

CRISIS COUNSELING

Giving Emotional and Spiritual Guidance to Those in Crisis

Goals for Each Step**Step 1:** Identify and define the crisis situation.**Step 2:** Explore biblical principles for facing crises from God's perspective.**Step 3:** Define immediate steps to reduce the urgency of the situation.**Step 4:** Develop a plan for long-term healing and for preventing similar crises where appropriate.

S T E P O N E

**Observation and Identification of the Problem**Identify and define the crisis situation.**Meet the Counselee**

Scenario 1: Jerry and Lucy moved to California just a month ago and have visited your church for the last two Sundays, trying to find a new church home. All of their family and friends are back in Nebraska. Jerry returned to his office one day to find a voice mail from Lucy urging him to come as quickly as possible to the children's hospital. Their son, Ted, has been critically injured by a hit-and-run driver. He immediately calls you and asks you to meet him there.

Scenario 2: John and Carol have been in your church longer than you have, but it has been a little difficult to get to know them—they are both rather quiet and reserved. Unexpectedly, Carol calls to tell you that she has good reason to believe that John has been molesting their two daughters (aged 10 and 12). She is desperately trying to decide whether to confront him and whether to take the girls and leave. Could you please come and talk to her and her girls?

Scenario 3: It is no secret that Roger and Karen are having marital problems, but, suddenly, it has exploded into a full-fledged battle. Karen calls you a little after midnight and asks you to please come immediately. She's hoping you can stop Roger from leaving.

CRISIS SITUATIONS ARE INTENSELY STRESSFUL AND EMOTIONALLY DRAINING. They require urgent, thoughtful, and practical guidance—something victims often have difficulty providing for themselves. The tasks of the one who intervenes include discerning what elements have turned a stable situation into a crisis; providing control (without physical force) and reassurance to reduce anxiety; and helping sufferers identify an immediate, short-term solution to reduce stress and provide hope.

Crises are the result of physical, emotional, or spiritual trauma, or, more likely, a combination of these. Situations involving rape, child abuse, incest, adultery, drug abuse, attempted suicide, spousal abuse, family disputes, assault, robbery, or burglary all have the potential for creating severe and unusual stress in a person's life. When such stresses occur to the extent that the victims and family members are struggling to cope with the problem or its implications, it becomes imperative for effective intervention to begin. Without such intervention, the ability of the crisis sufferer to cope will continue to deteriorate. Such a person becomes more and more emotionally disorganized and will have more difficulty returning to a normal level of functioning.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR COUNSELEE?

- Is he a believer? A growing Christian? A nominal Christian?
- Has she faced similar crises before? If so, why does this person have a history of crises? What was done in previous crises to bring restoration and healing?
- What has happened to move the problem to the crisis level? (Sometimes this is obvious, sometimes not.)
- Is this a true crisis or more of an attempt to get attention that will simply be repeated if you respond?
- Is there anything you, the counselor, need to do to decrease your legal liability? (See box at right.)

Reducing Legal Liability in Crisis Situations¹

- ✦ Intervene within the limits of your background and training. Do not exceed those limits, thereby committing the illegal practice of medicine, law, or psychology.
- ✦ Discontinue your intervention only if you are relieved by someone with greater skill than your own.
- ✦ Maintain confidentiality of all information you obtain about a crisis victim. [For confidentiality limits, see *Counseling Insights* Introduction.]
- ✦ Document everything you say and do with a victim. This may assist you later if you or your procedures are challenged.
- ✦ Whenever possible, obtain the victim's consent before you assist with the crisis. If in doubt, ask!²

S T E P T W O



Biblical Instruction and Encouragement

Explore biblical principles for facing crises from God's perspective.

An Old Testament Crisis

Jezebel was Elijah's sworn enemy. After he triumphed over her god, Baal, on Mount Carmel, she sent Elijah this message: "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them [the prophets of Baal whom Elijah had killed with the sword]" (1 Kings 19:2). Elijah was in crisis! What did he do? He did what many counselees will do: he panicked.

"Elijah was afraid and ran for his life" (v. 3).

But this is not where Elijah's response ended. He prayed. Granted, at first he prayed selfishly, even suicidally: "He . . . prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, Lord,' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors'" (v. 4). Then, exhausted, "He lay down under the tree and fell asleep" (v. 5).

The answer to this selfish prayer was given on a much higher plane than it was prayed. God, in pure grace, responded: "All at once an angel



touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.' He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again" (vv. 5–6). After restoring Elijah physically, God took him on a long journey to Israel's sacred Mt. Sinai and there restored him spiritually. He gave Elijah specific instructions and then in a "gentle whisper" (v. 12), God

said, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (v. 18). Elijah was assured that he was not alone, that God had been working, and that God had a future for him.







We can distill these principles from Elijah's story:

- ✦ Crisis always occurs within God's transcendence or within His governance of all things. He holds all times in His hand. *This gives your counselee perspective.*

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An Old Testament Crisis

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-  Panic is a normal response to crisis. Initially, help your counselee not to fight these feelings and assure him that the feelings are normal. *This gives your counselee freedom from self-condemnation.*
-  Prayer is *the* best response in crisis. Even prayer that is self-pitying is better than stoic denial of need or a desperate turning inward. *This gives your counselee a sense of control and hope.*
-  Physical restoration is a crucial factor in pulling out of stress and crisis. *This gives your counselee permission to relax.*
-  God is at work in subtle ways before, during, and after all crises in the lives of His children. His love draws them to Him through the disruptiveness inherent in crisis. *This reminds your counselee of her need to be dependent on God.*
-  God restores us with a gentle whisper. He is up to something even in the most severe crisis. He crushes our self-sufficiency in order to mend our souls with gentleness. *This invites your counselee to peace.*
-  Even when Satan or the flesh causes a crisis in one's life, God is still there to cause the crisis to work for the good of the believer (Romans 8:28). *This gives your counselee a sense of security in God's love.*

COMFORT FROM GOD'S WORD

Encourage your counselee to memorize Isaiah 26:3, 41:10, and Hebrews 13:5–6 and to quote them to herself in the midst of crisis, claiming the comfort in them that is based on God's love for her. Have your counselee read selectively through the Book of Psalms and look for similar verses to memorize and use for encouragement. Ask, "Is there any deep response in you that makes it hard to believe the comfort in these verses?" This is an important question because: First, the answers may help you address your counselee's doubts or unbelief, those mental and spiritual struggles that may stymie the application of these verses; and second, those same mental and spiritual struggles can cause anxiety to skyrocket and thus induce—or maintain—a crisis.

New Testament Perspective

Have your counselee read Matthew 6:25–34, shown on the right.

Have your counselee study this passage and substitute his fears and anxieties for the ones Jesus mentions. Help him to move forward with confidence in God's love and care. Help him to know that God will never turn His back on the sufferer (Heb. 13:5–6).

Remind your counselee that Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). He didn't just say, "You can do nothing." Rather, He said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (emphasis added). Notice how Paul's words complement this idea: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13). This same One who gives us strength longs for us to "cast all [our] anxiety [cares, pressures, problems, hurts, crises] on him because he cares for [us]" (1 Pet. 5:7). In other words, it really matters to God what is happening in the lives of His children.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."



Practical Helps for Today

Define immediate steps to reduce the urgency of the situation.

Verbal Self-Descriptions of People in Crisis

Bewilderment:

“I never felt this way before.”

Danger:

“I am so nervous and scared.”

Confusion:

“I can’t think clearly.”

Impasse:

“I feel stuck; nothing I do helps.”

Desperation:

“I’ve got to do something.”

Apathy:

“Nothing can help me.”

Helplessness:

“I can’t take care of myself.”

Urgency:

“I need help now!!!!!!!!!!”

Discomfort:

“I feel miserable, restless, and unsettled.”³



Signs That a Person Is in Crisis

Emotional

Anticipatory anxiety, generalized anxiety, shock, denial, insecurity, fatigue, uncertainty, fear, helplessness, depression, panic, despair, survivor guilt, feeling out of control, grief, outrage, numbness, frustration, inadequacy, feeling overwhelmed, anger, irritability

Cognitive

Confusion, poor attention span, poor concentration, flashbacks, loss of trust, difficulties in decision making, nightmares

Behavioral

Withdrawal, sleep disturbances, angry outbursts, change in activity, change in appetite, increased fatigue, excessive use of sick leave, alcohol or drug abuse, irritability, difficulty functioning at normal ability level, antisocial acts, frequent visits to physicians for nonspecific complaints, anger at God, loss of desire to attend religious services, regression, crying, change in communications, preoccupation with the crisis to the exclusion of other areas of life, diminished job performance, unresponsiveness, hysterical reactions⁴

Crisis Intervention Procedure

*Act Quickly*⁵

You need not wait until you know exactly what to do before acting; once you have made up your mind to intervene, you must plow ahead. The imperative to act quickly, however, does not mean you can’t stop to survey the situation. For example, make certain you know where the exits are in case of physical attack, as in a domestic violence situation. Second, becoming aware of a crisis does not mean that *you* must intervene. If a more skilled intervener is available, it might be wise to call on that person.

Act to Suppress Chaos

You must act to bring order to the situation. *For this reason (among others), it is wise to take a partner with you.* Two sources of order and calm are better than one. “Ways of gaining and maintaining

control vary with the situation and with the creativity of the intervener. The physical presence of the intervener, having the victims seated, making unusual requests [like, ‘Could I see that book over there?'], lowering or raising the voice, a whistle or other loud noise, intervening with a partner, even the mannerisms of the intervener—all may contribute to the control exercised in a given situation.”⁶

Relate and Reassure

Relate to the person with compassion. Show concern with your eyes, lean forward as you listen, reflect the person’s emotions (for example, “You must feel so hurt.”), and stay with the person until her feelings of panic subside and the ability to think clearly returns. Follow the steps on the next page to reassure the person of God’s care through the crisis.

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Crisis Intervention Procedure

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HELP-R

The acronym *HELP-R* summarizes five key principles for ministering to a person in crisis. The letters stand for *Hear, Empower, List options, Plan, and Refer*.

To *Hear* a person means to listen with understanding. A flood of thoughts and emotions overwhelm people in crisis, and they need to talk about their feelings. By listening, you receive and contain their emotions, giving them a safe zone.

You can *Empower* people in crisis by encouraging their strengths and assets. Most people in crisis feel powerless. When you point out an asset, such as their willingness to talk or their desire to find God's strength, you infuse them with courage—which is the basic meaning of the word *encourage*.

The third letter stands for *List options*. Adding this principle to the previous two, you may say this: "I understand your feelings of panic (*Hear*). You're doing the right thing by talking about them, and I sense your desire to feel God's strength through this crisis (*Empower*). What are some options that He may be giving you as your next step?"

From the options, select a single action and make a *Plan*. The plan should include an achievable goal and a commitment to the goal. Hold the person to the plan by contacting him later to see how things went.

Finally, *Refer* the person to available resources according to her need. Depending on the crisis, specialized counseling for trauma victims may be necessary to help long-term.

These six steps would take place during the "Relate and Reassure" stage.

Infuse Perspective

Remind your counselee that crisis, no matter how shattering, occurs within the palm of God's hand. This is true in the sense that nothing occurs that can outstrip God's ability to bring healing, to inculcate Christlikeness, and to restore hope and thanksgiving. Help your counselee grasp the big picture—while much evil and calamity is free to happen in a fallen world, we bear it in the shadow of His Cross, under the shade of His care, and in the anticipation of His crown.

Emphasize Dependency on God

Many crises occur because folks have been trying to do everything on their own. Depleted and angry, they have no coping ability when an extra stressor comes. A simple statement, such as "You may not feel this, but God has you in the palm of His hand," may arrest the despairing mind-set. Of course, a common response in crisis is for the sufferer to be angry at God. Don't dispute the anger. Rather, turn it on its head by saying, "By being angry at God, you're drawing near to Him. We tend to get angry only at those we care about."

After You've Connected with the Sufferer, Encourage Prayer

When the sufferer has accepted that you represent control and stability, seek to further that feeling by bringing, through prayer, God's stabilizing presence to the situation. This will help him understand that alternatives do exist and that God will not let this situation go to waste. You may even read to the sufferer the account of Elijah's desperate prayer in 1 Kings 19.

Establish That God Is Calling the Sufferer to Peace

If God is present even in Sheol (Ps. 139:8 NASB), then He is present in the current crisis. There is no frontier He cannot cross. Many crisis sufferers feel isolated in an alien place with alien feelings. But the strangeness of what sufferers experience and feel can't keep God out. "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Ps. 119:71). God will use what she is going through. This realization can bring great hope and stability.

Help Your Counselee with the Powerful Feelings a Crisis Induces

Some of the stress the sufferer feels will come from the difficult realization that he can be feeling so panicky and out of control. He may respond to this loss of control with even stronger feelings of rage and shame. Assure him that panic is normal in crisis and that it's okay not to take on the additional task of fighting the feelings he's having.

Encourage Physical Restoration

Scripture twice draws attention to Elijah's having sought sleep during his crisis. On top of that, the narrative emphasizes twice that God supplied food for Elijah. Then we're told, "Strengthened by that food, he traveled . . . until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kings 19:8). Those in crisis may not have eaten or slept well in days. Encourage them to take care of themselves. Contact others in the church who are willing to bring food, watch children, and provide transportation, if needed. Be sure you get permission from the sufferer before you do this.



Lifetime Principles for Growth

Develop a plan for long-term healing and for preventing similar crises where appropriate.

WHY DID THIS CRISIS OCCUR?

Ask yourself these questions:

Is the crisis part of a pattern of manipulation?

Could it have been created for the sake of getting attention? When a high need for attention and a low self-concept come together in the same person, a crisis-seeker may be born. This person figures that he can only gain that life-giving attention by staying in crisis. Although only a small minority of people will do this, a pastor or counselor can be utterly depleted through riding the crisis roller-coaster with this person.

Are you acting too much like a rescuer? The rescuer is the alter-ego of the crisis-seeker. The rescuer maintains her identity by doing for others what they are unable to do for themselves and thus saving them from disaster. This is an intoxicating power and the rescuer lives on it. In a true crisis, the sufferer cannot do what he very much wants to be able to do. In an orchestrated crisis, the sufferer has not lost coping skills but has lost the belief that he is worthwhile apart from the chaos he can generate.

Is the crisis part of a slow self-destruction in the sufferer's life? Some people don't so much commit suicide as they cultivate it. They engage in high-risk behavior because they're on a path of self-destruction. The crises they engender are a by-product of this lifestyle. While this information doesn't change what an intervener would do to stabilize a crisis, it may influence the follow-up stage. A counselor following up a person who

tends to suffer chronic crises would want to evaluate the counselee's "(1) wish for surcease, escape, rest; (2) anger, rage, revenge; (3) guilt, shame, atonement; (4) a wish to be rescued, reborn, start over."⁷ Even though the chronic-crisis sufferer may not evidence all these feelings, you should note the possibility of their presence in his life.

Is the crisis part of a pattern wherein the sufferer feels he deserves to suffer?

Some people perpetuate crises in order to inflict on themselves the misery that will help them do penance for their enormous failures in life. Any follow-up of such a person

would have to include heavy, repeated concentrations of Christ's forgiveness and love.

WORK ON LIFE-PLANNING SKILLS

Many people end up in crisis because they can't see foolish patterns in their lives that invite crisis situations. For example, the lonely married woman who responds to another man's advances is setting herself up for disaster. She needs to address the problems in her marriage rather than seek a short-term solution that will start out as a bandage and end up as a hand grenade. Much of the time, emotional pain blinds us to the ways we're opening ourselves up to crisis. The following life-planning skills can help:

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Why . . .

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- ❑ Learn to admit pain and need; learn to seek help.
- ❑ Learn to confront relational deterioration, especially in marriage.
- ❑ Learn financial management, especially budgeting.
- ❑ Learn how to get rid of distorted ideas of God and how to make regular, meaningful contact with Him.
- ❑ Learn how to live in community, not in isolation.

WORK ON SELF-CONCEPT AND IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" To be "in Christ" is to be joined to, identified with, and granted all the benefits of the work of our Lord. To be "in Christ" is to receive many new realities into ourselves. The crisis sufferer—and especially one who chronically suffers crises—may need to restore the wonder of receiving a new identity (or see it for the first time). Of course, if the sufferer is not a believer, you may have the joy of introducing him to Christ for the first time!

**For the Counselor****Be Careful about Burnout!**

If you are doing crisis intervention with any regularity, you must take burnout seriously. Here are some signs that burnout might be imminent:

- ✓ High resistance to going to work every day
- ✓ A pervasive sense of failure, as indicated by such expressions as "I can't do enough"; "I can't get it right"; "I'm no good anymore."
- ✓ Anger and resentment
- ✓ Guilt and blame
- ✓ Isolation and withdrawal
- ✓ Extreme fatigue after work
- ✓ Marital and family conflict⁸

A Word from Chuck

Pain humbles the proud. It softens the stubborn. It melts the hard. Silently and relentlessly, it wins battles deep within the lonely soul . . . By staying, it refuses to be ignored. By hurting, it reduces its victim to profound depths of anguish. And it is at that anguishing point that the sufferer either submits and learns, developing maturity and character; or resists and becomes embittered, swamped by self-pity, smothered by self-will.⁹

Chuck

CAUTION**Intervener Burnout: A Crisis Waiting to Happen**

In terms of costs, the one who seeks to help those in crises will typically expend great amounts of emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical energy to the point of resulting in physical illness or other harm to himself. Therefore, it is imperative that the intervener disciplines himself with good habits of eating, exercising, and resting. To ignore personal needs is to become vulnerable to health, personal, and family problems.

**Homework**

The counselor and sufferer should do this assignment cooperatively: determine the appropriate follow-up resource for the sufferer and make an initial appointment. If you lack time or are uncertain about how to help the counselee, try checking with another pastor or Christian counselor. Or it may be necessary to check with Christian doctors or lawyers in the community to determine if they take referrals in crisis situations. Have the sufferer make an appointment. Follow up to see whether he has done so. If he has not, seek to understand what might be blocking him. If all else fails, check into possible referral sources in local telephone books and in the reference section of your local library.

QUICK TIP

For additional help in dealing with specific crisis situations, we suggest the following chapters of *Counseling Insights*:

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|----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Adultery | 31. Stress Management | 39. Fear and Anxiety |
| 9. Caring for the Terminally Ill | 32. Substance Abuse | 40. Grief |
| 13. Domestic Abuse | 33. Suicide | 42. Loneliness |
| 16. Rebellious Adolescents | 34. Unemployment | 48. Spiritual Failure |
| 17. Sexual Abuse and Incest | 35. Unplanned Pregnancy | 50. Trials and Suffering |
| 18. Single Parenting | 37. Anger | |
| 29. Sexual Addiction | 38. Depression | |
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Resources

- Greenstone, James L., and Sharon C. Leviton. *Elements of Crisis Intervention: Crises and How to Respond to Them*. 2d ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 2001.
- Mitchell, Jeffrey T., and George S. Everly, Jr. *Critical Incident Stress Management: A New Era and Standard of Care in Crisis Intervention*. 2d ed. Ellicott City, Maryland: Cherron Publishing, 1999.
- Morgan, Donald W., and Bruce Larson. *How to Put It Together When Your World Is Coming Apart*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 2000.
- Stone, Howard W. *Crisis Counseling*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Wright, H. Norman. *The New Guide to Crisis and Trauma Counseling*. Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2003.
- . *Crisis Counseling: What to Do and Say During the First 72 Hours*. Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1999.

NOTES

1. Nothing stated here should be construed to be legally definitive or to replace your own research into the laws of your state and city. This information should not be taken as legal advice or as a negation of the importance of seeking competent counsel from a licensed attorney as needed.
2. These observations are based on James L. Greenstone and Sharon C. Leviton, from *Elements of Crisis Intervention: Crises and How to Respond to Them* 1st edition by GREENSTONE/LEVITON. © 1993, p. 87. Reprinted with permission of Wadsworth, a division of Thomson Learning: www.thomsonrights.com. Fax 800-730-2215.
3. Greenstone and Leviton, *Elements of Crisis Intervention*, pp. 5–6.
4. Greenstone and Leviton, *Elements of Crisis Intervention*, pp. 6–7.
5. For more information on crisis intervention procedures, see “Crisis Intervention,” *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2d ed., ed. Raymond J. Corsini (New York, N.Y.: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), Vol. 1, p. 348.
6. *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, p. 348.
7. Edwin S. Schneidman, Norman L. Farberow, and Robert E. Litman, *The Psychology of Suicide* (New York, N.Y.: Science House, 1970), p. 492.
8. Greenstone and Leviton, *Elements of Crisis Intervention*, pp. 39–40. This is a partial list. For the full list, see the source.
9. Charles R. Swindoll, *Killing Giants, Pulling Thorns* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 56.