



Responding to Crisis & Trauma

According to the research, people respond to crisis, trauma, and loss in different ways:

- Some people are initially unaffected but later have difficulty;
- Some people are immediately affected but do better with time;
- Some people struggle initially and for an extended period of time; and
- Some people seem to be okay in the short and long-term.

Unfortunately, it's difficult to know which of these categories we might fall into before crisis hits. People who have strong support systems and are temperamentally flexible before crisis hits tend to do better.

Experiencing Crisis

For people experiencing crisis, it's important to maintain flexibility with self and others. If you are in a situation you have never experienced, don't expect yourself to know how/what you should be thinking, feeling, or doing. Expecting yourself to think, feel, and act/not act a certain way is something to avoid. Taking things as they come, maintaining flexibility, and avoiding statements like "I should" or "I shouldn't" are important to processing through crisis, trauma, and loss. It's okay and natural not to know what to think, feel, say, or do. It's also okay to ask for and receive assistance from others.

Crisis events can amplify pre-existing stressors and make people think, feel, and act abnormally. Crisis events can force past "resolved" issues to resurface: present wounds bring up past wounds. Problems can quickly compound and make us feel trapped, especially if sleep deprivation becomes a factor. Sometimes people feel under such pressure and stress they swear they're going to "crack" or go "crazy." Please know it is possible to process through present and past events and, while we can't control how our minds respond to crisis, we can take care of ourselves by drinking lots of water and eating/sleeping when we can. Letting go of unreasonable expectations and focusing on flexibility can become the key to much needed sleep.

For Parents

For parents whose children have experienced crisis, it is important to help children process through things as they surface. Keep explanations short and age appropriate. Scary conversations need to be avoided when children are present. When children express concern, reminding them they are loved and safe can be helpful. Another helpful thing is returning children to their routine as soon as possible. While this may be difficult, small things like waking at the same time in the morning, going to church, seeing friends, singing the same bedtime songs, etc., can all be helpful.

In general, parenting through crisis is difficult. While traumatized parents may not feel the confidence to reassure their children, parents need to be careful not to overburden their children's coping abilities. So, in order to be present for their children, parents need to lean on other available supports like counselors, family, friends, church leaders, or other community resources. One of the best things a parent can do for their children is take good care of themselves. If children believe their parent is okay, they tend to believe they are okay. If children don't think their parent is okay, then they won't be okay either.

For Supportive Helpers

Helping friends, neighbors, or even strangers in crisis is important, but can come with its own challenges. Supportive helpers need to be able to identify when to be directive and when to be hands-off. Because shock (feeling numb) reduces our ability to problem-solve, people in shock may require a more specific and direct approach.

Conversely, it is important to be patient with people experiencing crisis because they may be more demanding and irritable than normal. Be patient. Remember, the person you're helping is deeply hurting and in great need. Just as this short amount of information is inadequate to resolve the hurt of those in crisis, so words from helpers are inadequate to resolve their pain. Sometimes being present in silence is the most helpful thing you can do for those in crisis.

Helping people in crisis can vicariously impact supportive helpers, activating a helper's previously "resolved" issues. So, helpers also need to remember to take good care of themselves and have supportive people in their lives to assist them. As a general rule, supportive helpers should avoid depending on the person in crisis to provide this support.

Warning Signs

Finally, be aware of lasting issues such as prolonged eating/sleeping problems, depressed mood, difficulty adjusting to changes, or feeling hopeless, helpless, or worthless. If you encounter these or you/your family need help processing through crisis, please contact a reputable therapist to help you.

Joshua Ascherman, MFT 98889
3 Governors Lane, Suite A
Chico, CA 95926
(530) 413-0032
chicocounselor.com

About: Josh Ascherman is a retired police officer and a licensed psychotherapist practicing in Chico.

Please note: this is not intended to be a substitute for professional counseling.