

SELF HELP SHEET

Student Counselling Service

Crisis Management

What is a crisis?

A crisis is an emotional and physical response to some precipitating event or series of events that disrupts our normal day-to-day functioning. Everyone experiences a crisis now and then. They are a normal part of life and can occur at any stage. Some experts say that we can only grow and develop through resolving the normal, developmental crises that are part of being human.

However, sometimes we experience something that is so hurtful, challenging, or threatening that we feel overwhelmed. Experiencing a loss, suffering a blow to one's self-esteem, or having difficulty adjusting to new circumstances are all common crises experienced by students in 3rd level. When you experience a crisis, you can have physical reactions, like headaches, stomach pains, tiredness or exhaustion. You can also feel helpless, confused, anxious, and unable to concentrate. These feelings are signs that your mind and body are trying to cope but are taxed by doing so. Because students in 3rd level are juggling multiple demands on their time and energy, they may be particularly vulnerable to crises.

How can a crisis be managed?

While we may have limited control over the event that precipitates a crisis, we do have control over how we choose to manage it. Crisis management occurs through *cop*ing. We all have coping skills, or behaviours that are automatic reactions to demands placed on us. When we are in crisis, we feel that our existing coping skills are not enough to get us through. We may be overlooking resources that we have, or stuck in a pattern of avoidant coping (for example, through denying that a problematic situation exists or by using alcohol or other drugs to "cope"). We may be reluctant to seek help from others because of negative experiences in the past, fear of being misunderstood or labelled or because of thoughts that we "ought" to be able to manage on our own. However, part of the process of becoming mature adults is learning how to get help when we need it.

When managing a personal crisis it can be very helpful to pay attention to perception. Perception refers to how we look at and interpret both the precipitating event and our possible alternatives for dealing with it. If you perceive an event as a total and complete disaster from which you can never recover, you will feel much worse than if you:

- acknowledge the pain the event has caused you
- remember that we all experience pain in life
- remember how you coped with pain in the past.

Managing a crisis well requires planning and action.

Suggestions for positive coping

Everyone copes in their own way with life events. Some people are very well aware of their coping style while others are less sure of how they react to stress. What works for one person, may not work for someone else. The following guidelines for managing a crisis will help you to mobilise your resources and develop more alternatives for coping. You will also come out of the crisis with more tools for living.

1. The first step to take is to define and understand what has happened. A typical response to a precipitating event is the feeling that “I can’t get my head around this.” In fact, making sense of the event that precipitated the crisis is one of the ways to get through it. Many people find writing about the event a helpful way to define it. Others find that talking to someone they trust is better. Whatever you choose to do, do something to get straight in your own mind what has happened and how you are feeling.
2. Make sure that you are not in danger. If you feel you are in physical danger or there is a risk of harming yourself or someone else, make sure that you get help.
3. Seek emotional support for yourself. Sometimes we make the mistake of withdrawing from the important people in our lives when we are experiencing a crisis. It is a more helpful coping response to seek out contact with people who care about us. The Student Counselling Service, the Medical Service and your Tutor are other good sources of support.
4. As much as possible, try to maintain the routine you had before the crisis. Try to eat well, get enough sleep and exercise. Maintaining your routine will help you feel less out of control.
5. Be open-minded as you think about alternatives. We often overlook options when we feel overwhelmed. Try to make a list of ALL possible choices for dealing with the crisis. Then you can select the ones that seem to be best for you at this time. Try to avoid the kinds of “coping” that can lead to more crises (for example, staying in bed all day might feel comforting but might lead you to fall behind in your course and other responsibilities). Choose positive coping aimed at helping you resolve the situation and/or your feelings about it.
6. Make a plan and stick to it. Letting other people know about your plan can be very helpful. You are more likely to follow through on your plan once you have told a partner, family member or friend about it. Telling someone your plan also provides you with more social support. Include some things that will help you feel better, and some that will address the problem situation. Whatever you decide to do, make your plan concrete, specific, and achievable.
7. Commit yourself to your plan but don’t be afraid to revise it if you identify a new need or resource. Be flexible and kind to yourself as you work to manage the crisis.

Remember that crises are a normal part of life. There are many sources of help and support in College. Focus your efforts on harnessing the internal and external resources available to get you back to optimal functioning.

Further reading:

Butler, G., & Hope, T. (1995). *Manage Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hybels-Steer, M. (1995). *Aftermath: Survive and Overcome Personal Trauma*. London: Simon & Schuster.
