

Supporting others through a crisis

A crisis is generally identified as a major incident which impacts everyday life and jeopardises a sense of safety. The aftermath of a crisis frequently leaves individuals and families displaced and alters the way they would normally function. Additional impacts can include sudden financial instability, the need to seek alternative accommodation, and ongoing uncertain feelings towards future stability. Generally speaking, these types of factors tend to impact individuals' mental as well as physical wellbeing. Knowing how to support others going through or dealing with the after-effects of a crisis can increase overall wellbeing and lead to increased ability to help them regain good mental health.

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma is typified by being exposed to others' stories and pain. When a crisis happens, images seen on television or stories shared can be enough to make an individual feel as though they too have experienced the event directly. In some situations it is not possible to avoid possible vicarious trauma effects, for example, the profession in which an individual is employed. When professional hazards are not the reason behind potential vicarious exposure there are things individuals can do to limit the likelihood of becoming exposed. These include limiting television and news coverage. In the case of children, limiting their exposure to television and news reports, images on the internet and conversations pertaining to troubling stories is essential. Young children in particular have not yet developed the cognitive capacity to understand the gravity of what is being said and shown, meaning their imaginations can make an already sensitive topic feel raw and painful.

Understanding typical emotional responses

While not all children or adults will experience the same emotional responses during a crisis, there are typical responses that often occur. These include:

- Feeling helpless – When a crisis happens many people want to act to make things better, but given their situation they may realise that their situation cannot be improved (either in the short or long-term)
- Overwhelmed – The degree of a tragedy is not indicative of how a person will or will not react. Everyone is different. Nevertheless, feeling overwhelmed by an onslaught of intense emotions can make it difficult to believe that there is an end to what they are experiencing. The intensity of emotions can make it difficult to navigate through simple tasks that once were enacted with ease. Children especially will have trouble articulating the feelings they are having and may act out in an effort to dispel unwanted emotions.
- Insecurity – Not knowing what is going to happen in the future can unravel even the iron-nerved. When life is suddenly different it can be difficult to adjust and find equilibrium.

Due to the range of emotions that may be felt during a crisis, behavioural responses towards other people and/or familiar situations may be atypical. Knowing that there will be a period of adjustment can help people understand that the strong emotions they are feeling is normal and that there is nothing inherently wrong with them. It also grants silent permission to reassure themselves that they are not weak or ill-equipped to deal with a crisis in a rational manner.

Depending on age, children may not be able to comprehend why things cannot return to normal and they may question things despite being told the realities of a situation. Fanciful thinking can often encourage children to wish for and hope that things will return to the way they were.

How to help people going through a crisis

When a crisis happens it is natural to want to help others. Yet those who are willing to help often find themselves at a loss to know what to do or how to go about it. Dealing with others that have gone through a crisis is not like any other negative situation most people have previously supported another person through. As a result, third parties can be left feeling as equally helpless. Nevertheless, there are things that can be done to help others through their difficult situations. These include:

- Listening – just sitting and being in the other person’s presence, saying as little as possible is often the best support that can be given. It can be tempting to want to fill silences, yet doing so stops the other person from sifting through their thoughts and feelings. Allowing a comfortable silence to settle between yourself and the other person sends a silent message that if and when the other person wishes to talk they can do so. Should the other person wish to talk, avoid asking questions. Supporting people through a crisis is not about helping them to fix their situation. Solution focused work is best done with a qualified professional once the initial shock of a crisis has had a chance to settle.
- Platitudes – platitudes are statements that are made with the intention of putting things into perspective or to try and shine a positive light on things. Unfortunately they are seldom helpful and can make a person going through a crisis feel worse. Examples of platitudes are statements such as, “It will be okay in the end”, or “things will get better”, or “it could be worse”. Although they are often spoken with good intentions they are not usually interpreted that way. Avoiding platitudes is necessary when supporting people coping with a crisis situation.
- Messages of support – a crisis can leave people feeling isolated. Simple and regular contact via messages of love and support can be extremely beneficial.
- Offering help via any means possible – many people find it hard to ask for help. They may also be very proud and believe that independence is necessary. Respecting a person’s decision for privacy and independence should always take precedence, but offering help is not unwarranted. Offering help needs to be done with sensitivity. Stating what help you can offer and then leaving the other person to mull it over usually works best.
- Allowing people time to cry – some people try hard not to cry in front of others. Yet if people going through a crisis need to cry, allowing them to do so is very important. Just like in the case of listening, nothing needs to be said to make them feel better or to make them stop. If appropriate, a hug or a gentle hand placed over their hand can be an added comfort.
- Linking in with services – knowing which services to access in a time of crisis can be critical. Governments often have community services websites where information on available services can be located. Alternatively, helplines or front line services such as neighbourhood centres have contact information regarding what services will best meet a person’s needs. In a major event crisis, governments tend to set up help lines to inform individuals where help can be found.

All of the above suggestions work equally well for children as they do adults, although adults will need to instigate access to services on children’s behalf. During a crisis, children will undergo the same reactions to grief as adults, although they may be less able to articulate their feelings or needs. Their moods may be more erratic and they may seem like they are pushing the boundaries more. Some children may become clingier and require reassurance that everything will be okay and that they are safe. Ensuring that their questions are answered in child-appropriate ways is especially important. Giving detailed information is not particularly

helpful, however giving them a watered down, need-to-know version can be. Discussions involving finances and other adult-related worries should be had away from children.

Children, like adults, will not react to a crisis in the same manner. Some will bounce back quickly whereas others will need long-term support. In any case, grief reactions can crop up randomly and sporadically. Early access to support, whether it be a professional or otherwise, will best improve a child's ability to regain a sense of normality. Being able to re-establish a routine (even if circumstances require it to be a different routine) will help create a sense of security. Equally important is keeping the same rules and boundaries in place for children. While their feelings towards a crisis may make them feel angry it is important to help them know that there are still appropriate and inappropriate ways to express such feelings. For example, "It is okay to whack that stick on the ground to get your feelings of anger out, but it is not okay to use that stick to hit your brother."

Children need to be reassured that they are loved when a crisis occurs. Giving cuddles (if they like physical contact) can help to lessen the intensity of emotions. Teaching them how to use strategies via role modelling can also be helpful, for example, sniffing a flower and blowing up a balloon can be a good way to teach them how to deep breathe. It can also be beneficial for children to see that the adults around them having feelings too. Talking children through what adults are doing to support themselves through intense feelings helps to normalise that everyone, no matter what age, has to work hard at overcoming unwanted emotions.

Re-capping the essentials

When a crisis occurs it can make those affected feel less secure. These situations often leave people displaced or change lives significantly, meaning a period of adjustment will be needed before things might start feeling normal again. A crisis can impact people's mental and physical wellbeing. Vicarious trauma can occur as a result of seeing or hearing about a crisis. Limiting exposure to the event may be needed, especially in the case of children. Regardless of age, critical incidents invoke typical emotional responses, although everyone will have their own unique reaction. Some may overcome the problem with relative ease while others may have ongoing reactions. Children may also employ fanciful thinking and be unable to comprehend why things cannot return to normal. Knowing how to support people affected by a crisis is essential. Listening, avoiding platitudes, normalising emotions and reactions to events, messages of support, allowing those affected to cry, linking people to services, letting people know they are loved, and offering help are a few strategies that can be used. Re-establishing routines and rules for children can help to create a sense of stability for children and support them to overcome and manage their emotions. Role modelling ways to deal with emotions is also another beneficial strategy.

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