: An inquiry into hardiness,” *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 137 (1), Jan., 1979.