

# TIP SHEET

## WHEN A CRISIS HAPPENS

### What is a crisis?

A crisis is any event out of the ordinary which threatens to collapse your usual coping mechanisms. Sometimes the crisis event is unexpected like:

- the sudden end to a relationship
- a serious accident involving family or friends
- the loss of someone you love
- being the victim of a crime, a house fire, or a natural event e.g. a flood.

Some student specific emergencies include for example the crash of your hard drive, loss of your university notes, a critical incident on campus or having to suddenly find somewhere new to live. Other events may be expected but still very distressing when they occur. You may be directly involved in the event or a witness to something that happens.

You may be surprised by the strength of your reaction and by the length of time it takes to recover. Others around you may also be affected leaving you without your normal support network. Sometimes one crisis triggers the memory of other traumatic events adding to the difficulties you're already facing. Some events may seem bigger than others. Their impact on you will vary depending on what else is happening in your life at the time and what meaning you place on the crisis event. Sometimes reactions can be delayed by hours, weeks or even months. Although crisis events are distressing, most people make a good recovery and few go on to have long term problems.

### Common reactions to a crisis

It is reassuring to know that a wide range of initial reactions are entirely normal – you are not going crazy or showing signs of weakness. You are experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Accepting your reaction as understandable and normal is reassuring and can help you settle and gradually deal with the crisis. Each person's reaction will be unique. Even if a group of people are all dealing with the same event the strength and type of reaction will vary from person to person. Common reactions may include:

### Emotional

- Shock and disbelief that the event has occurred
- Feeling numb as if things are not real
- Fear for the safety and well being of yourself and others
- Anger at who 'caused it or allowed it to happen'
- Anger at the unfairness and injustice often leading to a sense of despair and feelings of hopelessness
- Irritability and a loss of resilience for dealing with other issues
- Sadness and grief for the loss
- Feeling depressed or in low spirits for no apparent reason
- Being out of control, wishing you could change the event
- Guilt for not being able to prevent it or for not doing more

### Where can I get help from others?

Sometimes it is helpful to get help straight away particularly if it has been very distressing, other times it may not be necessary until some time later. Either way, do not hesitate to make contact and seek advice.

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus telephone 4921 5801 or at the Central Coast campus 4348 4060. Web site: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/counselling/>
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.

Spiritual support is available through the campus Chaplaincy Centre Newcastle ph 4921 5571 or Central Coast ph 4348 4060. Web site: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/chaplaincy/>

- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as do the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.

### What other resources are available?

#### Websites

[www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au) Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health  
<http://grieflink.org.au> GriefLink

#### Books & Booklets

Kushner, H.S. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. London: Pan  
McKissock, D.and M. Coping with Grief. Sydney: ABC Books.

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STUDENT SUPPORT

[www.newcastle.edu.au](http://www.newcastle.edu.au)

## Physical

- Sleep disturbance due to thoughts about the event going over and over in your mind
- Feeling tired and fatigued
  
- Being startled easily
- Difficulty in staying still
- A pounding heart, sweating, trembling or body aches
- An upset stomach – e.g. diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea

## Thoughts

- Frequent thoughts or mind pictures of the event – almost like you are reliving it
- Attempts to shut out the painful memories
- Dreams and nightmares about the event
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- Trouble making decisions
- A desire to be alone leading to increased social isolation

## Ways to cope with a crisis

- Be gentle on yourself and accepting of your reaction. Remember it is a normal reaction to an abnormal event.
- It helps to talk things out even if normally you keep things to yourself– seek out the support of friends and family. It is OK to express a whole range of emotions and thoughts. If you feel it is difficult to talk to people you know seek out the assistance of a Counsellor, Doctor or Chaplain. Talking things out in the day can reduce the chance of nightmares at night.
- Make a point of being with people who can offer support and understanding. Sometimes it can be surprising who is more able to do this. Support may come from surprising places or you may feel disappointed that other friends or family have not been as understanding as you would have expected.
- Avoid people who may be critical, challenging or demanding.
- Give yourself some time to be alone and time to be with people.
- Reduce as many pressures and demands on yourself as you can. Being gentle in the short term will pay off in the long term.
- Let people around you know that you're not at your best because of the crisis event. Even if you do not discuss the details it can be very supportive for you to know that they are aware.
- Let people know how they can help. We often wish people will know what to do but often they do need some guidance. What you need will be different to someone else. Give yourself permission to ask for help
- Eat nutritious meals and exercise regularly, even if it is just a short walk around the block. This will reduce the likelihood of getting an illness as your immune system may be compromised during a period of stress. Exercise also reduces physical tension as well as anxiety and depression.
- Try to maintain some regular, basic routines. This will help you feel more secure and part of the world.
- Take time out – nurture yourself by doing something that you normally enjoy, even if at first you are not very motivated.
- Avoid making major decisions such as moving house or changing jobs.
- Try not to be impatient. You will have good days and bad days but with time the intensity of your reaction will lessen.

## When professional help might be needed

Professional help might be needed if your feelings are prolonged, persistent or too intense. There is no set recovery time so if you feel you have followed the suggestions on this tip sheet and are not experiencing

some relief seek professional help. There are some suggestions for extra sources of help on the back of this tip sheet.

## Ways to help someone who has experienced a crisis

- Be supportive and offer to spend time with the person. Be available to assist with practical tasks. Don't wait to be asked.
- Provide ongoing support and realistic reassurance and not just in the early stages. It is not uncommon for a stress reaction to be delayed.
- Be a good listener. Don't underestimate the healing qualities of listening and just being with the person.
- Allow the person to deal with the crisis event in their own time – they may recover quickly or need more time. Sometimes things improve only to get worse later on – this can be quite normal.
- Don't make judgments about their reaction to the crisis e.g. "I thought you'd be feeling better by now".
- Avoid platitudes such as "it could have been worse". This only tends to minimise the crisis event.
  
- Make allowances for the person. They may be uncharacteristically snappy, argumentative, unmotivated or anxious. Try not to take this personally.
- If you have also been affected by the crisis event, make sure that you have support for yourself, both practically and emotionally.

## Coping with a crisis and study

The crisis event you have experienced may make it difficult to concentrate on your studies. It is common to feel unmotivated, exhausted and to have difficulty thinking clearly. Some ideas to help you manage your studies include:

- Accept for a time you will not be able to function at your optimal level. It may be helpful to study for shorter blocks of time and to vary the study tasks. Set specific tasks and make your study as interactive and active as possible e.g. underlining, making brief notes, doing a small part of an assignment.
- When your mind wanders gently bring it back. Each time you do this you are helping to train your mind to go where you want it to go.
- Pick the time of day you generally study best.
- Allocate a time each day to process the crisis. Knowing you have this time will help you contain wandering thoughts at other times
- As much as possible try to attend lectures tutorials and labs. The routine and structure often helps. You may wish to notify academic staff that you have experienced a crisis event.
- Ask fellow students for assistance with notes or with anything else you may need, associated with your studies. It may help to study with someone, even if they are quietly working on something else.
- It is helpful to talk to people about your crisis event but know when to stop. Sometimes going over and over things is unhelpful.

If you are concerned about failing or submitting late assignments, apply for extensions or special consideration. University students can apply online at

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/enrolments/progression/special-circumstances.html>

- TAFE students can speak directly to their teacher.
- Remind yourself of your original goals even if just now they don't seem important.