



Surviving a Family Crisis

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A family crisis occurs when a family has to change. It is a turning point: things will either get better, or they will get worse. Sometimes, day-to-day hassles can pile up and cause a stress overload.

Other events can cause a family crisis:

A "bolt from the blue" — something unexpected—can suddenly hit your family. Someone may die, your home burns, you lose your job, you win the lottery.

- These changes can be difficult for families because they require the family to deal with many changes. If someone dies, others may have to “fill their shoes” while also dealing with the loss. If you win the lottery you have to deal with how to spend the money and this can cause family conflict.
- Families can adapt well to these crises by supporting one another and being flexible enough to make needed changes.

A developmental crisis occurs when people get married, have children, have a child start school, have a teen going through puberty, have a child leaving home, have parents retiring, aging, and/or dying.

Some of these changes are subtle and gradual; others are abrupt and dramatic.

- These crises are often viewed as “normal events”—and thus you may not be aware of the stress on your family. Adapting to the leaving or adding of a family member or the changes that occur as children and adults grow and age can be very difficult for families.
- These “normal” developments can cause stress because they challenge us to rearrange our families.
- To adjust to a developmental crisis, families often need to adjust family rules and roles to meet the new abilities of family members.
- Every family must change as their youngster approaches puberty. To become mature adults, teens must gradually get more practice in making decisions.

A structural crisis occurs when the family resists changing to meet the demands of a developmental or “out of the blue” crisis.

- Being unable to change can aggravate existing conflict and can lead to many actions that harm you or other family members. Examples include cheating on one’s partner, feeling suicidal, drinking too much (alcoholism), physical and sexual abuse, drug use and divorce.
- These behaviors are often symptoms of the family’s inability to adapt to change and to solve problems.
- The family may become so disorganized it is unable to overcome the crisis. When behaviors such as these occur, families often benefit from outside professional help.

A family crisis is naturally stressful

A crisis demands some sort of change in the family, and this change is stressful. Families immobilized by stress often:

- lack cohesiveness and closeness among members.
- lack positive conflict-management skills.
- fight over "who is right."
- lack time and positive interaction between the parents.
- lack family activities and quality time together.
- experience stressed-out symptoms—including sleeplessness, lack of appetite, disorientation, memory lapses, depression and anxiety.
- Talk openly and honestly. Poorly functioning families may not talk, may keep secrets, or have many topics they cannot or will not discuss with each other.
- Develop a strong social network by participating in community organizations, accepting help and supporting others.

Seek Help

If you can't get "unstuck," seek professional help.

Do you want to live the rest of your life this way? If not, can you develop a workable plan to "make things better?" If not, get help from a reputable family service agency in your area.

Kids Feel Stress Too

When a family is experiencing a crisis, all its members are affected—including the children. Sometimes adults believe that kids do not really feel stress, but they do. Some signs that your child may be stressed are:

- misbehaving more than usual
- more quiet than usual
- school problems, such as fighting or not paying attention

- having trouble sleeping
- worry and concern about the family problem

Children need help to deal with the stress they feel.

- Talk with your child about the family problem, in words she can understand.
- Let your child know he does not need to worry about "adult problems," such as money. Be clear that some problems are not his to worry about.
- Teach your child to relax when she is feeling stressed. Have her listen to some music, breathe deeply, perhaps release her tensions physically through playing outside or just laughing with you.
- Give words to your child's feelings. Sometimes children do not know they are stressed. "I heard you had another fight in school today. I am wondering if you are worried about my losing my job?"
- Listen when your child talks about his concerns. Give him your full attention and listen for what he is feeling as well as disagree about family goals and how to reach them.
- Spend some fun time with your child. This will help reduce her stress as well as yours.

Guidelines for Families

Researchers suggest these guidelines for families adapting to change:

Accept the hardship. Well-functioning families quickly accept the hardship and use their energy and resources to meet the challenge. Recognize that tears can be good medicine for many people. Recognize and mourn your loss. Then, figure out your options for moving ahead.

- Don't blame each other.

Poorly functioning families try to attach the blame to someone inside or outside the family. Healthy families see the crisis as a family-centered problem. They work together to correct or change the problem.

- Be patient.

Well-functioning families recognize the need for peace-making, patience and consideration. Poorly functioning families quickly respond with anger.

- Be good stress managers.

Practice a healthy lifestyle and plan well-deserved relaxation times.

- Try to gain control over whatever part of life you can. Flood victims are encouraged to seek this control, even if it means putting their remaining possessions in storage, or buying a hot-plate on which to cook. You may also gain control by practicing mindfulness to stay in the present moment.
- Remain optimistic, striving to see the brighter side, without denying reality or suppressing your emotions.
- Accept and validate your emotions and the emotions of your family members. It is normal to experience stress and anxiety in crises, support yourself and others through these emotions.
- Help each family member have high self-esteem and help them be self-reliant. Praise each other often and encourage the strengths of each person.
- Give daily reminders of your love and appreciation. Healthy families are clear and direct about feelings, particularly expressions of commitment, affection and praise.
- Do things together as a family. Go on family outings, plan fun time at home, hold family meetings, play together and go to church together.
- Seek outside support if necessary. These supporters may be friends, extended family members, mental health professionals, non-profit organizations, religious communities, hotlines/crisis lines, etc.

References

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