

Staying Stable when a Loved One is in Crisis

Having a loved one in crisis can be a very destabilizing experience. In our drive to be helpful, many of us rush to action. Often that drive is fueled by our own feelings of distress. We want to do as much as possible to bring relief to the person in crisis. It is common to want to rise to action, but sometimes the best action to take is no action. Simply being present is sometimes the best approach to have, both for our loved one and for ourselves.

Each person connected to the situation needs to absorb their feelings about the crisis in their unique way, and this takes time and space; two of the most difficult things to provide when we see a loved one hurting. As support persons, our own feelings of helplessness can be frustrating, overwhelming and even frightening. There are, however, a number of things you can do to help reduce the chaotic feelings a crisis with a loved one brings.

Do not join the crisis: Empathy is helpful; joining in the crisis is not. Taking on the other's pain or feeling a sense of responsibility for it actually reduces one's ability to be helpful and can create confusion for all involved. When called to help another, one must practice "stepping aside and observing" the situation before determining the best way to be helpful. Often just "being with" the person in crisis provides the most comfort.

Build your own support system: It is okay to feel unstable when someone you care about is in crisis. Attending to those feelings is beneficial to both you and the person you care about. Stress knows no boundaries so give yourself permission to ask for your own support.

Ground yourself: Grounding is more than relaxation. Grounding requires finding a way to bring stability to a chaotic mind and body. One of my favorite grounding exercises is simple, yet powerful. Sit comfortably in a chair and place both feet flat on the floor. Close your eyes and think about the stability of the ground beneath your feet. Allow the energy within you to be absorbed into the solid ground, focusing on the stability of the ground, knowing it is strong enough to support all that you bring to it. Relax into the exercise for a full 10 minutes, or as long as you can comfortably remain. Experiencing the solidness of the ground beneath you often reestablishes the feeling of your own internal strength.

Do not personalize other's reactions: When someone is hurting or scared, having self control can be problematic. It is common for one to be impulsive, and in that impulsivity, the likelihood of saying hurtful comments can increase. As the helper, remember that your loved one is in a compromised position emotionally, physically or both. Providing latitude for atypical behavior will reduce the likelihood of being wounded by a loved one's words.

Be specific with your offer: When you offer a gesture of help, know your limitations and only offer that which you can comfortably provide. It is when we offer more than we are able to give that we feel overwhelmed and overstressed.

Find a quarterback for the team: When a crisis requires a team approach, it is helpful to have a quarterback to coordinate the team. Each individual helping in the crisis brings their own talents. Appointing one person to coordinate the helping efforts creates efficiency among those who are contributing. This also can help protect each member

from being overwhelmed. And remember, not everyone can be a front line worker, but all involved in the helping effort are important.

Don't expect immediate resolution: When we reach out to help someone in crisis, we feel a sense of accomplishment and positive movement. The person in crisis is in a different process. Although it may feel good to them to have the help, it will not necessarily bring the feelings of resolution we desire for them.

Be forgiving, both of yourself and of others: Crisis situations take persons out of their normal state of functioning. With time and help, normal functioning can be restored. Be understanding with yourself and others that life as it was before the crisis has temporarily been interrupted. Expectations of relationships as they were before the crisis should be suspended.

Breathe: Many people do not realize that when under stress, we hold our breath. Remember to breathe.

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