

3.5 Crisis Response

Overview of Crisis and Trauma

The Chinese write the character for crisis by combining two other characters, danger and opportunity. Every crisis involves a potential for long lasting emotional trauma. At the same time, a crisis presents the individual and everyone involved in that individual's life an opportunity for new understanding and personal growth.

As we face situations in our lives that involve a crisis or a trauma, it is important for leaders to know that there is no formula for getting through the crisis without any emotional fallout. Grief reactions are a part of crisis and trauma. Grief reactions will differ for each individual. It may be hard for you as a leader to understand when a person is in crisis because it may not be a situation that you would consider to be overwhelming, yet it may be a true crisis for the individual experiencing the situation. It is important to listen to each individual in your group as they communicate with you, and refrain from judging their emotional response to the given situation. If you can validate for the individual that you can empathize with what they are feeling, you can strengthen that member's trust in the group, facilitating a quicker resolution of the crisis response.

In some scenarios, it is quite clear that anyone would be in crisis given the same situation: serious illness, serious accident, victim of a crime, or death of a loved one. In these situations, most leaders find that not only does the individual with the crisis go through the grief process, in a way the entire group responds with a grief reaction. Each individual in the group will respond differently. The more events in their own lives that haven't been resolved adequately will add to their reaction. This explains why sometimes a friend may respond with more emotion to a given situation than the individual experiencing the crisis. As a leader, your organized response to a crisis within your group can work to strengthen the bond of that group, or can destroy the trust group members have in the group.

There is no set formula to assist in every crisis situation. However, the more you as a leader know about the grief process, as well as about resources for individuals in crisis, the better able you will be to handle any given situation. The following information is given as a guide and resource to support you should you ever need to deal with crisis or trauma in your group. You are encouraged to seek out expert advice should any traumatic event occur in your group, or should you have any questions about the best way to respond. Your best resources for dealing with crisis and trauma are Chaplains, Counseling Centers, professional therapists, and health care providers, as well as other leaders who have gone through similar experiences in their groups.

Grief

Grief is a natural process that allows you to adjust to a significant change or loss. Grief may be expressed physically or emotionally, and may have some of the same symptoms as depression. The following tips may help ease the grieving process.

- Take as much time as you need to grieve. Review mementos, play nostalgic music, and read old letters.
- Let yourself cry. If you can, let go and sob.
- Talk about your grief with a friend. If your friend tells you to snap out of it, find a more sympathetic listener. Your clergy may also help you to understand and deal with your loss.
- Friends may feel awkward about mentioning your loss. Let them know it is all right to talk about it.

Stages of Grief



- These stages can occur in any order. The person grieving may skip some and may repeat any one or all of the stages.
- The grieving process is different for everyone. Some may grieve longer than others. Allow the person all the time they need.
- Do not be discouraged if you are on the receiving end of a grieving person's anger. Give them some time, and then write a note of encouragement to touch base again. Ask someone else in your group to contact the individual if they do not want to talk to you.

The Art of Kind Words

Writing a sympathy note to someone who has lost a love one is not easy. "You want to say the right thing, but you don't know what that is," say Hilary Zunin, co-author with husband Leonard M. Zunin of *The Art of Condolence: What to Write, Say, Do at a Time of Loss* (Harper Perennial, July 1992.) Yet she points out, "Expressing your feeling on paper doesn't have to be a chore." Her helpful dos and don'ts:

- **DO** write a note even if you've sent flowers.
- **DO** mention special qualities of the deceased – how the person influenced your life, or personal traits you admired. (If you did not know the deceased, something like, "I never met your mom, but I know how wonderful you are. I'm sure a part of her is in you" is appropriate.)
- **DO** recount a personal memory of the deceased, if you can. It's Okay to recall something humorous.

- **DO** offer specific assistance. “Why don’t I take the kids to see a movie next week? I’ll call you to set up a day.” Make sure you follow up.
- **DON’T** tell the person what to do or how to feel, as in: “Be thankful you’re young and can have another child.” Or, “You must get on with your life.” Or, “It was really a blessing – you must be relieved.”
- **DON’T** minimize the person’s grief.
- **DON’T** compare. If you’ve recently experienced a loss, share but don’t compare your own experience with that of the bereaved. The phrase “I know exactly how you feel” is a definite DO NOT!
- **DON’T** shy away from expressing your sympathy in cases of suicide or the death of a child. Address the situation honestly: “I was stunned when I heard about Sandra’s suicide.” Or, “I can’t begin to imagine how difficult this loss must be for you.”
- **DON’T** be a “condolence dropout.” Grieving is a long-term process and people need repeated contacts from those who care about them.
- **DO** what you are comfortable with! If you are in a leadership role and do not feel comfortable talking with the bereaved about their loss, ask someone who is comfortable to be the primary contact. **DON’T** feel like you must do it all as the leader.

SAMPLE NOTES FOR HOSPITAL/SYMPATHY

Congratulations on the birth of your son/daughter! We are looking forward to seeing them at our MEPS in 18 years! The recruiters will be calling! Sincerely, what a blessing! As you get settled in with (baby’s name), please let us know if you need anything. Again, best wishes!

*We are so sorry to hear of the loss of your mother. Losing a parent hits home with all of us, and we know that this isn’t an easy time. If there is anything we can do, please let us know.
With sympathy,*

*Get well soon! We miss you! We hope as you convalesce at home, you will keep in mind that we are all here rooting for a quick recovery for you. If you need anything, please give us a call!
Sincerely,*

*We hope that your surgery went well. You know that you and your family are in our prayers! We are hoping for a quick recovery for you. You should be hearing from us soon to see if you could use some assistance with meals, transportation, or child care. Get well soon!
Sincerely,*

Our deepest sympathy goes out to you and your family. Words cannot convey how we feel. We always remember how (name) would (special memory). He will surely be missed by all. We can only hope that your memories of (name) will help sustain you through the next few months. We will be contacting you to see

*how we can be of assistance, especially with the children. If there is anything you need, please know we will stand by you.
With sympathy,*



Using An Emergency Contact Tree

The emergency call tree will be used in the event of a command crisis or traumatic event. It usually consists of mature, experienced volunteers or points of contact (POCs) who have been trained specifically for these calls. This special group of callers is separate from a social call tree. Every attempt should be made to contact every member of the command, including spouses of members at home or at their work place. It is critical that information be kept updated in order to have an accurate list of phone numbers. It is suggested that you pass non-essential information at least once a quarter to insure accuracy of the list, i.e. test your list on a regular basis. When there is a crisis, it is too late to correct the contact tree.

This guide should be read before starting your calls. The news you receive to pass on may be upsetting you and to all the members of the command in varying degrees. You will be dealing with members and their spouses in a very stressful situation. Remember, you're going to have to be calm in your attitude and organized in what you say.

In the event of an accident or mishap at the command:

- Only the Commander or designated representative may start the Emergency Contact Tree.
- The original message should be written down, and kept as concise as possible, but include all pertinent information.
- The Commander or designated representative should contact the Readiness Support Group (RSG) Volunteer Coordinator. He/she will copy the message word for word. The message will then be sent through the emergency contact tree.
- Each POC will explain that there has been a mishap in the command. If calling a family member, first assure the caller that their spouse is fine. Ask that they get a paper and something to write with, that you have a message to pass from the Commander. Ask that they take the message down word for word.
- Read the information you have received. Don't engage in speculation. This is not the time to offer opinions on what may have happened. As a command representative, your opinions will be taken seriously and could cause confusion and hard feelings later.
- Check back with any family member that needs additional assurance and encourage spouses to get together for support if needed.

- Civilian and military members should contact their own family members if it is possible, however it is important that someone contact all family members before they hear the information via the media. If in doubt about the family's communication with the MEPS member, call the family member.
- Information should NOT be left on answering machines or with message-takers. Ask that the individual call you back immediately upon their return, then pass the information. This information should never be passed as an e-mail.

- In the event of a non-mishap communication (such as severe weather closing the MEPS): Follow the same procedures as above. It is the Commander's discretion if information may be left as a message, but there is no guarantee the intended person received the message unless you speak directly to them.

Possible Roles of the RSG in Times of Crisis

- Trained as emergency callers.
- Organize food, child care, and transportation for families in crisis.
- Send get well and sympathy cards to family members on behalf of the command.
- Organize assistance drives as needed for family members in crisis (i.e. blood drives for leukemia patient, clothes drives for victims of a house fire, etc.)
- Information and referral resource for families in crisis.
- _____
- _____
- _____

Responding to Non-Routine Calls

Not all calls will be routine. There are three types of calls that a POC may have to handle:

1. Crisis
2. Emergency
3. Suicide

Important! POCs are not trained counselors! The goal in these calls is to make the appropriate referral as quickly as possible. POCs should notify the Commander about the referral as soon as possible.



Crisis Calls

A person could be in crisis and call for any of the several reasons, including:

- Fatalities
- Chronic illness
- Divorce
- Bankruptcy

Crisis calls can involve one person, a family, or the whole MEPS. In a crisis, the caller feels unable to cope with the situation. The caller needs information, emotional support, and the reassurance that he or she can handle the situation.

Keep in mind that the caller may be overwhelmed by emotion. The person may be feeling a combination of the following emotions:

- **Anger** – may be hidden behind other feelings. The anger could be directed at another, or turned inward, resulting in depression. An example would be if a caller refers to his or her spouse in a sarcastic way.
- **Helplessness** – the person feels unable to cope, with nowhere to turn. One example might be a caller who says she is just not “strong enough” to be a military spouse.
- **Anxiety** – a combination of worry and uncertainty. Anxiety is a normal response to challenging situations, but when it gets out of hand, anxiety can lead to confusion, poor judgment, questionable decisions, and self-defeating behavior. It can immobilize a person. One example of extreme anxiety might be a first time expectant parent. The caller could be so anxious about the enormity of what he or she needs to accomplish before the baby’s arrival, that he or she may just do nothing.
- **Lowered self-esteem** – the person doesn’t see himself or herself as competent. An example might be a caller remarking that he or she “has never been successful at anything”.

If your caller is overwhelmed by emotions, let him or her know that these feelings are a normal part of a challenging event and that it’s okay to have these feelings. You may have to calm down the caller before addressing the problem.

Remember also that the concept of crisis is relative. One person’s crisis is an ordinary event to someone else. In addition, you are not responsible for another person’s crisis.

Emergency Calls

An emergency call is often a life-and-death situation involving a serious or terminal illness, injury, or death. It is very important to have an updated resource file with emergency numbers for police, fire, ambulance, poison control center, etc.

The goal is to make a referral. The POC should make sure that he or she understands the feelings involved and the facts of the situation. The referral should be very specific.

Again, the caller may need to calm down first. The POC should speak in a reassuring and positive voice, which may help to calm the caller.

One last tip is to deal with the caller, even though he or she may be talking about someone else involved in the situation.

Suicide Calls

The tips for handling crisis and emergency calls also apply to suicide calls. In all of these calls, remember that the POC has mandatory reporting obligations in certain situations. This is especially true with suicide calls. You must take immediate action to inform the appropriate agency when a person threatens suicide. You should call the established emergency response number.

Here are some other tips for handling these calls:

- Always take the threat of suicide seriously.
- Don't make promises that everything will be all right.
- Get the person's name, location, and phone number in case he or she hangs up.
- Get help. Try to keep the caller on the phone while someone else calls the police. If another person is in the house with you, give him or her a note to phone for help.

Important! Be sure to get the Commander's guidance on this issue. Many commanders have prescribed responses based on local resource availability.

Crisis Response Exercise

Determine the best response to the following situations:

Situation 1 – You receive a phone call from a spouse who says the husband has moved out of the house and wants a divorce. The spouse is crying, saying she still loves her husband and doesn't understand why he wants a divorce. She is worried that she will have to move out of the house and can't afford to live anywhere else. She continues to say that she can't cope with this situation and doesn't know what to do.

Your response:

- a. Tell her that you can't talk to her right now because you are on a lunch break. You ask her to call back in an hour.
- b. Tell her that you are going to speak to the husband and get his side of the story. And that you will call her back in an hour.
- c. Stay on the phone and identify her concerns. Give her the contact information for the local Chaplain or the Military One Source. Tell her you will call back in 1-2 days to see how things are going, and invite her to call you again if she still has concerns.

Situation 2 – A few days later, this same spouse (see Situation 1) calls. Says her husband was at the house last night and they got into an argument that turned into

physical violence. She says the husband slammed her against the wall and tried to choke her. She is scared to do anything because he will hurt her again.

Your response:

- a. You take the time to hear her concerns and help her develop a plan. Part of that plan is to call a women's shelter and then to notify the MEPS Commander.
- b. You tell her you understand what she's going through because you were also abused in an earlier message. You start telling her your story of being abused for 10 years and that your ex-husband was a "jerk". You decided to stay in the marriage until the children were old enough.
- c. You invite her to stay at your house and promise not to tell anyone about what happened.

Situation 3 – In a different situation, you find out that a co-worker's child has been diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Your response:

- a. You find out that the co-worker will be at the hospital a lot. You organize the RSG to prepare meals for the family and offer to run errands.
- b. You send a sympathy note to the family.
- c. You follow-up the sympathy note with a call to the family.
- d. All of the above

Exercise Answers

Situation 1: c

Situation 2: a

Situation 3: d