

Professor's Notes

Week One: Defining a Crisis and Crisis Intervention

It is evident that major crisis in our country (and the world) have escalated in recent decades, but so have the smaller incidents that affect individuals and families and communities on a daily basis.

In order to provide an adequate understanding of these troubles we need to develop some definitions and delineations that will help address ways in which the church can care for those facing these times or tribulation.

CRISIS: "A state of disorganization in which the individual faces frustration of important life goals or profound disruption of one's life cycle and methods of coping with stress."

The term "crisis" has been defined in many ways. Simply put, it is a state of disorganization in which the individual faces frustration of important life goals or profound disruption of one's life cycle and methods of coping with stress.

These situations often call for specific responses on the part of one's family, church, community for care and support. When a crisis reaches a stage that is immobilizing and prevents one from consciously controlling oneself, then it becomes the type of crisis for which a person seeks treatment.

Think of some examples of a crisis-situation that may have occurred in your life...

- loss of loved one
- interpersonal crisis with loved ones
- suicide/ suicide attempts
- unplanned pregnancy
- divorce
- hospitalization (emergency)
- job relocation / termination
- financial problems
- imprisonment
- infidelity
- drug addiction
- a family crisis (give personal example)
- terrorism
- natural disasters
- sexual harassment or abuse
- viral epidemics or pandemics

The truth is, this list could be unending. That is because a crisis is not so much based upon the event itself but the way the individual experiencing the event perceives the event.

An actual crisis has essentially three parts.

The definition reflecting these three is called the **trilogy definition** ¹

The three aspects of a crisis are

1. A **precipitating event** occurs
2. The *perception* of this event leads to **subjective distress**; and
3. Usual **coping methods** fail, leading the person experiencing the event to function psychologically, emotionally, or behaviorally at a lower level than before the precipitating event occurred.

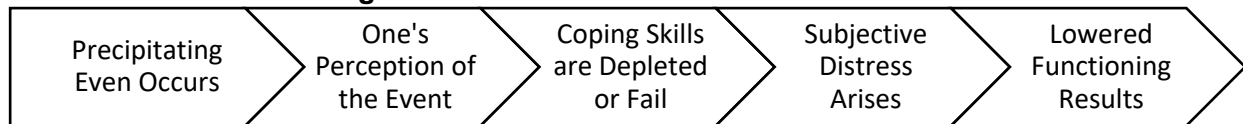
If we follow this definition, we can see that a precipitator occurs in the form of a threatening event that intrudes on the life of an individual or group, causing a state of tension that is

¹ Kanel, Kristi. A Guide to Crisis Intervention 3rd ed. NY: Brooks & Cole Publ. pg. 1

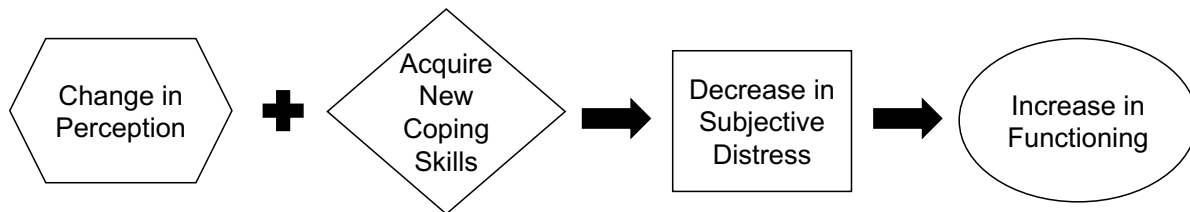
subjectively uncomfortable and the person experiencing the event resorts to customary coping behaviors.

In all of these components of a crisis, perception of the event is by far the most crucial part to identify, because it is the piece that can be most easily and quickly altered by the counselor or pastor.

Formula or Understanding the Process of Crisis Formation:



If the goal of crisis work is to increase functioning, the following formula aids the crisis worker in understanding the process for leading a person out of a crisis.



PRECIPITATING EVENTS

Precipitating: sudden, quick, rapid

Personal crises have some sort of identifiable beginnings or precipitating events

Notice that the method of change has to do with how the precipitating event is perceived rather than with making a change in the precipitating event itself.

Usually changing the facts and actual events that have occurred is not possible.

The best we can do is work at changing or altering the client's understanding and perceptions of the events

Perhaps the most important aspect of any crisis is how the person perceives the situation.

The meaning given to the event determines whether the person can cope with the added stress.

This meaning has been termed the **Cognitive Key**

Once the helper identifies the cognitive meanings the person ascribes to the precipitating events, the helper can work actively to reframe these thoughts / perceptions.

COGNITIVE KEY: The meaning given to the event.

"I just broke up with my boyfriend!"

Often a teenager will approach an adult (parent, pastor, or teacher) to share their crisis situation, only for the adult to downplay the issue because the adult has ascribed a different and lesser meaning to the precipitating event. Often this leads the teenager to carry the crisis (in their perception) alone. This may be one reason why teenage suicide is one of the highest of all ages.

What does this mean?

What is a crisis for one person is not necessarily a crisis for another. Thus, we cannot disqualify someone's perceived crisis because that perception (cognitive key) is affecting the coping skills and stress level and consequently one's healthy functioning.

COPING METHODS FAIL

Often the subjective distress overwhelms the individual, and the coping methods fail to function effectively. When a person realizes that their normal resources are depleted or insufficient to resolve the challenge caused by the precipitating event, they can no longer function (immobilization: socially, psychologically, spiritually, relationally) that is when they seek out help.

These coping resources are internal and external:

Internal: personality, intellect, experience, spiritual maturity, spiritual meditation (*"I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds."* - Psalm 77:12 ESV)

External: community, friends, finances, church, literature, medical, exercising, support services

*"The greater number of and diversity of coping methods, the less likely a person will experience a crisis."*²

With a change in perspective, once a person begins to identify, develop, and/or utilize the available resources, the subjective distress will be lowered to a manageable level.

Gerald Caplan provides seven characteristics of effective coping behavior.

1. Actively explore reality issues and searching for information
2. Freely expressing both positive and negative feelings and tolerating frustration
3. Actively invoking help from others.
4. Breaking problems into manageable bits and working through them one at a time.
5. Being aware of fatigue and pacing coping while maintaining control in as many areas of function as possible
6. Mastering feelings where possible; being flexible and willing to change.
7. Trusting on oneself and others and having a basic optimism about the outcome.³

As you can observe, Caplan does not take into consideration a Christian Worldview. A fundamental characteristic that is found in the arsenal of the believer is the theological awareness that ultimately we are not in control of anything in our lives, with the exception of how

COPING METHODS AND RESOURCES:

"The greater number of and diversity of coping methods, the less likely a person will experience a crisis."

- Norman Wright

CAPLIN'S CHARACTERISTICS:

Caplan ignores the unique benefits that are affording the follower of Jesus when facing trials and troubles.

Can you think of what other biblical benefit is provided for us virtue of God's redemptive and sanctifying grace in the life of the believer?

² Wright, Norman H. *Complete Guide to Crisis & Trauma Counseling*. Expanded ed. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publ. 2011. Pg. 132.

³ Caplan, Gerald. *An Approach to Community Mental Health*. NY: Grune & Stratton. 1964.

we react to our situation. God, on the other hand is in control of all our situations, and is never caught off guard.

This awareness, establishes a peace reflected in the Philippians passage where Paul writes, *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* -Philippians 4:4-7 ESV

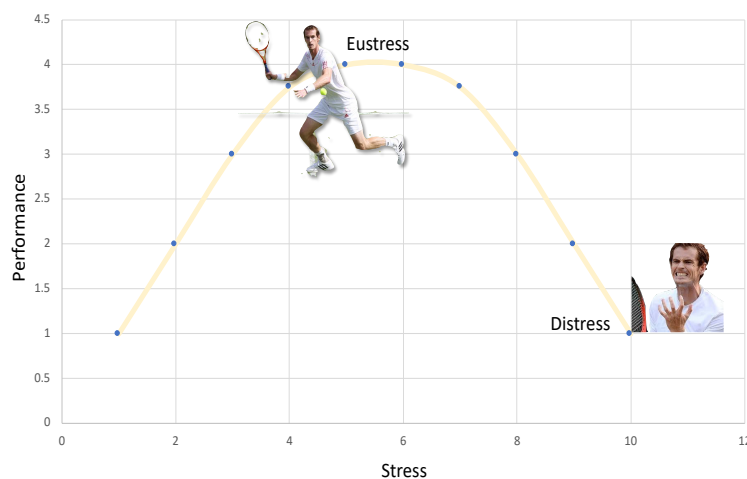
SUBJECTIVE DISTRESS

What is the difference between Crisis and Stress? Stress is different from a crisis, though they are often confused. If people can cope with the precipitating event, they will likely experience stress but not a crisis.

A rise in anxiety is a typical reaction to the initial impact of a threatening event. A person may experience shock, disbelief, distress, and panic.

The increased anxiety is often a healthy defense mechanism. If the initial anxiety is not resolved, the person may experience disorganization. During this phase of the crisis, the person often experiences feelings of guilt, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, confusion, and fatigue, leaving them in a vulnerable state.

Ironically, anxiety does have the power to generate energy and increase coping skills. For example, when a child is in danger and the parent experiences a surge of adrenaline, allowing him to rescue the child (Incredible Hulk Phenomenon). This sort of anxiety or “stress” is called **Eustress** (good stress).



This type of stress empowers you to grow in three areas:

- **Emotionally**, eustress can result in positive feelings of contentment, inspiration, motivation, and flow.
- **Psychologically**, eustress helps us build our self-efficacy, autonomy, and resilience.
- **Physically**, eustress helps us build our body (e.g., through completing a challenging workout).
- **Spiritually**, eustress is often equated with faith building, in that it motivates us to trust God in areas we may feel overwhelmed.

Everyone needs some “stress” to perform at the peak of their abilities, so at the beginning, as stress increases, so does performance. But, if stress keeps increasing, there comes a point where performance will drop off (i.e. test anxiety).

TWO CATEGORIES OF CRISIS

DEVELOPMENTAL CRISES

Developmental Crises are normal, transitional phases that are expected as people move from one stage of life to another. They take years to develop and require adjustments in the family as members take on new roles. People often seek counseling because of their inability to cope with the evolving needs manifest.

Examples of Developmental Crises⁴:

STAGE	CRISIS	LIFE CHALLENGE
<i>Infancy</i>	<i>Trust vs Mistrust</i>	<i>Mom fails to bond/nurture infant Father fails to join in nurturing</i>
<i>Toddler Years</i>	<i>Autonomy vs Shame and Self-Doubt</i>	<i>Parents fail to allow independence and are overcontrolling</i>
<i>Preschool Years</i>	<i>Initiative vs Guilt</i>	<i>Child unable to interact with other children</i>
<i>Childhood Years</i>	<i>Industry vs Inferiority</i>	<i>Child fails to master skills at school (academic, physical, social skills)</i>
<i>Adolescence</i>	<i>Identity vs Role Confusion</i>	<i>Parents fail to provide freedom and responsibilities Parents fail to understand the needs of the teen Teen fails to manage new responsibilities Teen fails to find acceptance with peers</i>
<i>Young Adult Years</i>	<i>Intimacy vs Isolation</i>	<i>Young adult fails to develop intimate relationships (loneliness) Young Adult fails to find independence from parents</i>
<i>Middle Adult Years</i>	<i>Generativity vs Stagnation</i>	<i>Spouses fail to rekindle marital bond Adult fails to involve self in new and fulfilling activities Fail to identify a sense of life-calling</i>
<i>Mature Adult Years</i>	<i>Independence vs Dependence</i>	<i>Older adult fails to continue participation in life Older person experiences depression about life Older adult frustrated and threatened by physical and professional limitations</i>

SITUATIONAL CRISES

Situational crises are those that emerge with the occurrence of uncommon and extraordinary events that an individual has no way of forecasting or controlling.

Some examples of situational crises are;

Crime	Sexual Assault	Death
Divorce	Illness	Disaster
Domestic Abuse	Financial Crisis	

A number of Situational Crisis can become crises unique to specific life stages within genre of Developmental Crisis of life. For example, adolescences can be a stormy period, in which teenagers can struggle with their independence while in need of the family system to provide the external resources needed to address their distress. For this reason, most adolescent intervention programs require family involvement.

Consider some of the Situational Crises that can occur for adolescents: Teen Pregnancy, Gangs, Suicide, Bullying, Runaway, Eating Disorders, Drug Experimentation, Gender Identity Confusion, Self-harm Behavior, Legal Trouble. Your textbook from Van Pelt and Hancock elaborates on several of these issues and more. We will also, spend time discussing some these challenges in week six of this course.

⁴ Source: Adapted from Erikson, 1953.