

## How to Survive a Crisis



*By Hal Pickett, PsyD, LP, ABPP*

No matter who you are, where you are, or what you're doing with your life, someday something very bad is going to happen very suddenly.

How are you supposed to handle that?

Sudden stressors, like job loss, the end of a relationship, or a family crisis often create a wide array of feelings that can change rapidly. Sometimes these feelings are directed at something external, like anger, depression, anxiety, fear, or irritability towards a loved one. Sometimes they are more internal, like questioning your own competence, having a fluctuating self-image,

and feeling like all the usual stressors and issues you're used to dealing with are suddenly much worse.

All of these feelings are normal, and you are not worse in any way if you feel some or all of them. But it's important that they are expressed and controlled in a healthy way. Start by paying attention to how you're reacting to the situation and the feelings it's giving you: watch your sleep, eating patterns, exercise habits, caffeine and alcohol intake, and how you think about yourself.

### **What If I'm Feeling Like the Situation Is Overwhelming Me?**

Sometimes a situation, crisis or not, is best handled with a professional at your side. If you notice any of these things, talk to a therapist -- they want to help!

- Feeling emotionally "stuck."
- Your sleep is being disrupted.
- Your appetite is changing.
- Your energy levels are unusually low.
- Your mood is significantly changing.
- You're having thoughts of self-harm.
- You're uninterested in your usual go-to activities.
- Your anger has suddenly increased.

Even though what happened is difficult to handle, it's important to talk about it. Telling your story helps to reprocess what happened and can help you reframe it in your mind. The more you talk about a situation, the more accustomed you become to it, and the less power it has over you. Talking about it also gets you outside help from the community: it can create new options for you as other people share ideas, help you find kindred spirits, let you learn from other people and them from you, and provide an emotional release as you stop carrying the problem by yourself.

But, as important as it is to share your story, it's equally important to share it in a healthy way that you're comfortable with. First, remember to only say as much as you want. You do not

need to bring up everything if you don't want to. Sometimes there's a tendency to spill everything when you're in the moment, but if you say more than you want to, or more than you'd be happy about later, you may end up feeling more vulnerable than before instead of strengthened. Second, talk to people you feel you can ask something from -- if you need advice, a plan, or just someone to listen, and then you don't ask for it or get it, it can make your stress and emotions worse. Third, as time after the conversation goes on, be aware of the feelings that come from opening yourself up to the other person and sharing what happened. It's good to talk about those feelings, too.

### **I've Dealt with the Initial Emotions. What Next?**

When a crisis first hits, it feels like it will feel that intense forever, and that everything will always be as bad as it was in those first moments. But things will change, and your thoughts and actions will shape how things change. So once you've dealt with the initial emotional reaction, it's time to focus on your actions.

For starters, even though things may be in flux, it's important to keep a schedule. Pattern it after your old schedule as much as possible: Get up at the same time you did before, eat meals at the same times, work on projects at the same time, etc. Of course, there will be differences you can't ignore. For example, if you've lost a job, you won't need to be at work at a certain time. You'll be tempted to sleep in, watch all the shows you didn't have time for, work on the projects you'd been putting off, and constantly help family and friends with their errands and tasks.

All those things can be okay if they're moderated. But if you give in to any and all of them to the point that they completely change your daily life, you're going to have problems.

Suddenly sleeping much more than usual disrupts your brain's schedule and ends up making you feel even more tired. Humans need structure and order; without it, we tend to be lazy, spend a lot of time daydreaming, and lose track of time. Scheduling our day not only provides structure and keeps daily life similar to what it was before for consistency, but it also helps us know what we do with our time, know that we accomplished something that day, and keeps us

focused. Eating, sleeping, and exercising on a schedule is particularly healthy -- both the brain and the body thrive on regularity.

### **What Does a Post-Crisis Schedule Look Like?**

A post-crisis schedule should mimic what your schedule was like before the crisis. It doesn't need to be exact, but it should be close. Sticking to the job-loss scenario, this is what a daily schedule could look like to mirror what life looks like when you have a job:

<u>Work Day</u>	<u>Out-of-Work Day</u>
6:30 Wake up	7:00 Wake up
7:00 Leave for work	7:15 Read the paper over breakfast
7:30 Arrive at work	8:00 Work on job hunting
10:00 Break, return to work	10:00 Break for walk
10:15 Return to work	10:30 Return to job hunting
12:00 Lunch	12:00 Lunch
1:00 Return to work	1:00 Work on a project
3:00 Break, return to work	3:00 Break for a walk
3:15 Return to work	3:30 Return to project
5:00 Leave for home	4:30 Have a cup of coffee
5:30 Arrive at home	5:30 Quit work for the day

Here's the thing with a post-crisis schedule: It has to work for you, or you won't do it. It needs to fit your lifestyle, it needs to be made with your new situation in mind, and, above all, it needs to be doable. Don't be overly ambitious with it. Include some rewards for you to work towards; in the above schedule, breaks to walk and get coffee are the rewards. But it can easily be something else. And remember to cut yourself some slack -- you're going through something difficult. It's okay to be a little easier on yourself than normal and to know that you might not live out your daily plan every day.

## **Are There Any Silver Linings to My New Situation?**

As bad as things look when a crisis hits, there are almost always some silver linings. If you lose your job, it gives you a chance to re-evaluate your goals, change careers if you'd like, and use some of your newfound spare time to do things you didn't get a chance to before. If a relationship ends, you have an opportunity to reflect and learn how to have a better one, go out more often with old friends, meet new people, and re-invent your personal life. If a family member becomes ill or is diagnosed with a mental illness that requires your help, you'll now have a chance to spend more time with them, talk about things you didn't before, and get to know them better.

## **How Do I Start to Move On?**

A crisis is also usually a good time to do some strategic planning for your life. It can stun you into seeing everything in a new perspective, and that can be very useful. It may feel overwhelming at first as you start to look at everything with new eyes, so looking at things strategically can help calm everything. A solid way to start is with an analysis method borrowed from the world of business.

You may have heard of "SWOT" goals being used for new products. It stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, and provides a framework for you to assess a goal. It's easily applicable to a new business venture, but you can also use it to look at your life goals. What are your strengths? What are the strengths of your goal? What weaknesses do you and your goal have? Where are the opportunities for you to move towards your goal, and what opportunities will you have to implement it once you get there? What stands in the way of you progressing towards this goal and then living it out? Finally, taking all these things together, is it something you think is attainable, and worth doing?

Try to keep things short and sweet as you think about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Rather than list as many things as possible for each category, try to find patterns and get to the roots.

## **Why Should I Analyze My Goals Right Now?**

Using a SWOT analysis on your life's goals can help you figure out how to move on and adapt by distinguishing your wants from your needs, what you're really aiming for, whether a goal is short-term or long-term, whether it's the ultimate goal or a stepping stone towards something else, and how you can achieve your dreams.

Of course, there's more to figuring out life goals and how to achieve them than just using a SWOT analysis. You need to start by being very honest with yourself -- not just about what you want, but why and how. It also helps to find three intermediate goals that you can start working on in the short-term; feeling that you've accomplished things in the short-term, especially when they're clearly getting you towards your ultimate goal, can be a huge motivator.

As you look at your life and your goals, remember that this process is not like therapy. Instead of being heavily process-focused, like therapy, this is meant to be heavily goal-focused.

If you start thinking about things and you realize you don't know what your goals are, that's okay. The process above is deductive: First you identify the end goal and then you deduce the milestones and action steps to get there. But there's also an inductive way to do it: You start doing things you want or need, and as you go you see a small goal, which leads to more action steps, which leads you to another goal, and so on, until you identify a larger, long-term goal to move towards. Neither the deductive nor the inductive way is better or worse than the other. Both can be equally useful and attainable. Which you pick simply depends on where you are in life.

The last thing to keep in mind is that you should dream! Dreams can help you identify both short-term and long-term goals if you're having a hard time with that. If you've already identified a long-term goal, compare it to your dreams: How different are they? Are they compatible?

## **I've Thought About My Goals. Now What?**

Going through all this goal stuff is going to create some feelings itself. It's perfectly normal if your emotional response is "Now I'm depressed," "I'm going to forget this happened for a bit," "I have been totally enlightened," "I've discovered my dreams and got side-tracked daydreaming about being a flying trapeze artist," or even just "That was whatever."

Any and all of these feelings are understandable, and they can all help with your goals. Sort through your feelings to figure out what worked and what didn't, what was difficult, what was helpful, whether you were able to identify realistic strengths, and whether your weaknesses are getting in the way.

It's rare that anyone gets anything exactly right on the first try. So the next step is to tweak your goals: Make them more reasonable, make them more objective, make them more action-oriented, narrow things down to the first three action steps so you know where you're headed, and make a timeline you can hold yourself to.

## **How Do My Goals Fit in the Grand Scheme of My Life?**

Goals are great. But they're not everything. Some people treat their goals like their entire life plan, but goals should only be part of your life plan. They should be stakes you build around. So once you have your goals and your plan and your timeline, you're ready to move on to making a life plan.

This is not a "Where do you see yourself in five or ten years" thing. If you lay out exactly how you want your life to go, with every single milestone and stage mapped out, you're going to be disappointed and could end up feeling like you've failed if you go off course. All life plans should be short, dynamic, and adaptable, because that's what life requires. Life rarely goes according to plan without hiccups or curveballs. Rather than try to make your plan immune to those unexpected curves, make a plan that can grow with you.

Just how short should a life plan be? There's no real rule. It could be a monthly plan, a weekly plan, or even a daily plan. The key is to make it useful. Make it as simple or complex as you need, as arching or segmented as you need, in a form that you can keep with you.

Everyone's needs are going to be different, but for example, here's what works for me:

- A daily calendar with my schedule and appointments.
- A daily to-do list with daily action items.
- A weekly planner with due dates of short-term goals.
- A monthly planner to organize short-term goals.
- A yearly planner for important dates.
- Long-term goals listed in front for reminders, focus, and encouragement.

Talk to someone about your goals, your life plan, and what you're feeling. Then, once you've tried all this for a little while, look back over the whole experience and ask yourself some questions. How has it gone? What works for you? What ideas have you come across that you could bring into your life? What are you worried about? Do you need help? Who around you can help you? Meet up with the person you initially talked to and update them on how things are going; what are their thoughts and suggestions?

### **My Life Will Never Be the Same. How Should I Think about That?**

It's perfectly okay to mourn the life you don't have anymore. But as with all things, there is a time when you need to start thinking about the future. That doesn't mean you need to suddenly stop being sad, or hurt, or worried. It just means that you need to learn how to carry the pain so it doesn't weigh you down. Maybe you'll look back at what happened and see that it was a good thing in the long run. Maybe it will always be a painful memory. Either way, it's important that you don't simply try to ignore what happened so things go on unhealthily. You may need to readjust your life to adapt to what happened. Maybe you need to readjust yourself. But don't let what happened make you think any less of yourself. Even if the crisis happened a while ago and you're just now starting to deal with it and move on. Bad things happen to everyone, everywhere. And things will be better again.

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