



Dealing with a Crisis

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Facing a difficult or dangerous situation. Crises can affect an individual, a family or the whole community.

In a crisis, children need to feel safe and know that there is someone they can rely on. They have similar feelings to adults but may show their distress in actions rather than words. Children can learn about coping from how they see their parents dealing with a crisis.

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What is a crisis?

In a crisis there is usually an event involving change as well as loss. It could be the loss of someone through death or separation, the loss of health through illness or accident, or the loss of something such as a house or a job. Sometimes we are affected by the fear of loss or change.

As a result of the crisis you might feel confused or powerless, or unable to cope because you:

- have never been in this situation before
- have found it hard to cope with a similar situation in the past
- feel tired, worn out, unwell, or like a failure.

The stress of the situation can make you feel overwhelmed.

However, a crisis can also become a chance to make positive changes in your life, to deepen relationships or develop new ones.

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People respond differently to crises, even people in the same family. A crisis for one person may not be a crisis for someone else.

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What causes a crisis?

Many things can lead to a crisis. It may be:

- a sudden threat to your life or safety such as a bushfire, flood or earthquake
- big changes in your workplace
- separation or divorce
- an accident or illness - yourself or a loved one
- community situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other things that might cause a crisis are:

- having a miscarriage
- having a child with illness or disability
- a child starting or leaving school
- a family member in trouble with the law
- moving house
- losing or winning money.

Even good things can feel like a crisis. Things like getting married, having a baby or being promoted are positive but are times of big change.

A crisis can be triggered when a lot of things happen at once or when they build up on each other over time.

How to know when someone is in crisis

Some signs that a person may be in crisis include:

- physical: sweaty palms, looking flushed, pounding heart, rapid breathing, shaking, diarrhoea, vomiting
- thinking: confused, can't concentrate, can't make decisions, memory loss
- emotional: anxiety, mood swings, withdrawal, despair, helplessness, agitation, panic
- behaviour: broken sleep, challenging behaviour, sudden outbursts of anger, crying, drug or alcohol misuse, changes in appetite.

People can often feel:

- bewildered: 'I've never felt like this before'
- scared: 'I feel nervous, worried'
- confused: 'I can't think straight'
- immobilised: 'I feel stuck and nothing helps'
- despairing: 'It all feels hopeless'
- angry: 'How dare he die and leave me'
- apathetic: 'I just don't care anymore'
- overwhelmed: 'I don't feel in control'
- a sense of urgency: 'I need help now!'
- that the situation is not fair: 'Why is this happening to me?'

How children react

Children can have their own crises. Things that may seem small or manageable to an adult can be a crisis for a child. This can confuse parents if they don't know what caused the crisis.

Seeing a parent or parents in distress can set off a crisis for a child. This doesn't mean you should hide your feelings, but you need to be aware of the impact on the child. Reassure them that you are managing this crisis even if you are upset.

Children may:

- become scared of things linked with the crisis, such as loud noises, storms, fires, changes in living arrangements, strangers
- have disturbed sleep or nightmares
- lose interest in school or other activities
- have poor concentration
- fear there will be crises in other areas of their life
- act as though they are younger
- have behaviour problems or problems with friends.
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Children have similar feelings to adults in a crisis but often show their feelings in actions rather than words. They are often not able to tell you how they feel.
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Children react differently at different ages

Reactions can include:

1 to 4 years - Thumb-sucking, bedwetting, fear of the dark, clinging to parents, nightmares, not sleeping or broken sleep, loss of bladder or bowel control, speech or feeding problems, fear of being left alone, being irritable or fretful.

5 to 10 years - Aggression, confusion, withdrawal, competing for attention, avoiding school, nightmares, poor concentration, tummy aches, headaches, fear of the dark, fear of being hurt or left alone.

11 to 13 years - Changes in appetite, broken sleep, antisocial behaviour, school problems, anxiety, aches and pains, skin problems, fear of losing friends and family, acting as if it hasn't happened.

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In a crisis it is common for children to behave as though they are younger.
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What parents can do for themselves

Recognise and express your feelings. Ignoring them won't make them go away. Give yourself time to be sad and to heal but know that you will work through this.

- Focus on what's most important at the moment. Work out what you can control and what you can't. Focusing on what you can control will reduce your stress.
- Connect with supportive family and friends, and seek help from services. In times of community crisis it can help to talk with others in a similar situation.
- Do something kind for someone else. This can help them, and make you feel better too.
- Plan how you will deal with anniversaries and special occasions. These can set off old hurts.
- Be realistic about what you and others can achieve.
- Respect that people deal with crises differently, even those close to you.
- Make time to relax and look after yourself.

What parents can do for children

What children need most in a crisis is to feel safe and know that they have someone they can rely on. They need your reassurance, acceptance, understanding and support.

Your responses

- Be aware of the impact your responses have on children. Even if you are distressed, they need to know you are the adult and there for them.
- It is OK to let children see you are upset. Talk to them about your feelings, and let them know you are working out how to manage the crisis. They will learn how to cope from how they see you coping.
- Take charge if you need to. It will make children feel safer. Let them know they will be looked after. Try not to overreact or panic – children will be more afraid.
- Let children know you don't expect them to look after you, make you feel better, or solve the problem.

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Be positive and tell children you are dealing with the situation and expect things to get better.
Reassure and encourage them but don't make false promises.
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Children's feelings

- Listen to children and tune in to their feelings. Take their feelings seriously.
- Allow them time and space to express their feelings. Some may want to draw, write, tell stories or keep a diary. If they feel aggressive, energetic play may help.
- Help children to have contact with supportive family and friends.
- Spend extra time with children. Do some fun things together. You might spend extra time putting children to bed at night. A night-light may help if they are scared.
- Limit children's viewing of media images of disasters. If they do watch, be there to discuss it with them.

Talking with children

- Talk with children about what is happening in age appropriate ways. Talk when you are calm and reassure them you will work through this.
- Say enough for them to understand what has happened or what the problem is. Answer their questions but don't give details they don't need.
- Keep it simple and use words they understand. Saying that someone 'died' is better than 'passed away'.
- Depending on their age, you may have to repeat things many times, even simple things.
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know something. Say you will try to find out.

Predictable routines

- Keep to usual routines as much as you can. Predictable routines help children feel safe.
- Give them tasks to do, or the chance to help in ways suitable for their age. Feeling some control helps them to cope.
- Include children in decisions where possible, but take care not to involve them in adult problems.
- Have regular family meetings and listen to children's ideas about what's going well or what you will do. Even young children enjoy being involved. These conversations can deepen your connection at this difficult time and build children's sense of being heard and having some input.

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Keep to routines as much as you can. It will help children feel safe and secure. Make sure they eat well, are active and get plenty of rest.

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Children's behaviour

Be patient if children's behaviour is difficult to cope with. They might:

- be quiet or withdrawn
- be teary, clingy, grizzle a lot
- be angry, aggressive, defiant
- fight a lot with their siblings, friends or you
- go back to younger behaviours such as tantrums.
- It is important to see behind the behaviour and work out what your child needs.
- Stay calm and patient, and be reassuring.
- Show you understand how they feel. Help them name their feelings. They may be sad, grieving the loss of someone or something, worried, scared, lonely, frustrated, angry, missing friends or family.
- Ask children what would help them. Work on solutions together.

Getting help

If you are worried about your children or yourself, seek help early.

Let staff at your child's school know you are having problems. It will help them understand any changes in your child's behaviour and they may be able to provide extra help and support.

If you are struggling yourself, seek help from a counsellor or other health professional.

You can get further advice and information from:

- School
- Your GP
- School Nurse
- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/emotional-health/children-young-peoples-emotional-health>
- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/mentalhealth> **Phone:** Just One Number on [0300 300 0123](tel:03003000123)
Text: Parentline on 07520 631590
- **Help in a crisis** - 24/7 immediate advice, support and signposting for people with mental health difficulties in Norfolk and Suffolk, **Phone:** First Response on 0808 196 3494
- <https://parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk/article/when-someone-dies>