

Responding to Emotional Crisis

When someone we know and love is having an experience of intense emotional suffering, it is hard to know what to do. It is natural to feel overwhelmed and afraid. When feeling the fear of the situation it is easy to overreact. We have come to believe that unless we are a trained professional we lack the skills to be with someone in crisis.

A caring friend or family member may in fact, be more effective support than a professional in times of emotional overwhelm. You have a relationship with the person and are a much more natural support. Love is a more powerful force and a stronger healing agent than professional credentials.

That being said, I believe we can all learn some calming and grounding techniques that help us face into the fear of overwhelming situations. Please read "*The Danger and Opportunity in Crisis*" before continuing.

This is what I've learned about being with those who are in emotional crisis:

- Emotional crisis is a cry from deep within that something needs and wants to be seen and heard.
- Emotional crisis is always about something. It never "just happens" out of the blue.
- We are more than our body chemistry, and although there is a biochemical component to all aspects of life, our emotional crisis is about more than neurochemistry.
- There is always meaning in everything we experience.
- Emotional crisis is often the first step in the process of releasing and reorganizing ones life into a greater sense of authenticity and wholeness.
- We have an unquenchable human spirit and a psyche that is coded to survive.
- We can face into overwhelming situations.
- It is not necessary to understand what is happening.
- It is important to BE WITH what is happening.
- It is far more helpful to BE With a *PERSON* than to diagnose and treat an illness.
- Our power and passion is often on the other side of that which we fear the most.
- Being afraid does not mean we are weak or that we are incapable.
- No matter what is happening in the moment or what has happened in the past, there is a part of us that is completely undamaged, is whole, and is connected to a creative life force flowing through all things, every moment, even this one.
- All life is constantly moving into a greater order and more complete state of wholeness.
- Breaking down, falling apart IS part of the process of moving into a greater state of wholeness.
- The potential for transformation is inherent in each moment.
- We can face into and overcome just about anything.

These are important principles to be aware of, not just for your loved one, but for yourself as well. A crisis situation is not only about the person experiencing the emotional suffering. It is about everyone involved. Everyone in the room feels afraid, unsafe, and overwhelmed. The following techniques are for all involved.

These are some suggestions on how to BE WITH someone in emotional crisis:

- **Breathe:**

One of the most powerful tools we have is the breath. When in crisis it is normal to hold one's breath. The fight or flight response sends a message throughout the entire body. All unnecessary systems shut down, muscles contract, and adrenalin is pumped into the system, which magnifies anxiety and agitation. When one is holding the breath or breathing in a shallow way, the whole body is constricted and the effects of fear expand.

So take a slow deep breath and release it with a sigh. A sigh sends a signal to the body to relax. Ask your loved one to take some slow deep breaths with you. If you did nothing else, breathing deeply helps us face into things because as we breathe deeply, the oxygen is traveling throughout our entire system. We begin to slow down and feel calmer. Encourage your loved one to continue taking long, deep, slow breaths, releasing them with a sigh.

- **Honesty:**

Acknowledge what is happening. Let the person know you care. Admit that you feel afraid or feel overwhelmed and don't really know what to do, but you're willing to be here with her or him. Even though your loved one is having a big emotional experience, they are likely to have very keen radar for sincerity or truth, otherwise known as a "bullshit meter" (technical term ☺). Avoid using platitudes and denial. People usually appreciate and relax when others are honest with them. Denial helps no one. It is ok to admit that you may feel helpless and wish you had a way to make the loved one feel better.

- **Control:**

When someone is in emotional crisis, they are usually hyper-vigilant. Any attempt to control a person in crisis will usually exacerbate the crisis. Let your loved one know you want to help them figure out what they need and want, and that you are there for THEM.

- **Presence:**

A solid presence is very comforting. To stay present to the situation, focus on what is happening right now. Focusing on what has happened in the past or might happen in the future takes you out of this moment and makes it difficult to respond to what is happening now. Do not over-react. Talk in a slow, calm manner, continue breathing slowly and deeply, focus on your loved one, providing a steady presence.

- **Suspend the need to fix:**

Trying to brainstorm solutions and 'fix' the situation is not helpful at his time. Trying to fix the situation is often about the helper needing to feel in control, rather than actually providing help. Think about what has been helpful to you, in times of distress.

- **Deep Listening:**

Listen, Listen, Listen. Tell your loved one that you are interested in what is going on for him or her. Listen even if you don't understand what your loved one is saying. Suspend your own judgment and know there is meaning in this, even if you do not see what it is. Try to find a place of fascination in yourself...the inner workings of the psyche is quite brilliant in its coping ability. When we can move from trying to control and stop the process, the process can actually become quite fascinating.

- **Expressing Emotions:**

Allow your loved one to express feelings. Simply hold witness to these feelings. If you are having trouble being with your loved one's feelings, admit that to yourself and your loved one. Often our loved ones feel responsible for our feelings or are unable to express their own authentic feelings because of our difficulty in being with them. It's ok to set limits. Let the person know you will

hold space for their feelings as long as they are not destructive. If anger is a prevalent feeling, suggest beating a pillow, stomping in the woods, making sounds like growling or toning, etc. Suppressing feelings is often part of the cause of emotional crisis.

- **Trust the Process:**

Be aware that emotional crisis is often the first step in the process of releasing and reorganizing one's life into a greater sense of authenticity and wholeness. Breakdown is often a step toward breakthrough. Let your loved one know you believe they are going through an important process and you are willing to support them to find what they need.

- **Ask what is needed:**

Despite what it looks like, most people know what they need, most of the time. Ask your loved one what they think they need. Support your loved one to find what works for them.

- **The Basics:**

Emotional crisis requires getting down to basics. There is really very little that must be done. Food, Water, Rest, and perhaps a walk are all you need to concentrate on. Avoid sugary foods. Sugar triggers emotional instability. A high protein meal is helpful to ground and often balances the emotions. Be sure your loved one drinks plenty of water. Walking or sitting on the earth is a good grounding technique. Holding someone's ankles gently for several minutes draws their energy back into their body. Emotional crisis is often very draining. Your loved one may need a great deal of sleep to recoup the energy expended. You also need sufficient rest and may need help from other friends or supporters.

- **Providing Comfort:**

Often a person in crisis feels ungrounded and unsupported. Perhaps they would like a warm bath, or to wrap up in a warm blanket. Ask your loved one if they would like a hug or would allow you to hold them. A good way to hold someone to provide support is to sit on the floor with your back against a wall or stable piece of furniture. Have your loved one sit in front of you, back towards you, leaning back allowing you to support him or her with your arms gently holding them. Encourage them to breathe deeply and sigh. This is a good way to release tension and when they feel supported they can often surrender into a deeper place of ease. Do not be surprised if emotional release also comes with this surrender. You might also try rubbing your loved one's back or feet. Think about what would help you feel more relaxed and cared about if this were you.

- **Non-Pathology:**

Being with a loved one during emotional crisis takes a lot of time and energy. If you must seek outside support, be sure it is what your loved one wants. Your love and support cannot be duplicated. If at all possible find ways to support yourself and your loved one without pathologizing the experience. Trust there is a much larger process moving through this individual than an "illness."

- **Spiritual Support:**

Seek whatever spiritual support and faith makes sense to you and your loved one. Ask for the transformation of this situation. You need not know what that might look like. Be open to the notion there is a larger creative intelligence flowing through all things all the time. Every moment has the potential for transformation.

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