

# Crisis Management

## **Characteristics of a Crisis**

Everyone has experienced a series of normal developmental crisis in his/her life. Most have experienced situational crises. In both cases similar patterns of behavioural responses would be exhibited. Such behaviours include tiredness or exhaustion, helplessness, immobilization, confusion, physical symptoms, and anxiety.

Crises are normal human reactions to emotionally dangerous situations. If the crisis is caused by a disaster, such as a flood or earthquake, no one is surprised to see families with extreme emotional disturbance. Yet, when the stimulus preceding the crisis is not physical but emotional or relational, such as bereavement or divorce, a stigma tends to be attached to resulting aberrations in behaviour.

## **Precipitating Event:**

The precipitator of a crisis is usually a catastrophic event, e.g. death of a partner, but it may also be the accumulation of a series of events. People who apparently have coped well with a series of difficult events suddenly find themselves so exhausted that they cannot deal with one more problem, even if it seems that this problem is not a difficult problem to cope with. All their coping strategies are spent and they are thrown into crisis. Occasionally, the precipitator is not readily recognisable to the person in distress. For instance, distress can sometimes present in a physical manner e.g. headaches resulting from anxiety before exams. Once the stimulus is uncovered the physical symptoms are reduced.

Some precipitators have built within them an almost automatic crisis response e.g. heart attack, leading to fear of death.

## **Appraisal:**

The precipitator and the crisis as such have no direct cause-and-effect relationship. People's appraisals (perceptions) of emotionally hazardous situations greatly determine whether a crisis will occur and if so, how serious it will become. For example, most individuals in crisis perceive a loss or are threatened with the loss of something important to them. This loss can be a significant person, relationship or value.

## **Coping methods and resources:**

A crisis will occur only when early attempts at coping with the threat fail. When usual coping methods fail, disruption caused by the appraised threat remains or increases. People become immobilized or frantically continue trying those methods that have already proved inadequate and unsuccessful in dealing with the crisis. Common responses used by people in crisis are, "I don't know what to do", "I can't cope" or "I feel so helpless." The more seriously threatening one's appraisal of an event, the more regressive one's coping responses will be. The

greater the number and diversity of coping methods, the more likely individuals will prevent periods of crisis or at least experience a milder crisis than those with poorer coping skills.

Thus a crisis is not an external event, a crisis is what happens within a person, what takes place as a response to that event.

People in crisis often tend to pull away from the very interpersonal relationships that they need most at that time. It is important to be aware that positive interpersonal relationships foster adaptive crisis resolution. A significant factor in the resolution of crises is the willingness to seek help from others. Therefore, people experiencing crisis need other caring people around them.

### **Crisis Intervention**

1. The first step in crisis management is to define and understand in your own mind what has happened, what you are feeling and why.

Try to identify the one area that precipitated the crisis and focus on that. Start with that one event or stressor.

2. Minimise the physical and psychological danger to yourself, e.g. consider shelter options.

3. Take emotional support for yourself, e.g. contact the student counsellor.

4. Examine alternatives. A wide array of appropriate choices may be available. The alternatives may refer to:

- Situational supports, i.e. people you know and care about what happens to you.
- Coping mechanisms i.e. the actions, behaviours or environmental resources you might use to help get through the crisis. Steps such as making a decision, accepting a loss that cannot be changed, and learning a new skill can all help with coping with crisis.
- Positive and constructive thinking patterns. For example, changing your overall view of the situation from a negative one (problems) to a positive one (goals) can be a very first step. Positive self-talk can also be very helpful.

5. Make plans. Plan action steps that have a good chance of restoring your emotional balance. A plan should:

- Identify additional persons, groups and other resources that can be contacted for immediate support.
- Include concrete and positive actions for a variety of constructive activities (such as relaxation, running, reading) which should both be realistic and focused on problem solving.

6. Commit yourself to your plan. Most of these useful goals in crisis management may be attainable in a matter of weeks. It is important and valuable to review what you have learnt, what new strengths and coping skills you have acquired for the resolution of future problems and crises.

**Further reading:**

Stone, H. (1993). *Crisis Counselling: Caring for people in emotional shock*. London: Augsburg Fortress.

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