

A Young Persons Guide to ~ Crisis Intervention ~



A Peer Counselling Handbook

Crisis Intervention

All of us have been in some sort of crisis at some time in our lives. But what seems like a crisis to one person might not seem so drastic to another. We all have different things that can stress us most and we all have different levels of tolerance of stress.

Some people can cope well with dealing with emergencies such as keeping calm and knowing what to do when someone has an accident, maybe cuts themselves or scalds themselves with hot water – whereas someone else might faint at the sight of blood or become hysterical when someone is hurt because they are afraid that they will not be able to cope with it and might do something wrong.

One person might not worry too much about having their purse stolen. They might think - Oh well it's only money – but might get very upset if their pet gets sick. It is because we react differently to these situations that we can support each other and help when an emergency crops up. It is also much easier to cope with an emergency when it does not affect you personally and that is why it is useful to get help from a professional person or someone who is not emotionally involved. If we are emotionally involved in a situation – or we let it upset us, we are not so good at making correct decisions, weighing up what to do and doing the right thing. We need to stand back a bit and look at things in perspective rather than getting all mixed up in someone else's problems.

So what is a crisis?

We could say that a crisis is a situation that causes stresses to a person or group of people that is so severe or so sudden that they are unable to cope and need outside help. A problem overwhelms their coping abilities.

Let us consider examples of crises. These could be general crises that affect whole populations – such as natural disasters causing a crisis in food supply or water supply – famine, drought, or family crises such as a parent leaving home, or death of a child or it could be a personal crisis such as not being able to cope with a job, splitting up with a boyfriend or girlfriend or perhaps being too ill to cope with looking after yourself. Just being ill or poor is not a crisis. The idea of crisis is that the people involved cannot cope and the situation will not improve on its own and could get worse without intervention. Sometimes a bad situation will exist for a while and then something else happens which pushes it over the edge to be a crisis.



For example a family can be poor and just managing to get enough to eat and then father might lose his job so that causes a crisis. Or maybe you are unhappy at school but manage to force yourself to go there every day – until an older boy threatens you and beats you and you are then too upset to go back – that causes your crisis.

Make a list of examples of crises -

Crisis – What happened	Who does this affect

If something sudden happens to cause a crisis, then it is important to act quickly to help before things get worse. However the worse thing we can do is to jump in before we have thought things through properly and maybe interfere and make things worse. Sometimes we can do more harm than good and we need to be very careful what we do.

When is a crisis not a crisis?

First of all we must make sure that this really is a crisis and that the people need or want help. Sometimes there is a bit too much drama involved and we all need to calm down, take a deep breath and stand back and look at the situation.

DON'T MAKE A DRAMA INTO A CRISIS

Is there really a crisis here or are we misinterpreting things? Is this a plea for help someone who wants attention but could really do something about it themselves? Are we making mountains out of molehills?

We need to be careful how we get involved in things. It can be good to feel wanted and to feel that we are **DOING SOMETHING**. We need to be



careful that we are not too eager to do something and do the wrong thing. It can be frustrating – but we need to realise that sometimes it is better to DO NOTHING. Sometimes there is nothing that can be done and sometimes doing something makes things worse. In medicine there is a saying 'Primum non nocere' which means – the first thing is not to harm. It is good to remember that.

Getting the facts.

When we first are involved in a crisis situation - the best thing we can do is to keep calm and unemotional. If we get upset we are no good to the people we are trying to help. Then we need to evaluate the situation – that means getting as much information as we can about what has happened, how has it affected people, has anyone been hurt, is anyone in immediate danger, what is the most important thing that needs to be done. Some of these things might sound simple – but it is often the simple things that need to be done properly and thoroughly and they are often forgotten.

For example – if there is a fire – call the fire brigade and get everyone away from it. If someone has been electrocuted – turn off the electricity before doing anything else. It is useful to have some first aid training so that you know what to do in a medical crisis – but the most important thing is to call for professional help.

Very often a crisis is emotional or at least causes emotional stress. Talking to the person involved and helping them to calm down is very valuable. If you can let them talk and maybe cry it often helps just for them to know you are listening without you having to say much back to them. As they calm down you can then get more information and find out what the problem is.

Confidentiality

When you are talking to someone in a crisis – they may tell you private things about themselves or their family which they might not have told anyone if they were calm and thinking straight. It is important not to gossip and spread these facts around. You are in a privileged position to have heard these things and you need to respect the person who told you.

At the same time though – you do not want to be bound up in a secret with them. You need to keep yourself from being sucked in and compromised by what you hear. For example if they say – 'I'm only telling you this if you promise not to tell anyone' and they then tell you that they have been abused or that someone they know has committed a serious crime – you



will then be involved in this if you keep quiet – you will also feel upset and guilty about keeping a bad secret. You must always say that you need to tell someone who can help and explain that they need to be protected from abuse and harm and that you will be acting in their best interest if you tell a professional who knows what to do and will act discreetly.

Keeping out of danger.

It is very important when dealing with a crisis that you do not put yourself in danger. Consider carefully what you are doing – what is your role in this affair? Are you going too far? Do you understand the situation? Are you taking risks? How could you be affected?

There is no room for heroics. Heroes can get hurt. You might also be putting yourself into crisis situation and cause other people stress when they have to rescue you. For example – don't jump in and try to save someone from drowning if you are on your own and not an excellent swimmer – you might well drown too. If you have a friend who has been beaten by a drunken father – don't personally try to protect him – you will end up beaten or killed too. Think of some other examples.

How could you put yourself in danger?

What might you do?	What would be the danger?

Looking after yourself

As well as putting yourself in danger it is also useful to think about your own emotions. You do not want to take too much emotional stress yourself or be affected by other people's problems and pain. Sometimes you will be asked to do something that you find difficult or unpleasant. You may feel



manipulated or used by people who you are helping. In that case it is important to remember not to do anything which makes you feel uncomfortable. If it makes you feel uncomfortable – then you are probably being manipulated or asked to do something which is wrong. If you feel bad during or after you have helped someone or dealt with a problem – then you need to talk about it with someone responsible – talk to a counsellor or teacher or to your parent. Do not just leave it and hope that the feeling goes away. Even qualified and experienced professionals feel like that sometimes and have to talk to a colleague or friend about the way that a patient or pupil or client made them feel – so do not be too proud or embarrassed to ask for help yourself.

Special Situations –

Abuse - If someone has been abused they need to talk to a professional and they need to be treated physically for their abuse. If the abuse has been going on for a long time then the most important thing is for the victim to get to trust someone enough to talk about what has happened and often the emotional harm caused by the abuse is the most serious part of the problem. In this case there may not be an immediate crisis and so the situation can be dealt with in a planned way by the professionals involved. Your role is to help the victim to come forward and talk to a professional. If the abuse is recent, new, violent or life threatening – then immediate intervention is needed and the victim should be persuaded to come to see a professional right away. If they will not come then a responsible person must be told urgently and if a specific professional is not available then contact the police.

Depression or severe emotional stress – The danger here is that the person might do something harmful such as make a suicide attempt or harm themselves while they are upset without thinking of the consequences. For example when a boyfriend leaves or if they have an argument at home. Sometimes talking will help a lot. Try to get them to talk, calm down and then speak to a family member or professional.

Drugs or alcohol – If you suspect that someone is drinking alcohol or using drugs and harming themselves it is hard to get them to realise what they are doing and that they need help. Try to show them how they have affected themselves, how they have changed since they started substance abuse. Do not cover up for them or make things comfortable for them – they need to know the consequences of their actions. Get advice and professional help. Make sure your friends are aware of how drug pushers can manipulate young people and make it seem that drug taking is fashionable. Make sure your friends know of the dangers of drugs.

Think of some specific examples:-

What is the crisis?	What would you do?

Imagine the following story –

Alan is walking on his way to the shops when he sees a girl Marie from his class at school walking in front of him. She walks close to an old woman with a big bag and he sees her reach into the bag and steal the woman's purse. The woman turns and catches her and both of them are shouting and screaming. The woman is calling for the police and Marie runs of down the street. Alan follows her and catches up with her as she tries to hide in the park. What are you doing he asks? – He is shocked because she is normally a good student and an honest girl. She just falls down on the ground crying and sobs that he does not understand what has been happening in her life – she can't take any more ...she can't cope.

What do you think might have happened? What is Marie talking about?

What should Alan do?





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Do's and Dont's

- **Do** keep aware - keep calm - don't panic.
- **Do** plan carefully - think before you act - get information.
- **Do** know when not to do something.
- **Do** know when to hand over - get advice - seek professional help.

- **Don't** get over involved personally or emotionally.
- **Don't** do anything you are not comfortable with.
- **Don't** do more harm than good.

This handbook has been produced by Dr Diana Birch of Youth Support in conjunction with the peer counselling courses at the Women's Centre of Jamaica Foundation.

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ISSN 1 870717 13 9