

The Danger and Opportunity in Crisis

Being with a Person Rather than Treating an Illness:

by Deborah (Whittle) Trueheart

I'm sure you've heard that the Chinese character for crisis is a symbol for both danger and opportunity. From my experience the danger in crisis situations is that we'll lose the opportunity in it. To be sure when someone is having an intense experience of psycho-spiritual overwhelm and emotional suffering, it feels frightening and dangerous to that individual and those around him or her.

It is natural to want to do anything to make the situation stop. It is also natural when we feel frightened to overreact to a situation. It is certainly true that the way we view a situation determines our response to it. I'd like to offer a shift in perspective from the danger in a crisis situation to the opportunity in it.

It may seem to you that this emotional crisis just came on suddenly, or you may be aware of some build up of emotional content. This emotional build-up has probably been accumulating for some time. There may have been some event that has triggered the intensity of the situation. That triggering event may even have been something small that acted as "the straw that broke the camels back."

When someone has an intense experience that might be described as a crisis, it is reasonable to assume, even if it seems to have come on suddenly, that there is a reason for it. It is *about* something. The person having the intense experience may not be aware of what it is about. All they know is they are experiencing emotional suffering.

It is not important at the time of the intense situation to understand what it is about. Yet it is helpful if you hold a notion that something *is* going on here that is calling, indeed, screaming for attention. At this moment what is most important is to *be with* the person in crisis in a way that is supportive and helpful. I'd like to offer a few suggestions, using the Chinese character for crisis as a possible model for response.

Using the Chinese character for crisis there are two ways to approach the situation. The first is danger. The second is opportunity.

Danger:

This is the viewpoint most people use when responding to intense situations referred to as crisis. Many people believe the world is a dangerous place and we must be diligent in protecting ourselves. We have been conditioned to fear. We have been taught that when someone is in crisis, they are in danger and those around the person are in danger.

What are we afraid of? We are afraid the person in crisis will hurt themselves or hurt others. We are afraid we do not have the capacity to help this person. We are afraid if something bad happens we will feel responsible. Ultimately, I think we are afraid we will lose the person we love.

Fear skews perspective. It is hard to see the whole picture when viewing it from a perspective distorted by fear. Fear always sees the worse case scenario. Fear feeds on itself and expands very rapidly. It's easy to see in intense situations how everyone involved begins acting out of fear.

When we feel afraid we feel unsafe. The person having the intense experience feels afraid and unsafe and those responding are pulled into the intensity and feel afraid and unsafe. We want the cause of the fear to stop. So stopping the process of this person who is having an intense experience becomes the priority.

It is easy at this point to pathologize the experience. What does that mean? My Webster's New World Dictionary defines pathology as "1. The branch of medicine that deals with the nature of disease, esp. with the structural and functional effects. 2. Any abnormal variation from a sound condition."

One could look at this intense experience as an abnormal variation from a sound condition, especially when focusing on the extreme emotional suffering the person may be experiencing. One could say that the suffering is interfering with his or her ability to function normally and to be of sound condition.

The branch of medicine that deals with the nature of emotional suffering is psychiatry. Psychiatry uses the medical model, which sees the abnormal variation from a sound condition, as a symptom to be alleviated. Pathologizing the experience is when the suffering is looked at as a symptom of illness rather than as part of a larger process. The suffering is seen as the problem. The focus then becomes stopping the suffering. This is a very reasonable desire.

So from the danger perspective, fear is the prevalent motivator and the goal is to focus on the symptom and make it go away. The person experiencing the emotional suffering is taken to a professional or a professional is called into the situation. The suffering is diagnosed as a symptom of an illness. The focus comes off the person. The focus now goes to the illness, which must be managed. As time goes on and more focus goes to the symptom, the larger process is all but forgotten and the person begins to disappear into the illness. They are now referred to as a schizophrenic, a psychotic, a borderline, etc.

This is a very subtle process. The beginning of a person's disappearance into an illness begins with focusing on the danger of the initial crisis and labeling part of the process as a symptom. What would happen if we were able to see the opportunity as well as the danger in crisis?

Opportunity:

Seeing the opportunity in crisis requires a larger perspective. It requires seeing a person's life as part of an ongoing process of development. It is a perspective of seeing the dynamic, ever changing, always evolving quality of life rather than seeing experiences as static events. This perspective is that life moves through us, rather to us, and that there is meaning and purpose in everything in our lives.

It is a holistic perspective that recognizes that any moment of our life is the result of all aspects of our life. Each moment our life is comprised of aspects that are biographical, biological, emotional, intellectual, geographical, ecological, social, and spiritual. In other words we have a history and we function on physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels all at once. The complexity of our inner and outer world is mind-boggling.

There is a lot going on internally and externally in any moment, for any of us. It's impossible to know for sure what's going on in the internal world of a person in crisis. But we can be sure that it's big and it's important. It does seem as though something is screaming for attention.

When I think about the intensity of an emotional crisis, I wonder about what it takes to get to that intensity. Candice Pert in her book, Molecules Of Emotion, says that the human being is a complex informational system. She says the role of emotions is to carry and exchange information throughout our body/being and that our neuro-peptides are the chemical correlates of emotions.

So I wonder about what happens when we suppress emotions. Or what happens when the messages trying to get our attention go unnoticed. I notice that so much of our human experience contains a conditioning to deny our body messages or mistrust our own thoughts, feelings, impulses and desires. We have to work to survive, so we ignore our pain or our fatigue and keep at it to get the job done. We sometimes get the message that in order to belong we have to deny parts of ourselves, often the most authentic parts. Our lives are stressed and we're rushed, so we eat a diet high in sugar and processed food, or we skip meals altogether.

If we experience emotional or physical pain we literally or figuratively slap on a band-aid, take an aspirin and keep going. Or we cover it up with alcohol, recreational drugs, sex, TV, shopping, gambling, binging or some other addiction. All the while our technology, which is supposed to save us time and make our life easier, has made life more alienating and complex. We have very little time for anything that feeds us or sustains us and become very disconnected from ourselves. If we have experienced trauma in our past, that disconnection may be more severe.

My sense is that the spirit and the psyche will only let one disconnect from oneself for so long before some crisis develops to get one's attention. And here is the opportunity in crisis. Is it possible that crisis is a cry for attention from some part of oneself and a call back to connection with a more authentic self?

We have not listened to the many smaller messages. The messages that our body, our emotions, and our spirit have been trying bring to us. So the message expands into an intense experience of emotional suffering. The disconnection may have become so severe it shows up as an experience of non-ordinary state of consciousness in which one hears or sees things others do not.

To be sure, this intense experience is frightening and may feel dangerous. It may certainly feel overwhelming to the one experiencing it and for those trying to respond.

Yet, when viewed from the perspective of opportunity there is a possibility for completion of a larger process.

If the crisis is seen as part of a larger life process rather than an event, there are ways to be with a person and help them reconnect with themselves, discover what is screaming for attention and find the meaning and purpose in this experience. Seen from this larger perspective, this breakdown can become part of a process of breakthrough.

From the perspective of opportunity there is no need to pathologize the experience. The suffering is not seen as a symptom of illness, but rather as a messenger and a doorway to a connection with a more authentic expression of self. Since we have an unquenchable human spirit and the psyche is coded to survive, I believe we can actually face into almost anything. We can learn how to breathe through our fear. We can learn to use calming and grounding techniques. We can learn that by facing into that which scares us the most, we can reclaim our power and our passion.

The opportunity is to stand in the fear, recognize the danger, and stay focused on the present need calling for attention. The opportunity is to *be with* one in crisis, who is a person having an incredibly intense experience, an experience that is both danger and opportunity.

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