Dealing with a crisis

Parenting SA

When we have stress in our lives it is often a time when we make changes for the better. However, if we get too stressed and feel we cannot cope any more, then we are in crisis.

In a crisis, children need to feel safe and know that there is someone they can rely on. They have similar feelings to adults but may show their distress in actions rather than words. Children learn about coping from how they see their parents dealing with a crisis.

What is a crisis?

In a crisis there is usually an event involving change as well as loss. It could be the loss of someone through death or separation, the loss of health through illness or accident, or the loss of something such as a house or a job.

As a result of the crisis you might feel confused and powerless, feel like a failure, or feel unable to cope because you:

- have never been in the situation before
- have found it hard to cope with a similar situation in the past
- don't feel in control
- feel tired, worn out or unwell.

People often have an emotional response to the stress of a crisis. They might feel scared, anxious or angry.

People respond differently to crises, even people in the same family. A crisis for one person may not be a crisis for someone else.

What causes a crisis?

Many things can lead to a crisis. A sudden threat to your life or safety can create a crisis, e.g. a flood, fire or earthquake. You or a loved one might have an accident. There may be big changes in the workplace or you could lose your job. People usually experience a crisis if their relationship breaks down. Other things that might cause a crisis are:

- having a miscarriage
- having a child with a disability
- a child starting or leaving school
- a child leaving home
- a family member in trouble with the law
- losing or winning money
- being arrested
- parents separating or divorcing.

Even good things can feel like a crisis. Things like getting married, having a baby, being promoted or moving house are positive but are times of big change.

A crisis can be triggered when a lot of things happen at once or when they build up on each other over time.

How to know when someone is in crisis

Some signs that a person may be in crisis include:

- physical: sweaty palms, looking flushed, pounding heart, rapid breathing, shaking, diarrhoea, vomiting
- thinking: confused, can't concentrate, can't make decisions, memory loss
- emotional: anxiety, mood swings, withdrawal, despair, helplessness, agitation, panic
- behaviour: broken sleep, antisocial behaviour, sudden outbursts of anger, crying, drug or alcohol misuse, changes in appetite.

People can often feel:

- bewildered: 'I've never felt like this before'
- scared: 'I feel nervous, worried'
- confused: 'I can't think straight'
- immobilised: 'I feel stuck and nothing helps'
- despairing: 'It all feels hopeless'
- angry: 'How dare he die and leave me'
- apathetic: 'I just don't care any more'
- overwhelmed: 'I don't feel in control'
- a sense of urgency: 'I need help now!'
- that the situation is not fair: 'Why is this happening to me?'

How children react

Children can have their own crises. Things that may seem small or manageable to an adult can be a crisis for a child. This can confuse parents if they don't know what caused the crisis.

Seeing a parent or parents in distress can set off a crisis for a child. This doesn't mean you should hide your feelings, but you need to be aware of the impact on the child. Reassure them that you are managing this crisis even if you are upset.

The feelings children have in a crisis are similar to adults but they often show their feelings in actions rather than words.

They may:

- be distressed if they see their parent(s) or people they care about not coping
- be scared of things linked with the crisis, e.g. loud noises, changes in living arrangements, strangers
- have nightmares
- fear there will be crises in other areas of their life as well
- lose interest in school or other activities
- act as though they are younger
- have behaviour problems or problems with friends
- have disturbed sleep or poor concentration.

Children react differently at different ages

Reactions can include:

1–4 years

Thumb-sucking, bedwetting, fear of the dark, clinging to parents, nightmares, not sleeping or broken sleep, loss of bladder or bowel control, speech or feeding problems, fear of being left alone, being irritable or fretful.

5–10 years

Aggression, confusion, withdrawal, competing for attention, avoiding school, nightmares, poor concentration, tummy aches, headaches, fear of the dark, fear of being hurt or left alone.

11–13 years

Changes in appetite, broken sleep, antisocial behaviour, school problems, anxiety, aches and pains, skin problems, fear of losing friends and family, acting as if it hasn't happened.

14–18 years

Physical problems (rashes, bowel problems, asthma attacks, headaches), changes in appetite and sleep, lack of interest in things they usually enjoy, lack of energy, antisocial behaviour, poor concentration, guilt. Some of these are part of the ups and downs of this age too.

In a crisis, children have similar feelings to adults. They often show their feelings in actions rather than words.

What parents can do

For yourself

In a crisis it is important that you:

- recognise and express your feelings. Ignoring them won't make them go away. Give yourself time to be sad and to heal but know that you will work through this
- don't expect too much of yourself and others
- respect that people deal with crises differently, even those close to you

- work out what things you can control and what you can't – focusing on what you can control will reduce your stress
- make contact with supportive family and friends and get help from a counsellor if you need it
- be aware of the impact your responses will have on your child. They will learn about coping from how they see you managing yourself and the situation. Even if you are distressed, they need to know you are the adult and there for them
- make time to relax and look after yourself.

Anniversaries and special occasions can set off old hurts so make plans about how you will deal with these.

For children

What children need most is reassurance, acceptance, understanding and support. They need to feel safe and know that they have someone they can rely on.

- Try not to over-react. If you panic, your children will be more afraid.
- Talk with your children about what is happening, even if it is hard.
- Calm down before explaining the situation to them and reassure them that you will work through this.
- Say enough for them to understand what has happened or what the problem is. Ask them what else they want to know but don't give them details they don't need.
- Keep it simple and use words they understand. Saying that someone 'died' is better than 'passed away'. Depending on their age, you may have to repeat things many times, even simple things.
- Take charge if you need to. It will make your children feel safer. Let them know they will be looked after.
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know something.
- Make sure children can express their feelings to you and other family members.
- Allow them time and space to express their feelings. Some may want to draw, write, tell stories or keep a diary. If they feel aggressive, energetic play may help.
- Help children to have contact with supportive family and friends.
- It is OK to let your children see that you are upset. Talk to them about your feelings, and let them know that you are working out how to manage the crisis. They will learn how to cope from how you react and how they see you coping.
- Let your children know you don't expect them to look after you, make you feel better, or solve the problem.
- Spend extra time putting young children to bed at night. A night-light may help children who are scared.
- Make sure you find time for some fun things to do together.
- Be patient if your children's behaviour is difficult to cope with.
- Limit children's viewing of media images of disasters. If they do watch, be there to discuss it with them.
- Make sure children eat well, are active and get plenty of rest.

Keep to your children's usual routines as much as you can. It will help them feel safe and secure.

Getting help

If you are worried about your children or yourself, seek help early. Talk with your doctor or counsellor.

If you feel you cannot give your children what they need, find someone else to help them.

Let your children's carers or school know you are having problems. It will help them understand any changes in your children's behaviour and provide any extra help and support they need.

Be positive about the future and let children know you are dealing with the situation. They need to believe things will get better. Reassure and encourage them but don't make false promises.

Want more information?

Lifeline
Phone 13 11 14, 24 hours
Crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support

Kids Helpline
Phone 1800 55 1800
A confidential counselling service for children and young people 5 to 25 years
www.kidshelp.com.au

Reach Out
Provides information, tools and support for young people dealing with everyday troubles or tough times http://au.reachout.com

KidsMatter
Information for parents and schools about managing trauma www.kidsmatter.edu.au

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
Free therapy services for children and families. Anyone can contact the duty officer in the following locations.

- Elizabeth: Phone 8252 0133
- Paradise: Phone 7321 4500
- Port Adelaide: Phone 8341 1222
- Oaklands Park: Phone 7425 8600
- Morphett Vale: Phone 8326 1234
- Northern country regions: Phone 1800 819 089

For more information about CAMHS services and other country office locations see CAMHS brochures at www.wch.sa.gov.au or phone the Women's and Children's Hospital on 8161 7000

Australian Red Cross
Has resources for parents and schools on supporting children to deal with crises
www.redcross.org.au

Parenting SA
For more Parent Easy Guides, e.g. 'Coping skills', 'Grief and loss', 'Children's mental health', 'Bedwetting' and 'Sleep disturbance'
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network
For information on raising children
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Government of South Australia

Parenting SA
A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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