



Coping with Crisis

Six Steps for Caring for Yourself in Times of Crisis

Tragedies happen in our world everyday. While some befall us directly, horrors like the recent violent tragedy on the Virginia Tech campus can affect us just as deeply. The startling realities we witness through pervasive news reports on television and the internet can cause “secondary trauma.” Secondary trauma is the negative and sometimes debilitating emotional response we experience when affected by the losses of others. Exposure to this trauma can cause emotional, physical and spiritual exhaustion and impairment.

No one can ever be fully prepared for every crisis or exposure to crisis. We can, however, make choices that lead to growth and healing. There are decisions and actions we can take to minimize the impact and maximize the recovery from secondary trauma.

Below are some six important suggestions that can help in times of Crisis:

Understand normal reactions

It would be difficult to not have horrific headlines and images played in our minds again and again after learning of recent tragedies such as the Virginia Tech massacre, or the fatal workplace violence incident at NASA, or even the accident of fallen Blue Angels pilot. It is common to experience a wide range of emotions that are too complex to organize. It is not simple to wrap our minds around reasons for sudden death or perpetrated violence. Therefore feelings of shock and disbelief, as well as fear and sadness, can affect all areas of our lives and drown our spirits. These are normal reactions to abnormal situations.

Realize effects of other losses

There are two major issues that can affect how you cope with crisis: your past and your present. Any past experiences you may have had with crisis or trauma can affect how you approach crisis today. If you’ve been affected by painful past events - a family death, or divorce or a national tragedy - you may find yourself consumed with flashbacks and memories of these times. Your present condition will also affect how well you deal with stress. Life’s stressors, such as such as caring for an aging parent or enduring financial problems, may seem magnified when experiencing another trauma.

Consider past healing

Most likely, you have survived one or many previous losses or traumas. Consider what helped you most and seek similar solutions or supports. What activities, actions, or involvements led you through healing in past stressful times? Also consider what did not help, and try to not repeat those coping attempts - such as indulging in unhealthy behaviors, or not addressing your feelings at all.

Talk with children & inquire about school safety issues

If you are a parent, a key concern may be how to address such terrible events with your children. There is an increased level of stress in those who have school-age/college-age children, and for those who work in an educational environment. These are normal reactions to emerge after random acts of violence against innocent student and school faculty. Research has shown that human-made traumatic events are more psychologically distressing to individuals than natural disasters. And while these types of disasters cannot be 100% preventable, educational institutions can put security measures in place to limit the accessibility to the facility. Another imperative issue schools should consider is how prepared and organized they are to respond to event once it has occurred.

Consider the following suggestions:

Talk with your child's school/university about what safety/security measures are in place to prevent an act of violence.

- Specifically inquire as to what their Crisis Plan entails, what is the make-up of their Crisis Response Team, and what type of Crisis Response are they prepared to activate. The Federal Government mandates all schools to establish crisis plans and crisis teams.
- Have they performed tabletop and/or full-scale drills of their Crisis Plan and Response?
- Has their faculty and support staff been trained how to specifically handle a crisis specifically an intruder in the building or a student with a weapon?

Lastly, if your children are at an age where they are exposed to the news, talk to them about the recent events. Allow them to express their fears and feelings about these events.

Remember to use their level of development as a guide – do not give too much information to very young children.

Be intentional in self-care

Take care of yourself! Be patient, but also be deliberate in daily choices that bring health and healing. Spend time with friends and family. Go for a walk. Take a bubble bath or read a good book. These, and other activities of self-care, can go a long way to balance the trauma of events outside of our control. They bring emotional, as well as physical, relief and are necessary in preventing further strife and turmoil.

Recognize need for help

If your stress is so strong that it gets in the way of your daily life, talk with someone. Don't try to go it alone. You can start with a trusted friend, relative or minister. If there are ongoing debilitating consequences resulting from any crisis or critical incident, this posttraumatic stress can be dealt with, and you can regain your life again. You may want to talk with a mental health professional to discuss how well you are coping with recent events. Seek help early, before the devastation of secondary trauma causes emotional or physical burnout.

Do you have a question you would like to share? Email AskSusan@Centerstone.org.

For confidential and professional help in recovering from any current or previous crisis, contact Centerstone at (615) 460- HELP (4357) or visit www.Centerstone.org.

About Centerstone

Centerstone (www.centerstone.org), a not-for-profit organization, is the largest behavioral healthcare provider in Tennessee and the ninth largest in the nation. Serving the community for more than fifty years, Centerstone provides a full range of behavioral health and related educational services to individuals of all ages and their families. Centerstone is devoted to research that seeks to identify, treat and eliminate mental illness. Centerstone provides services to more than 50,000 individuals annually. Children, adolescents, adults, seniors, and families all receive help from a multitude of different programs at more than 65 facilities and 140 partnership locations throughout the region. For more information about Centerstone, please call (615) 460-4357 or toll free at (888) 291-4357.

About Susan Gillpatrick, MEd, LPC, CTS

Susan Gillpatrick, Centerstone Crisis Management Specialist, primarily works in the field with clients in critical incident response situations, and in Centerstone's wellness trainings and presentations. She is also responsible for planning and implementing marketing and growth strategies for Centerstone's Crisis Management Strategies.

In recent years, Ms. Gillpatrick worked for the Shelby County Government Victims Assistance Center in Memphis. There, she co-developed a model program for the state of Tennessee entitled, "Homicide Response." Her work in this area received the 2000 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties.

Ms. Gillpatrick is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Trauma Specialist, Certified Workplace Conflict Mediator, and Mental Health Service Provider in the state of Tennessee and a National Certified Counselor. She is also a member the American Counseling Association, the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, the Tennessee Mental Health Counseling Association, and the Middle Tennessee Employee Assistance Professionals Association. She is a frequent presenter at local and national conferences, and has had numerous articles published. She received her Master of Education degree in Human Development Counseling from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.

To request Susan Gillpatrick to speak with your group or organization about complete wellness in living, contact her at (615) 460-4445 or susan.gillpatrick@centerstone.org.