

PARENTING  
ALL AGES

ParentLink  
guides use 'he'  
and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit  
your child's sex.

Everyone knows about stress—life has lots of it. Stress isn't always unhealthy—it is what makes us get things done on time, or remember things. However, when we get too stressed, stress becomes distress, and things get harder to handle. If we get to the point where we are so stressed that we don't believe we can cope with a situation any more, then we are in a state of crisis. We can have crises at work, at home or in any part of our lives. In a lifetime of bringing up children, parents can be faced with lots of crises.

A crisis is often the time to make changes so things can be better.

## What is a crisis?

A crisis usually has several parts:

- An event—something happens which triggers a crisis. This event usually causes or threatens to cause some sort of loss, for example:
  - loss of someone through death or separation
  - loss of health through illness or accident
  - loss of some thing, a house, or a job
  - loss of good feelings, for example, feeling bad about yourself, feeling old, feeling a failure, feeling alone.
- Feeling that you can't cope with the situation. This may be because you have never been in the situation before, or because right now you feel sick or worn out, or because you are in a similar situation to one you found hard to cope with before.
- An emotional response to the high level of stress such as fear, anxiety, anger.

Sometimes it can be a whole lot of things piling up on each other—it's not always one thing alone.

People cannot stay in crisis forever—it is just too painful. Experts agree that crises tend to last for between a few hours and a few weeks—six to eight weeks at the most. After that time, it is highly likely that either the situation will change, or how we react to it will change.

**Everyone has crises but it's how we deal with them that counts.**

## What can lead to a crisis?

Many things can lead to a crisis:

- losing your job
- changes in your workplace
- losing money or winning money
- an accident or injury to you or a loved one
- death of a loved one
- separation or divorce
- being arrested
- having a miscarriage
- having a child with a disability
- a child starting or leaving school
- a major birthday—a new decade
- natural disasters such as fire, flood
- a child getting into trouble with the law
- children leaving home.

Even 'good' things can lead to a crisis:

- getting married
- the birth of a child
- multiple births
- a promotion
- moving house.



**ACT**  
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Community Services

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# What you need to know about a crisis

- How we react to a crisis situation is very much a personal thing. What feels scary to someone else may not feel scary to you. What is a crisis to you today may not be a crisis to you next week.
- In a crisis there is always a sense of danger and a sense of actually or possibly losing something or someone.
- Crises always involve making a choice. We can be overwhelmed by it. We can feel trapped or powerless.
- We can either do nothing about it and accept the situation or we can choose to do something about it.
- When we are in crisis we usually cannot see what we can do about it. Usually there are ways—we just can't see them, because we are too close to the problem.
- A crisis signals a time when we are most willing to make changes.

## How to know when someone is in a crisis

There are signs which suggest that a person is in crisis and these include:

- physical—for example, sweaty palms, looking flushed, heart palpitations, dilated pupils, rapid breathing, shaking
- behaviour—for example, broken sleep, inability to sleep, antisocial behaviour, sudden outbursts of anger, loss of appetite, crying
- emotional—for example, anxiety, withdrawal, despair, helplessness, agitation, panic
- thinking—for example, confusion, inability to concentrate, inability to make decisions, not thinking straight.

People often show:

- bewilderment: 'I've never felt like this before'
- sense of danger: 'I feel nervous, scared'
- confusion: 'I can't think clearly'
- immobility: 'I feel stuck - nothing helps'
- despair: 'It feels hopeless'
- anger: 'How dare he die and leave me'
- apathy: 'I just don't care any more'
- sense of urgency: 'I need help now!'
- feeling of unfairness: 'Why should this happen to me?'

## How children react

Children have their own crises, which can be very confusing for a parent, particularly when you don't know what caused it. Sometimes things that seem small to adults can be a crisis for a child. It is important to remember that seeing a parent or parents in distress can set off a crisis for a child.

The sorts of feelings children have in a crisis are very similar to the feelings of their parents, but they are usually less able to put them into words. Parents need to know that children often show their feelings in action rather than words. Typical reactions of children in times of crisis can be:

- fear that what happened in one area of life will take over their whole life
- loss of interest in school
- acting as though they are younger
- behaviour problems
- disturbed sleep
- problems with friends
- fear of things that may be associated with the crisis, for example, loud noises, dogs, strangers
- lack of concentration
- always worrying about what could go wrong.

## Children react differently at different ages

- **Early childhood (1–4 years):** thumb-sucking, bedwetting, fear of the dark, clinging to parents, nightmares, sleep problems (can't get to sleep or wakes up), loss of bladder or bowel control (or constipation), speech problems, feeding problems, fear of being left alone, fretful.
- **Childhood (5–10 years):** irritability, whining, clinging, aggressive behaviour at home or school, competing for attention, nightmares, fear of the dark, avoiding school, poor concentration at school, fear of being hurt, fear of being abandoned, confusion, school refusal, general anxiety, headaches, 'tummy aches', or 'being too good', sleep problems.
- **Early teens (11–13 years):** broken sleep, change in eating habits, rebelliousness, school problems (fighting, withdrawal, loss of interest, poor concentration), anxiety, physical problems (headaches, vague aches and pains, skin problems, bowel problems), loss of interest in friends, fear of being hurt, fear of losing friends or family, anger, acting as if it hasn't happened.
- **Late teens (14–18 years):** physical problems (rashes, bowel problems, asthma attacks), headaches, changes in appetite and sleep, agitation, loss of interest in things they normally enjoy, loss of energy, loss of interest in the opposite sex, irresponsible or antisocial behaviour, poor concentration, guilt. Some of these things are part of the ups and downs of this age too.

# What parents can do

## For themselves

Remember that children learn about life from their parents and other adults, so how parents deal with situations affects how children handle their lives.

Children need to learn that bad things do happen in life, but it is how we deal with them that is our test and they will learn this from you.

When you are faced with a crisis it is important to:

- recognise how you are feeling—pretending you don't have feelings will not make them go away
- work out what areas of your life you can control and do so—sometimes doing normal things such as putting in a load of washing will make you feel more in control
- don't be too hard on yourself or expect yourself to be a super-parent—everyone falls in a heap sometimes!
- get support for yourself from friends or relatives, or get professional help—a counsellor, doctor, lawyer or accountant may be able to give you the information you really need
- anticipate problems coming and make plans—anniversaries and special occasions such as birthdays or Christmas can often set off old hurts.

## For children

When a child's world falls apart what is needed more than anything is acceptance, understanding and support. Most of all a child needs to feel that there is someone who can be relied upon.

- Try not to over-react. Your first instinct is usually to protect your child. If you panic you may only make your child more afraid. Take a few minutes to gather yourself together before you talk to your child. Tell your child if you are upset but reassure her that you will be able to support her to manage the situation. If you are too distressed, you may need to get someone else to support you both.
- Allow your children to see that you are upset, but reassure them that you will be okay (if it is true) and let them know that they will be looked after.
- Recognise that your children usually become upset or fearful when you are upset.
- Take charge if you need to, particularly if your child is really upset. You will need to take over until your child is calm enough to take control of herself.

- Don't let the situation be made bigger than it really is but at the same time recognise that your child's sense of it being 'the end of the world' is a very real feeling. Show that you understand how it must feel for her.
- Talk to your child. Give answers, even if it is very hard, but keep your answers as simple as possible, in words your child can understand. As a first answer—'died' is a better choice than 'gone to heaven'. However, 'gone to heaven' may be a good answer if it is part of your family's beliefs.
- You may have to repeat simple things many times.
- Ask your child what she wants or needs from you right now.
- Don't be afraid to say 'I don't know'.
- Try not to lecture.
- Give your children enough information so that they can understand what the problem is, but don't give unnecessary detail. If you tell them nothing, they will probably imagine the worst. Tell them what they need to know—they may surprise you with how much they understand. Ask them to tell you what they understand and what else they want to know.
- Don't expect your children to solve the problem for you. They may well surprise you with the love and reassurance that they offer you, but they will not be able to solve adult problems. Let them know that you don't need them to look after you.
- Try to get your child doing something she would normally do as soon as she can. Something as simple as helping you to take out the rubbish bin can help your child feel some sense of normality again in the middle of chaos.
- Keep to old routines. Let your child keep to his normal routine as much as you can as this helps him to feel safer—but accept that he might just not be able to for a while.
- Contact with friends or relatives may help to make things feel normal again.
- Reassure your child. Remember that actions speak louder than words. Hold your child—it usually makes her feel safer, but recognise if your child, particularly an older child, may not want to be touched. If so, follow the child's cue. Just be there.
- Night-time can be especially frightening for a child. Spending extra time putting your child to bed can be useful. A night-light or allowing your child to come to you in the night may help.
- Allow your young child to use a dummy, a favourite toy or blanket as much as they need. This can reassure them.

## What parents can do *continued*

- Encourage your child with hope and optimism—but don't make false promises. Your child needs to feel there can be a solution, not to have the solution.
- Allow your child to express her feelings and give her time to do so without being rushed.
- Help your child to get feelings out through play or physical activity (play dough, drawing, writing, telling stories or writing letters or keeping a diary).
- If your child needs to be aggressive, help her to find a physical activity that uses energy and gives a feeling of satisfaction (building blocks or a cubby house, hitting a ball, running, going to a gym or playing sports).
- Get help or get information. A consultation with a professional about what is happening for your child may be enough. Act sooner rather than later.

**If you are in crisis yourself, and for the time cannot give your child what he needs, find another adult whom your child trusts to be a support. This is especially important during a family break up or when you are suffering a great personal loss.**

## Reminders

- People going through a crisis often feel as though they are going crazy. Usually they are not!
- Even the most 'together' person can fall apart in a crisis.
- People cannot stay in a crisis forever.
- In a crisis we are usually very keen to change. There is a good chance that with a bit of help, we can come out of the situation having learned a lot and feeling stronger, or in a better position than we were before.

## Contacts

<b>Child and Family Centres</b> (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
<b>Kids Help Line</b>	24-hour	1800 55 1800
<b>Lifeline</b>	24-hour	13 11 14
<b>Parentline ACT</b>	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

## Websites

<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	Parenting and child health information
<a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>	Kids helpline
<a href="http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au">www.parentlink.act.gov.au</a>	Other parenting guides
<a href="http://www.raisingchildren.net.au">www.raisingchildren.net.au</a>	Covers a broad range of up-to-date parenting topics

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