




## Coping with recruiter stress: Hardiness, performance and well-being in US Army recruiters

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### ABSTRACT

Recruiting for military service can be a highly stressful job, but it is one that is essential for success in the all-volunteer force. Military recruiters face a number of job stressors, including pressure to meet monthly production quotas, long work hours and time away from family. They also work in relative isolation, with limited work social support networks. These factors make recruiters vulnerable to burnout and early attrition. The present study examines psychological hardiness and active, problem focused coping as potential stress resilience resources in US Army recruiters. In a stratified random sample of  $N = 817$  recruiters, hardiness was found to predict supervisor-rated performance and psychological well-being. Hardiness also interacted with problem focused coping to predict psychological well-being, suggesting a mediating role for coping. These results can be applied to help improve policy for selecting and training military recruiters.

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### What is the public significance of this article?—

Recruiting for the military is a highly stressful job, and one that leads many recruiters to burn out and quit the job early. The present research shows that psychological hardiness is a protective factor for recruiters, helping them to maintain well-being and performance despite the job stressors. Selecting and training recruiters for hardiness will help to provide a recruiter force that is more resilient and resistant to the ill-effects of job stress.

The United States and most European countries rely on volunteers rather than conscripts to staff their military forces. Military personnel who are assigned as recruiters play a critical role in these all-volunteer forces, as it is their job to attract young people to sign-up for military service. Recruiters experience many job stressors, including having to meet monthly production quotas, dealing with time pressures, long work hours, extended periods away from family, isolation, and negative reactions from some citizens who do not support military service. For example, a report in the respected American Journal of Public Health describes several efforts to limit recruiters' access to schools, and advocates that more communities should limit or ban military recruiters altogether (Hagopian & Barker, 2011).

These extreme job demands have made it difficult for the military to attract and retain qualified recruiters (Myers, 2019). For example, in 2018 the US Army had a shortage of 400 recruiters, despite offering increased

bonuses and other incentives. Recruiters can experience burnout and diminished well-being, job satisfaction and performance. Job pressures have even led to suicide in military recruiters (Thompson, 2009). The Army currently employs about 8,000 recruiters, and in recent years it has had difficulty maintaining this number (Myers, 2019).

The US Army has one of the world's largest recruiting requirements. In 2018 for example, 81,299 new soldiers were brought on board, including active and reserve forces (US Army Recruiting Command, 2019). However, this number fell short of the goal of 92,100 by over 10,000 soldiers, or 12% (Philipps, 2018). Adding to the challenge for recruiters, 71% of American youth don't qualify for military service due to weight, drugs, or health problems, or low mental aptitude (US Army Recruiting Command, 2019). Each year, recruits must be found within this narrowing pool of eligible young men and women. Given the stressors inherent in the job, it is important to select and develop recruiters who are resilient in dealing with job stress.

Previous work aimed at predicting successful recruiter performance has given some attention to personality factors that might make a difference. For example, Mullins and Fatkin (2001) examined a variety of personality traits as potential predictors of recruiter success in a sample of 55 Army recruiters. None of the personality measures they examined predicted performance, although neuroticism was related to perceived stress.

A review of US Army recruiter research indicated that the personality tendencies of dominance, achievement, warm and outgoing, and confident all showed some association with positive performance (Borman, Horgen, & Penney, 2000). A later study by Horgen et al. (2006) attempted to predict recruiter performance with the Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Skills Inventory (NLSI), which included several personality measures such as conscientiousness, dominance, dependability, agreeableness, and tolerance for ambiguity along with a variety of other indicators. The composite NLSI showed some modest ability to predict recruiter productivity, but not performance ratings (Horgen et al., 2006, p. 26). In searching for relevant personality variables, all of these studies focused on the primary job requirements of recruiting, such as communications and salesmanship skills. Coping with job stress was not a central concern.

The present study examines hardiness as a stress resistance factor that may impact on performance in the highly stressful job of military recruiters. Psychological hardiness emerged in the social psychology literature in the late 1970s, as a constellation of attributes that distinguishes healthy from non-healthy stress people under stressful conditions. (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). People high in hardiness have a strong sense of *commitment*, believing the world is interesting and meaningful; a belief they can *control* or influence outcomes; and a sense of *challenge*, an adventurous, exploring approach to living. Hardiness is usually thought of as a trait, in that it is reasonably stable in individuals over time and across situations (Hystad, Olsen, Espevik, & Säfvenbom, 2015). However, these qualities are also somewhat state-like, influenced by environmental factors and amenable to change over time. Like most psychological constructs, hardiness is not fully a trait or a state, but exists on a continuum between the two (Donnellan, Kenny, Trzesniewski, Lucas, & Conger, 2012; Hertzog & Nesselroade, 1987). So while hardiness is trait-like in that it is a relatively stable characteristic of individuals, it also shows state-like qualities, and can increase or decrease depending upon social-environmental conditions and training (Bartone & Hystad, 2010). Studies have shown that hardiness is only modestly related to the Big Five dimensions of extraversion, conscientiousness and neuroticism, and that it predicts unique variance beyond the Big Five in relevant outcome variables including performance (Bartone, Eid, Johnsen, Laberg, & Snook, 2009; Eschleman, Bowling, & Alarcon, 2010).

Research studies with multiple occupational groups have found that hardiness is a significant moderator in the stress-illness relation (Bartone, 1989; Kobasa et al.,

1982). For example, hardiness moderates combat exposure stress in US Gulf War soldiers, with high hardy individuals showing better health (Bartone, 2000) and fewer PTSD symptoms (Bartone, 1999). Hardiness was found to be a moderator of stress in other military groups as well, to include Israeli soldiers in combat training (Florian, Mikulincer, & Taubman, 1995), US Army casualty assistance workers (Bartone, Ursano, Wright, & Ingraham, 1989), and peacekeeping soldiers (Bartone, 1996). These studies indicate not that stress is eliminated for persons high in hardiness, but rather that they are processing stress in more positive and constructive ways.

The stress-buffering effects of hardiness appear to be due at least in part to the different kinds of coping strategies used by high versus low hardy persons. When exposed to stress, people who are high in hardiness tend to rely on problem-focused, active coping approaches. When faced with a problem, they look for ways to solve it. This has been described as transformational coping, because it entails transforming the situation from something that is stressful and potentially damaging, into something that is manageable through action (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983). In contrast, people low in hardiness tend to use avoidance coping strategies, postponing or denying that problems exist. This could include alcohol or drug abuse, as some recent studies have indicated (Bartone et al., 2015; Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Hystad, & Laberg, 2017). Another recent study found that hardiness was linked to fewer PTSD symptoms in deployed Norwegian soldiers, but that this effect was mediated by avoidance coping approaches (Thomassen, Hystad, Johnsen, Johnsen, & Bartone, 2018).

Hardiness has also been found to predict improved performance in a number of stressful contexts, including military special forces candidates (Bartone, Roland, Picano, & Williams, 2008), students experiencing academic stress (Hystad, Eid, Laberg, Johnsen, & Bartone, 2009), and athletes in competitive sports (Hanton, Neil, & Evans, 2013). Hanton et al. (2013) also found that college athletes high in hardiness made greater use of active coping strategies, helping them to manage anxiety and perform effectively. And a meta-analytic review of hardiness studies found that hardiness was positively related to performance improvements and active coping strategies, and negatively related to avoidance or regressive coping approaches (Eschleman et al., 2010). Previous work has indicated that hardiness and coping are both related to performance in military recruiters (Bowles & Bartone, 2017).

Subjective well-being has been frequently investigated as an important outcome variable in many occupations, related to job satisfaction and performance (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). While there are many definitions and approaches to measuring well-

being, it is most commonly seen as an aggregation of satisfaction levels across multiple life domains, including work, family, community, health and finances (Rath & Harter, 2010). A definition of subjective well-being for the individual “is a broad category of phenomena that includes people’s emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfactions” (Diener et al., 1999, p. 277). Past work has indicated that well-being is associated with certain performance indicators in recruiters (Bowles, Bartone, Cooke, & Swisher, 2018). Earlier research also indicates that hardiness is a predictor of well-being in various groups, including university administrators and managers (Nayeri & Aubi, 2011), Australian army reservists (Orme & Kehoe, 2014), Canadian Forces officer candidates (Skomorovsky & Sodom, 2011), and military survivor assistance officers (Bartone et al., 1989).

The present study examines psychological hardiness as a potential resilience factor for military recruiters that can influence both performance and well-being. We also explore the potential interaction effect of hardiness and problem focused coping on both performance and well-being of recruiters. We focus on problem focused coping as most theoretically relevant to the hardiness construct. Following from the literature cited above, we posit the following hypotheses:

H1: Hardiness is positively related to performance in military recruiters.

H2: Hardiness and problem focused coping interact to influence performance.

H3: Hardiness is positively related to well-being in military recruiters.

H4: Hardiness and problem focused coping interact to influence well-being.

## Methods

A stratified random sample of  $N = 817$  recruiters was drawn from US Army recruiting stations across the United States. Respondents completed an anonymous questionnaire which included measures of cognitive hardiness and problem-focused coping drawn from the Stress Profile (Nowack, 1990, 1999), and also a measure of well-being as described by Bowles (2014). These are further detailed below.

The *Cognitive hardiness scale* consists of 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), with a Cronbach’s alpha reliability of .82

(Nowack, 1990). The scale includes both positive and negative items to assess the hardiness facets of commitment, control and challenge. A sample item is: “Becoming a success is mostly a matter of working hard.”

The *Problem focused coping scale* consists of 4 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with Cronbach’s alpha reliability of .69 (Nowack, 1990). Respondents are asked to indicate how often they use a specific approach to cope with daily work and life stress. A sample item is: “Develop an action plan and implement it to cope more effectively with the situation in the future.”

*Well-being* was measured using the Emotional well-being scale from the Work Life Well Being measure of Bowles (2014). This scale consists of 5 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree; Cronbach’s alpha reliability is .72. A sample item is: “I feel very happy with my life.”

*Performance* was measured using supervisor ratings. Supervisors rated recruiters on their overall effectiveness, which encompasses the following eight dimensions: (1) Locating and contacting qualified prospects; (2) Gaining and maintaining rapport; (3) Obtaining information from prospects and making good person-Army fits; (4) Salesmanship skills; (5) Delayed Entry Program (DEP)/Delayed Training Program (DTP) maintenance; (6) Establishing and maintaining good relationships in the community; (7) Organizing skills/time management; and (8) Supporting other recruiters and USAREC (Horgen et al., 2006).

Analyses first examined Pearson correlations among the study variables. Next, standard, direct entry multiple regression analyses were performed in order to test for effects of hardiness and problem focused coping on both performance and well-being. Since marital status has a known association with well-being, it was included as a control variable. In addition, each regression included an interaction term of hardiness X coping to test for possible coping mediation effects.

## Results

The sample was dominantly male (93%), reflecting the overall population of US Army recruiters. Most were married at 64%, with the remainder being single or unmarried. Also, the majority 61% of the sample reported being of a minority race, with 39% white. This likewise reflects the general population of recruiters.

Bivariate correlations (Table 1) showed that being married is associated with higher well-being ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both hardiness and problem focused coping correlate with supervisors’ ratings of overall performance, at  $r = .12$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $r = .11$ ,  $p < .01$  respectively. This provides some initial support for hypothesis 1, that

**Table 1.** Correlations and descriptive statistics for key study variables.

	Mean (N)	SD	Marital status	Hardiness	Problem focused coping	Recruiter performance	Well being
Marital Status	.639 (854)	.48	1	.06 <i>ns</i>	.06 <i>ns</i>	.06 <i>ns</i>	<b>.15</b> <i>&lt;.001</i>
Hardiness	103.11 (817)	12.55		1	<b>.42</b> <i>&lt;.001</i>	<b>.12</b> <i>.003</i>	<b>.50</b> <i>&lt;.001</i>
Problem focused coping	13.16 (817)	2.46			1	<b>.11</b> <i>.006</i>	<b>.26</b> <i>&lt;.001</i>
Recruiter performance	6.97 (618)	1.56				1	.07 <i>ns</i>
Well-Being	3.19 (854)	.67					1

Age range = 31 to 62; Marital status, 0 = Single, 1 = Married; N's are shown in parentheses; Significant correlations are in bold; probability levels are shown in italics; ns = not significant

hardiness is positively related to recruiter performance. The correlations of hardiness and coping with well-being were somewhat higher, at .50,  $p < .001$  and .26,  $p < .001$  respectively. This lends support to hypothesis 3, specifically that hardiness is positively related to well-being in recruiters. Not surprisingly, hardiness and problem focused coping were also positively correlated, at  $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ .

In the first regression analysis predicting recruiter performances, a significant model emerged with hardiness predicting performance, with overall model  $F(3, 588) = 4.728$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .024$ . This further supports hypothesis 1. Coping was not a significant predictor of performance, and the hardiness X coping interaction was likewise not significant (Table 2). Thus, hypothesis 2 regarding the interaction of hardiness and coping on performance is not supported.

In the regression model predicting well-being, hardiness was again a significant positive predictor of well-being, providing support for hypothesis 3. Also significant were coping and the hardiness X coping interaction term, with the overall model  $F(4, 499) = 86.603$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .41$ ). Hypothesis 4 is thus supported, namely that hardiness and problem-focused coping interact to predict well being in recruiters. These results are displayed in Table 3.

In order to visualize the interaction effect between hardiness and coping on well being, hardiness scores were plotted against well being for high and low problem focused coping groups (Figure 1). By displaying the

**Table 2.** Regression analysis for hardiness and problem focused coping predicting recruiter performance, as rated by supervisors (N = 591).

	Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Model 1	Hardiness	.051	.027	.406*
	Problem focused coping	.352	.204	.559
	Hardiness X Coping interaction	-.003	.002	-.673
	$R^2$			.024
	F for change in $R^2$			4.728**

Final Model  $F(3, 588) = 4.728$ ,  $p = .003$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 3.** Regression analysis for hardiness and problem focused coping predicting well-being (N = 503).

	Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Model 1	Marital Status	.267	.249	.048
Model 2	Marital Status	-.042	.193	-.007
	Hardiness	.197	.035	1.029***
	Problem focused coping	.593	.265	.588*
	Hardiness X Coping interaction	-.006	.003	-.843*
	$R^2$			.41
	F for change in $R^2$			114.825***

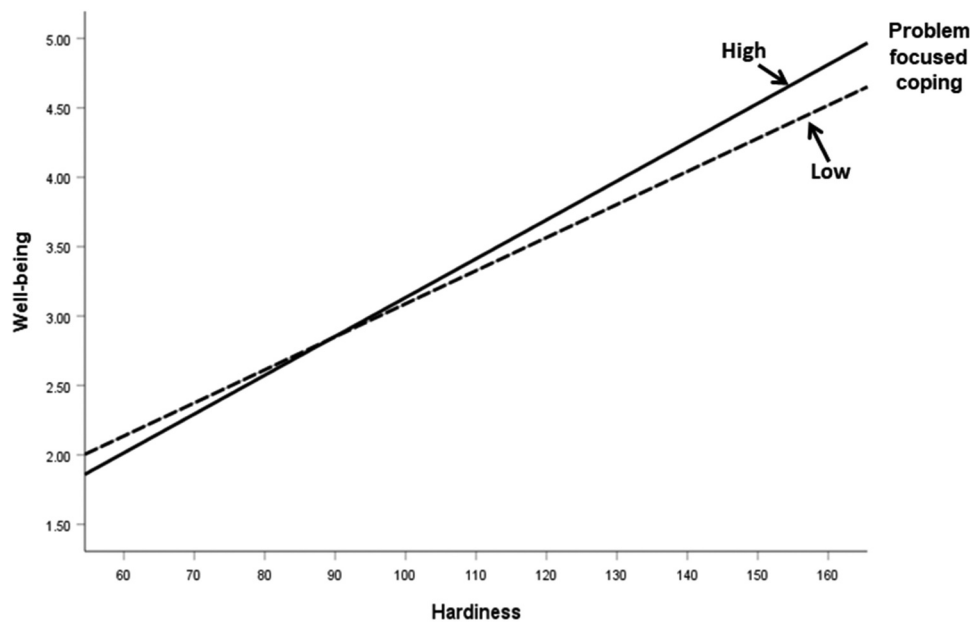
Final Model  $F(4, 499) = 86.603$ ,  $p < .001$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

interaction term in this way, it becomes clear in which direction the effects are going. As can be seen in the figure, as hardiness scores increase, well-being also goes up, and this effect is greatest for those who are high in problem focused coping. Thus, recruiters with the highest levels of well being are also high in both hardiness and problem focused coping.

## Discussion

In all-volunteer military forces, the job of recruiting is one that can be highly stressful, with long hours and time pressures to meet performance goals. These pressures often lead to burnout and early attrition. Results of the present study confirm that hardiness is positively related to recruiter performance (hypothesis 1). And while problem-focused coping showed a significant (though small) correlation with performance, it did not interact with hardiness in the regression predicting performance. Thus, hypothesis 2 was not supported. At the same time, the simple correlation results indicate that recruiters high in hardiness also tended to rely more on active problem focused coping strategies. In the case of recruiters then, it appears that hardiness effects on supervisor rated performance follow a fairly direct pathway. Considering that past research has often shown an interaction between low hardiness and avoidance coping strategies (Bartone et al., 2017) it may be that it is with avoidance coping that



**Figure 1.** Plot showing interaction between hardiness and problem focused coping on well being of US Army recruiters (N = 503).

hardiness and mainly interacts to influence performance outcomes. Future research on recruiter performance should thus examine negative coping strategies, such as avoidance, as potential mediators of the hardiness effect.

The present findings with respect to well being show that, as predicted, hardiness was positively related to well being. Thus, recruiters who are high in hardiness would seem to be better equipped to cope with the stressful aspects of the job, and able to maintain their sense of psychological well being. Our results also indicate that as a group, married recruiters report somewhat higher levels of well being. The positive effect of marriage on well being is well known, and is thought to be mainly attributable to higher levels of social support typically experienced by married people (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015).

Hardiness and active, problem focused coping were found to interact in predicting well-being (hypothesis 4). This indicates that the influence of hardiness on well being is to some degree mediated by coping approaches in dealing with stress. As Figure 1 makes clear, the highest levels of well being are seen in recruiters who are high in both hardiness and problem focused coping. This interaction effect is in accord with previous research showing that hardiness effects are often mediated by coping style (Bartone et al., 2017; Thomassen et al., 2018). Recruiters who are high in hardiness are thus more likely to take action to address work challenges and solve problems than those who are low in hardiness.

It is noteworthy that the predictive model for recruiter well being ( $R^2 = .41$ ) was quite a bit stronger than the one for performance ( $R^2 = .024$ ). This is to be expected, since conceptually hardiness is closer to well being than

performance. Also, well being is a more proximate indicator of how well recruiters are coping with the stress of their jobs. Furthermore, a multitude of factors can influence military job performance (Rumsey, 2012), many of which may have little or nothing to do with job stress.

Another important consideration is that in the present study, well being is based on the recruiters' own direct self-reports. Job performance on the other hand is a more distal measure, and is based on supervisor ratings covering a range of qualities. While poor coping with job stress can degrade performance in multiple areas, this may take some time to become apparent to supervisors. Further, stress-related performance decrements may be more visible in some rated areas than in others. For example, recruiters suffering from stress could experience a decrease in the number and quality of contacts with prospects, and yet their salesmanship and organizing skills may appear relatively stable and unaffected. Over time, diminished well being could be expected to have a negative impact on job performance. In support of this notion, well being and performance are positively correlated in the present sample, although the correlation doesn't reach significance ( $p = .08$ ).

Some limitations of the present study should be noted. We have examined only US Army recruiters, so it is not clear to what extent these findings might apply to other military branches or nations who also recruit young people for military service. Also, the data are cross-sectional, providing only a snapshot in time. As discussed above, it may take a longer period of time for the effects of job stress, and positive or negative coping, to be expressed in terms of job performance. Thus, longitudinal studies in

this area would be useful. Future studies might also consider the possible impact of hardiness on other indicators of success for recruiters, such as the quality and number of prospects recruited, awards received, and as a negative indicator, early attrition from the recruiter job. Another potential limitation concerns the relative brevity of two of the predictor scales used in this study. Problem focused coping was measured with a 4-item scale, and well being with a 5-item scale. While this is perhaps not ideal, both scales show adequate reliability (.69 and .72 respectively), and have been used effectively in numerous other studies (Bowles et al., 2017; Nowack, 1999).

Finally, it should be noted that while most recruiters are assigned to the duty without any choice, some individuals volunteer for recruiter duty. It is possible that those who volunteer may differ in how well they manage job stress as compared to the non-volunteers. It would be thus important for future studies in this area to distinguish these groups and examine them separately.

Despite these limitations, the present study demonstrates that in a nationwide sample of Army recruiters, psychological hardiness is linked to increased well being and job performance, and that high hardy recruiters make greater use of problem focused coping in dealing with job stress. This has obvious implications for selection of recruiters, but may also provide an avenue for better preparing recruiters to cope with the stress of their jobs.

There is evidence that the mental attitudes and coping skills characteristic of hardiness can be increased through training, as well as through leader actions and policies (Bartone & Hystad, 2010; Stein & Bartone, 2020). Furthermore, substantial progress has been made in the development of improved instruments for measuring hardiness (Bartone et al., 2019). Programs for training hardiness have reported success with business executives and managers (Maddi, Kahn, & Maddi, 1998), college students (Maddi, Harvey, Khoshaba, Fazel, & Resurreccion, 2009), nurses and nurse managers (Judkins, Reid, & Furlow, 2006). These training programs rely primarily on cognitive behavioral techniques that, with the help of a supportive coach or therapist, encourage participants to re-frame life stressors as challenges and problems they have the power to solve, and to see themselves as effective and engaged actors in the world. Also common to hardiness training programs is an emphasis on teaching active, problem focused coping skills for addressing stressful situations (Bartone, Eid & Hystad, 2016).

It is interesting to observe that some stressful training programs appear to increase hardiness in trainees, even when that is not an explicit goal of the program. For example, a study by Zach, Raviv, and Inbar (2007) tracked candidates in a rigorous Israeli security police selection

program over the 9-week course. In this program, tasks and challenges were presented to students in a sequence of graduated difficulty, an approach likely to reinforce the sense of hardiness-control. Likewise whenever students failed at a task, instructors discussed it with them in positive terms as a learning experience, and encouraged them to see it as a challenge and try again. This approach led to a significant increase in hardiness scores for candidates who succeeded in the course.

A similar study assessed hardiness levels in military medical students before and after an intensive battlefield medicine course known as the “Intensive Surgical Skills Course,” also known as “cut-week” (Szybist et al., 2019). In this course, students were exposed to a variety of increasingly extreme trauma cases, and performed triage and treatment on live human beings wearing special suits that allow for highly realistic simulated surgeries. To measure hardiness, the authors used the 28-item Hardiness Resilience Gauge (Bartone et al., 2019; MHS Assessments, 2018). Similar to the Israeli police selection course, students were presented with gradually more challenging (and stressful) situations to deal with, allowing them to experience success while building confidence. Results showed that after the course, students had increased significantly in total hardiness and the three hardiness facets of commitment, control and challenge.

Thus, it seems that hardiness can be increased through training programs that are not specifically aimed at building hardiness. The common threads in such programs appear to be a series of stressful experiences or tasks presented in a graduated manner, in a context of supportive instructors who emphasize the learning value of all experiences, whether failures or successes. Future studies in this area should seek to identify what kinds of training experiences may lead to increases in hardiness, and also to evaluate if such effects are lasting.

The present study has shown that hardiness is an important attribute for military recruiters, helping them to maintain well being and performance despite substantial job stress. Military leaders may wish to consider including hardiness as a factor in the selection and training of military recruiters. Likewise, policy efforts aimed at improving well-being and performance among military recruiters could benefit by focusing more attention on training to increase active coping skills and the hardiness attitudes that underlie these skills.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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