

Stress, Crisis and Reaching Out

According to the American Psychological Association:

1) *Fifty-four percent of Americans are concerned about the level of stress in their everyday lives. (APA Survey 2004)*

2) *In June 2008, more people reported physical and emotional symptoms due to stress than they did in 2007, and nearly half (47 percent) of adults reported that their stress has increased in the past year. (APA, Stress in America, 2008)*

And of course, we already know that: 3) *Having good mental health helps you make good decisions and deal with life's challenges at home, work and school. (APA, How Psychotherapy Helps People Recover from Depression, 1998)*

Is anyone in crisis?

Day to day stress can be challenging enough but when something unexpected happens you can be thrown into a crisis. A crisis is a time of extreme difficulty. You may be experiencing an **economic** (loss of job or income), **social** (divorce or estrangement), **emotional** (overwhelming feelings due to depression, anxiety or grief), **spiritual** (loss of faith or direction) or **physical** (illness or trauma) **crisis**. One definition of "crisis" is: *"the turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death"*. (Dictionary.com, 2009)

When crisis strikes, you feel alone, your self-care slips, and you get out of your regular routine including a regular yoga/meditation practice. During a crisis it's important to remember that you are continuing to make choices. One way to recover from crisis is reaching out for support by making phone calls. Connecting this way can help support you in making choices that lead to recovery and health.

Do you have a list of family or friends that you can call for support?

Whether you are in crisis or just feeling the effects of more and more stress, your tendency may be to isolate, cutting yourself off from needed support. Calling someone helps you find the compassion you are running low on. When you make a connection with another person who can hear your story and offer a compassionate response you feel stronger and supported in resuming other healthy practices. As you become stronger and healthier you are able to give back, supporting others who are experiencing stress.

If it's difficult for you to open up about what's going on with family or friends there are crisis lines that can take your call. The specially trained person on the other end of the phone or a therapist or counselor doesn't have to know who you are so that you can be anonymous. Ideally though building a network of support with people you feel comfortable with is the most helpful. Is there someone in your circle of family and friends who has opened up to you about something personal? This may be a good place to start. If you are still feeling uneasy about sharing information leave the details out and stick to how the situation is affecting you and how you feel about it. For example, "I'm concerned about something that happened with John. I don't think he would want me to share. The thing is I'm not sleeping well and feel so sad lately." Or, "I'm going through something very difficult right now that I'm not ready to talk about. I'm feeling so afraid and my anxiety is stopping me from getting out and doing the things I like to do."

It's OK to ask who ever you are calling to hold off on giving you advice. What's most important about reaching out is making a connection with another person and feeling heard. Ask the person you are calling if they are willing to "just" listen. If you want advice about your situation don't be afraid to ask for it. Choosing someone that you know will keep what you say confidential and is willing to share their experience, strength and hope with you will make it easier for you to open up. You will begin to feel the relief that comes with sharing your story.

The first call can be the hardest. Fear can stop you from taking that first step even when you are clear help is needed. You may feel afraid to make an outreach call because:

- 1) "Everyone is so stressed and busy...I don't want to burden them."
- 2) "No one can understand what I'm going through."
- 3) "I'm ashamed that I can't handle this myself."
- 4) "I'm afraid if I talk about this I will feel overwhelmed by my feelings."

You are not alone!

Many people feel this way until they realize this line of thinking is fed by their isolation and serves only to keep them alone and miserable. What I have found in my life and my work as a clinical social worker is that:

- 1) Everyone is *too* busy **and** they want to slow down. Getting an outreach call from someone helps them remember what is *really* important.
- 2) No one is without problems. Yes, the details are different but most people can relate to what someone else is feeling when under stress or in crisis.
- 3) No one is able to "handle" everything that comes their way alone. We are meant to live in community, meant to have support. Remember: "No man/woman is an Island".
- 4) Feelings become overwhelming and even harmful when we push them away or deny that they are there.

One Woman's Story

Crisis struck when Dawn (not her real name) got the call informing her that her 39 year old daughter had attempted suicide and was in the hospital. So many emotions and feelings flooded her, the last thing she wanted to do was admit that she needed help. She was in survival/crisis mode wanting to be there during her daughter's uncertain recovery. Her normal routine, including a regular yoga/breathing practice, was put on hold. She cancelled work and social commitments, becoming more and more isolated and depressed. Unsure about how all but the closest family members would react to the news, she didn't talk about what had happened. Soon she had no one she felt comfortable talking too. Sinking further into despair, Dawn knew something had to change. She decided to call a crisis line for support. Relief came with that first phone call. Slowly at first, she put into practice, making regular outreach calls. She eventually built up a network of people she felt comfortable with calling and checking in with on a regular basis. Dawn knows she's not alone and has since helped others who were also becoming isolated, thinking no one could truly understand.

Recovery or Death

"Research shows that receiving support from others is effective in managing stress. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress then consider seeking professional help," says Katherine Nordal, PhD, APA's executive director for professional practice. (APA Survey, Stress in America, 2008)

Crisis can be a set up for disconnection leading to more stress and despair. Human beings are meant to connect and feel the support of others. Making regular outreach calls can help bring you out of isolation. Picking up the phone and calling a crisis line, a counselor or a trusted family member or friend restores hope and strengthens your ability to take care of yourself and be there for the people you love.

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