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Crisis Counseling Theory and Intervention

The vast majority of people prefer to have stable, happy lives rather than to have a life full of problems. However, even the most stable individuals' encounter problematic situations in life that cause major disturbances. Jesus did not promise people a life without storms, but He did say in Luke 6:48-49 that people could build their tolerance level to the storms of life by putting into practice His words and teachings (Dobbins). People can often cope with the daily stresses and problems that arise. However, when a problem occurs that is temporarily beyond a person's ability to cope and he or she is "thrown off balance by the ensuing event," then the person experiences a crisis (Wright *Crisis* 20). Due to the critical nature of a crisis and its dangerous potential effects on a person, special counseling and intervention is needed for those who are experiencing a crisis so that positive growth may result instead.

Counseling is the "art [and process] of helping people overcome their problems, and, more positively, helping them grow in mental, emotional, and spiritual health" (Meier, *et al.* 297). A counselor performs three main functions: "listens to the counselee; helps the counselee gain insight; and helps the counselee formulate a specific plan of action" (313). Fereira aptly states and warns in his study guide, "As Christians, the use of Scripture and prayer will have a central place in our lives and the counseling we do. But at times, these tools of effective ministry can be used in place of listening, caring and loving which are also essential parts of the helping process." Switzer describes counseling as "acceptance of and love for another. It is the facilitation of communication--not just the use of words, even intellectually precise ones--but the art of understanding and being understood. This includes emotional meanings as well as intellectual ones" (13). Crisis counseling differs from long-term counseling in that crisis counseling is more "emotionally intensive" and has as a goal the restoration of "emotional equilibrium" rather than a goal of "long-term growth" and working "through long-standing conflicts" (Swihart and Richardson 140). Some prerequisite for a counselor to engage in crisis counseling include: caring "genuinely for the person in crisis" (Stone 37); understanding the definition and characteristics of crisis; and having the ability to diagnose whether a person seeking help is actually in crisis so that crisis intervention procedures can be utilized in critical situations.

Crisis, by definition, is "1. a turning point . . . for better or for worse. 2. a condition of instability . . . that leads to a decisive change. 3. a personal tragedy, emotional upheaval, or the like" (*Crisis*). Persons who are normally stable experience crisis when they are temporarily overwhelmed by their circumstances and are desperate to relieve the emotional pain or anxiety. The major psychiatric figure in crisis counseling, Gerald Caplan, defines a crisis as "a disturbance of homeostasis" (Dobbins), where homeostasis is "a relatively stable state of equilibrium" (*Homeostasis*). Stone aptly states:

A crisis can be understood as a crucial time and a turning point. In the present context it is the term for an individual's internal reaction to an external hazard. Involved is a temporary loss of coping abilities, a paralysis of action. Any definition of crisis makes a tacit assumption that the emotional dysfunction is reversible. Persons in crisis are not necessarily mentally ill, they are simply responding to a

hazardous circumstance. If they effectively cope with the threat, a return to former levels of functioning will result. (13)

According to Stone, "The two basic kinds of crisis are *developmental* and *situational*" (13).

"Normal developmental crises are the predictable, though critical, experiences everyone goes through in the maturation process" (Stone 13). Golan defines a transition as a "period of moving from one state of certainty to another, with an interval of uncertainty and change in between" (12). These developmental transition experiences have the potential for causing a crisis depending upon the person and include: entering school as a child, graduation from school, puberty, marriage, having a baby, promotion in a job, etc. Wright says that crisis can occur during the normal transitions of life because "many people are not mature or able to take responsibility" and "many changes are not so predictable or do not occur at the time we have planned" (*Crisis* 24). "Situational crises are exceptional and unpredictable; they are the upheavals resulting from unusual circumstances such as divorce or a disabling accident" (Stone 13).

"Most crisis involve a tremendous sense of loss" (Swihart and Richardson 22). This loss can be actual or only perceived, and not all people will respond the same way to the same storms of life. Some of the many situational events in life that can cause a person to experience a crisis include: the loss of a relative through death; the loss of a spouse by separation or divorce; the loss of a job; the loss of health, and the loss of respect. The developmental stages of life also create a loss. A person experiences a loss of singleness in marriage and sometimes a loss of previous responsibilities or working relationships in a promotion at work. Often, "Crisis is characterized by anxiety, self-blame, and frequently a sense of personal failure and guilt, which lead to a constricted perspective on accumulating problems" (Switzer 30). Furthermore, "The person in crisis is one who has begun to lose perspective, feel anxious and helpless, often depressed and worthless, frequently without hope, one whose future seems to be blocked out, who even has lost sight of some of the past" (259). Crisis can have a negative effect or a positive effect on people.

Crisis can effect a person negatively in their emotional, physical, and spiritual life. "Life-long scars can be formed during this time" of crisis, and emotional dysfunction can result (Swihart and Richardson 26). Dobbins comments on Dr. Erich Lindemann's evaluation of individuals unable to experience a normal grief reaction when they were in crisis from the death of a close relative, "some developed psychosomatic illnesses and others became emotionally disturbed in various degrees ranging from disturbances in their social relationships to psychosis." Wright summarizes some formal research saying, "Crisis in a child can have long-lasting effects because it may make the child less capable of dealing with trauma in the future" (*Crisis* 202). Furthermore, "When a child is wounded by losses in childhood, he or she could develop a tendency toward depression" (Wright *Recovering* 30). A second potential danger for those who experience crisis is suicide. If a person does not respond appropriately to crisis, they may feel that the way to escape the pain is through suicide. "Some of the most severe outcomes of a crisis are suicide, homicide, running away, physical harm, psychosis or a family breaking apart" (Wright *Crisis* 77). Third, instead of growing into Christ's image, "there are many who regress spiritually when confronted with loss" (Wright *Recovering* 35). People are often more susceptible and vulnerable to sin during emotional crisis (Dobbins). While initial feelings of anger and bitterness are normal, many remain angry or upset over the crisis and continue to harbor bitterness and unforgiveness toward God and others. Crisis can cause a person to be preoccupied with self, looking inward instead of reaching outward to others or focusing on God. It is often difficult for one in a state of crisis to help other people who are in need of salvation or edification. Moreover, Swihart and Richardson explain:

crises also "cost" in terms of emotional distress and agony. Suffering can sometimes

serve a purpose, but often unnecessary suffering can lead to fears and dysfunction and the interruption of relationships. When under undue pressure, people are often less effective in reaching out to others emotionally and spiritually; they are too preoccupied with inner needs. . . . Medical problems have a way of cropping up at times of high stress. Still another cost can be financial, due to loss of time from productive activity or cost of professional care. Time spent coping with crisis is also time lost from personal growth-producing activities. The person's energy is being drained trying to regain equilibrium instead of reaching toward self-actualization. (166)

Because of these potential negative effects, it is imperative for a person to overcome their crisis in a positive way.

Crisis can have a positive effect on people if they will allow it to produce growth instead of regression. "People in crisis are less defensive, more vulnerable, and more open to change than at other times in their lives. . . . those in crisis are less prone to protect themselves and are more open to outside help and assistance toward change" (Stone 26-27). Dobbins profoundly observes:

People prefer to stay the same. However, in crisis the pain of remaining the same is intolerable. So, crisis produces the possibility for change. It is a disturbance of the homeostasis, a situation that creates so much pain that the person cannot remain the same. . . . Until the pain of remaining the same hurts more than the pain of changing, people prefer to remain the same.

Crisis have an enormous potential for motivating people to draw closer to Jesus and to develop new Christlike behaviors and attitudes. Dobbins observes, "People often come to know the Lord often in crisis, when their back is to the wall, when the marriage is on the brink of divorce, when the kids are breaking their heart, when their business is about to go belly up, when the pathologist has given them a poor prognosis. Man's extremity becomes God's opportunity." Based on a study done in the early 1980's, "57 percent of the persons in the sample stated that a crisis in their lives was associated with their conversion. Many a person decides to become a Christian in an attempt to overcome a crisis situation" (Swihart and Richardson 122). Moreover, Clinebell states, "in crisis and losses people often confront their spiritual hungers, the emptiness of their lives, and the poverty of their values and relationships" (184). In the midst of a counselee's emptiness, Christian counselors "trained to deal with ultimate questions of meaning and value--can help people rediscover that living in relationship with a loving and faithful God provides meaning even in the midst of tragedy" (16).

Pain is often healthy in that "it is nature's way of calling attention to something that needs to be tended to in our lives" (Dobbins). Speaking from many years of professional crisis counseling experience, Dobbins says:

The wise crisis counselor . . . while he seeks to relieve some of the pain he does not try to take it all away. For once you have totally alleviated the pain you have neutralized the person's motivation to change. Remember, as a crisis counselor our opportunity is to help people change in a positive direction and pain is the motivator for that change. You and I as ministers will have to resist the temptation to prematurely take the pain away. For we have a very nurturing function. We like to relieve suffering. But if you're going to be an effective crisis counselor--taking full advantage of the crisis to maximize the change possible in a person's life--you are going to have to learn to let pain do its work.

Concerning a crisis, Switzer states, "There is, of course, danger to the person, and it may be a

shattering experience. However, because there is also a speeding up of the emotional and intellectual processes, there is the potential for new insights, and therefore not only a solution of the problems but also a reorganization of personality around a new center and on a higher level" (30). Similarly, Wright says, "with each and every loss comes the potential for change, growth, new insights, understanding, and refinement--all positive descriptions and words of hope. But they are often in the future, and we fail to see that far ahead when we are in the midst of our grief" (*Recovery* 10). On a positive note, "Sadness can cause us to become more contemplative, serious, thoughtful, and grateful and can give us a new purpose for living life to the fullest" (30). Losses can produce spiritual maturity (Romans 5:3-4 NASB) and allow character development of the fruit of the spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23 NASB). Through crisis, one can learn the art of suffering and "discover the extent of the comfort of God" (36). As a result, the individual will be able to respond with empathy and compassion toward those who are experiencing a similar crisis. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (NASB).

In a crisis, a person can choose to change for the better and can acquire healthy ways of viewing their crisis. Dobbins well states:

No one comes through crisis the same. Crisis changes us and it makes us bitter or better, but never leaves us the same. The difference between the words bitter and better indicates where the source of difference is. The letter, 'I'. I make the difference. How I choose to interpret what happens to me leaves me bitter over my crisis or better after my crisis.

Furthermore, "The attitude that one chooses to use in facing a crisis can make all the difference in the world. It is attitude that can turn a crisis into either a tragedy or a growth-producing experience" (Swihart and Richardson 27). "The Chinese character for crisis is made up of two symbols: one is for despair and the other for opportunity" (Wright *Crisis* 20). The difference between despair and opportunity is a person's attitude and perspective, which can be enhanced through proper crisis counseling intervention.

Crisis intervention is "no more than stepping into a disturbed situation or the life of a disturbed person, a family, or other group at an opportune time, in such a way as to stop the downward spiral of a deteriorating situation or condition, bringing love, support, assurance, and insight, in an effort to lead to decisions that can redirect life" (Switzer 25). "The primary goal of crisis counseling . . . is the quickest possible relief of the internal and external symptoms of the crisis and a return to that particular person's usual level of functioning" (45). The goals for crisis counseling can be summarized as follows:

1. help the person return to his usual level of functioning;
2. decrease anxiety;
3. teach crisis-solving techniques;
4. teach biblical principles so the person grows as a result of the crisis. (Swihart and Richardson 144)

With Warren Jones' A-B-C methodology, a counselor can "achieve contact with the client, boil down the problem to its essentials, and cope actively through an inventory of the client's ingenuity and resources" (52:87). First, a counselor must develop rapport with the client and diagnose if they are going through a crisis and what precipitated the crisis. The counselor must assist the person with catharsis by empathizing and allowing healthy grief and crying. The counselor should explore the situation and identify the threat (Dobbins). Crisis occur when people perceive a dangerous threat and "interpret the events as overwhelming and beyond their control in some way."

Counselors should assist "individuals to discover and articulate personal meanings" (Switzer 191) and to cope actively. A crisis counselor can help facilitate good decisions, positive growth, and new learning experiences.

Wright asserts, "Our grief work is not really complete until we have found some meaning in our grief. It is true that our emotions need healing, but so does our belief system or theology" (*Recovery* 38). Dobbins describes this important process:

None of us lives with the facts of his/her lives. We live with the story we tell ourselves about the facts of our lives. In pastoral counseling that story is called a theodicy . . . A theodicy is a theological explanation of life crisis. This is one of the reasons that secular mental health professionals are so handicapped in helping Christians. They do not know how to use the Scriptures to teach the Christian to reinterpret the crisis of his or her life in Biblical terms. When you go through something, if you don't process it out in your mind until you have a sufficiently comfortable way of living with what has happened to you--the shadow of that trauma continues to cast itself across your future.

Crisis counselors need to help people assimilate their crisis, by asking the counselee to verbalize their initial version of the story, which is usually very hurtful. Dobbins says, "There is an almost numberless versions of the facts of their crisis, and those versions will range from extremely destructive to extremely creative versions." The task of the crisis counselor is to allow the person to cry out to God and receive God's healing touch and wisdom and then move the person in the direction of having a theodicy that is very comforting. Dobbins says,

The devil will lie to us and steal from us by giving us more painful, destructive ways of interpreting the crisis of our life than are necessary, and when we get to this point in praying through when we have had some emotional relief as a result of an honest rehearsal of our feelings before God, we are in an emotional and spiritual state to hear a word from the Lord that can comfort us by helping us to put a different perspective on what we have lived through and give ourselves a new story about those old hurts.

Furthermore, Dobbins says, "I don't care what their theodicy is so long as it is consistent with their theology and is comfortable enough to let them go on with life." Healthy crisis counseling will always move a person from having a story that is very destructive to very comforting. Since "God is a God of purpose . . . He uses crisis events as tools for carrying forth his purpose even when the purpose is not clear to us. A crisis event is often a change in our world that forces us to change in order to accommodate a new set of circumstances" (Swihart and Richardson 32). A person can be greatly comforted by the truth of Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NASB).

Having a Biblical perspective on one's crisis is important and so is developing a positive attitude towards it. Wright comments:

The ability to develop a biblical perspective on our lives is perhaps best summarized in this verse: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2, 3 NAS). . . . What does the word *consider* actually mean? It refers to an internal attitude of the heart or mind that allows the trials and circumstances of life to affect us adversely or beneficially. Another way James 1:2 might be translated is "Make up your mind to regard adversity as something to welcome or be glad about." (*Recovering* 137).

Wright explains the two different attitudes that one can have during a crisis:

You have the power to decide what your attitude will be. You can approach it and say, "That's terrible. Totally upsetting. That is the last thing I wanted or expected for my life. Why did it have to happen now? Why me?"

The other way of considering the same difficulty is to say, "It's not what I wanted or expected, but it's here. There are going to be some difficult times, but how can I make the best of them?" Don't ever deny the pain or hurt you might have to go through, but always ask, "What can I learn from it? How can I grow through this? How can it be used for God's glory?" (*Recovering* 137)

Seeing a crisis from a Biblical perspective can help assist a person towards having a positive attitude that enables one to progress through a crisis.

In summary, although people may overcome many of the storms of life, crisis are inevitable and can produce negative or positive effects, depending upon proper crisis counseling and an individual's response and attitude. Switzer correctly states, "No one is so unmovably stable that she or he is not faced with events in life that are radically disruptive. . . . Obviously, some people may be vulnerable to fewer types of events than others and may respond more constructively and more quickly, have more resources in their personal environment, and move through their crises more quickly than others, but no person is immune" (40). Preventive measures should be taken to minimize crisis, and the negative effects of a crisis should be avoided. Swihart and Richardson summarize a realistic perspective on crisis:

Crises are a part of life. They are not something to be avoided, but rather should be seen as points of movement. The idea is not to try to discover ways to avoid crises, but rather to learn how to utilize them to produce growth rather than dysfunction. If one could find a way to go through life with no crises, that person would be successful only in avoiding real life. Crises are woven into the very tapestry of life itself. In fact, the Bible even teaches that we should be thankful for the trials that crises bring because they open the potential for growth of our faith (James 1:2, 3). (12)

With proper crisis counseling, a counselor can facilitate change and growth and guide a counselee in reinterpreting the crisis from a Biblical perspective that is therapeutic. With Jones' A-B-C method, a counselor can effectively intervene in crisis situations. Stone aptly warns, "If one becomes so concerned with one's role, intervention techniques, or with other personal responsibilities that one loses sight of the mission to love others, then a caregiver can miss seeing a person in crisis as infinitely worthwhile. This aspect of [crisis counseling] may seem so obvious that it need not be mentioned, yet at times parishioners or counselees can become cases, problems, or new experiences rather than unique and precious human beings" (37). In conclusion, Dobbins states, "knowing crisis theory helps the pastor [and counselor] to avoid personal panic in the face of crisis and to learn how to manage the process better. The skilled crisis counselor will be rewarded by seeing critical moments in the lives of individuals and congregations become opportunity for creative change instead of disasters."

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