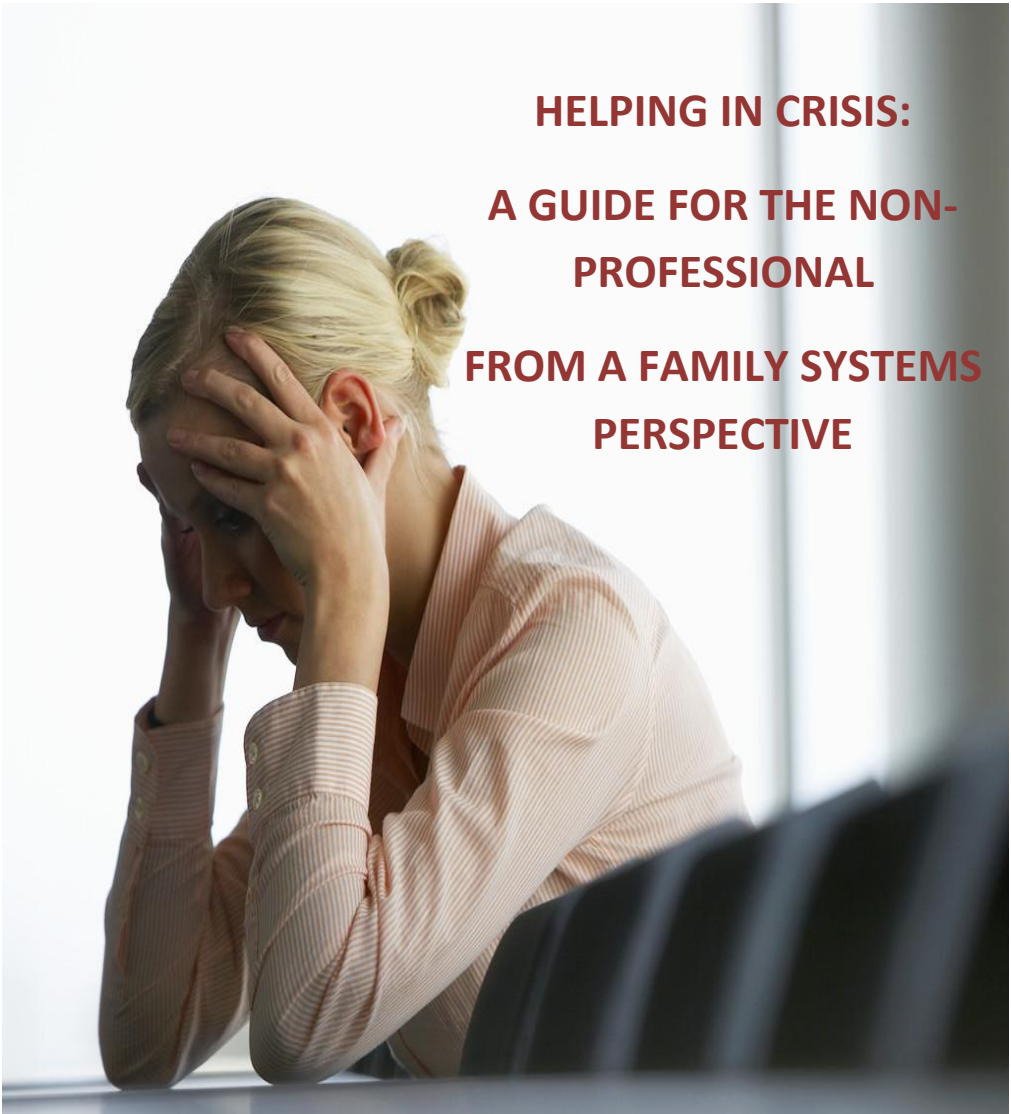
# HELPING IN CRISIS:

# A GUIDE FOR THE NON-PROFESSIONAL

# FROM A FAMILY SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE



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# Helping In Crisis: A Guide for the Non-Professional from a

# Family Systems Perspective



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# PREFACE

Helping In Crisis: A Guide for the Non-Professional from a Family Systems Perspective was written for people interested in learning more about how crisis affects the lives of their friends and family and how people in crisis may be helped by the supportive attitude of the people around them. It is not intended to be an exhaustive presentation of crisis theory or of the many facets of family systems theory. It does, however, give a broad overview of crisis and applicable concepts from a family systems perspectives that will be beneficial to those who wish to be more helpful when a friend or family member experiences a crisis.

While the principles of support can be applied generally, it is the intent of this work to concentrate, in its discussion and examples, on adults in crisis. Certainly, each crisis in the family has a dramatic effect on the children involved. Often that effect is dramatically different from the effect on adults in the family. If the reader wishes to explore in more detail the specific effects of various types of crisis on families, he or she will be able to find many books available that describe those effects on both adults and children in greater depth.

Often, in times of crisis, it is helpful for the person or family in crisis to seek the assistance of a professional, such as a marriage and family therapist. Even when such professional help is needed, family and friends can help create a supportive environment wherein the therapeutic work can be successful.

The underlying theme of this work is that we should value the opportunity to give support to those in crisis. Giving such support is a worthwhile investment in the lives of others, an investment that may return benefits to us when we find ourselves in a crisis at some future time.

It is the author's hope that the reader will find in these pages a reason and a way to reach out to those around himself or herself when the need arises, and to do so in a manner that is healthy for both the reader and the person in crisis.

Manhattan, Kansas, April, 1994

# CHAPTER ONE: ATTITUDES TOWARD PEOPLE IN CRISIS

Frank[1] was one of those people that everyone seemed to like. He was easy to be around, always ready to help out a friend, a man you'd trust with just about anything. Frank had a good life. His wife, Cindy, was respected in her work. He and Cindy had two kids that did well in school and got along together, most of the time. Frank liked his job; the pay was good and he and Cindy were getting pretty well set for the kids' college and their own retirement. Except for the fights they had over the amount of time Frank spent with his work, Frank and Cindy were a happy, respected couple.

Then there came signs that maybe things weren't so good between this ideal couple. The fights started coming every other day or so; and they weren't just about Frank's work. Soon Frank felt more distant

[1]All stories used in this work, except those accompanied by specific citations, are the creation of the author, based upon a compilation of clinical and personal experience. The characters are fictitious and should not be seen as referring to any specific person or persons.

from Cindy than he ever had in their life together. When he said something to her about it, she told him she didn't feel like talking; after all, he hadn't been concerned enough to do something about it when she fought for his attention in earlier years.

After two months of feeling like things were just getting worse and worse, Frank started getting suspicious. Cindy was gone from work a lot when he would call her and there were few evenings that she was at home with him.

Then came the bombshell: Cindy wanted a divorce. In tears she told Frank that she had fallen in love with someone else, a close friend at work. Frank was heartbroken and furious at the same time. "How could she do this?" he asked himself. Cindy asked herself the same question, but she had decided that she had gone too long in a marriage where she was terribly unhappy and, whatever happened, she wanted a change for the better.

Frank was desperate to make their marriage work and asked Cindy go with him to a marriage and family therapist. Cindy didn't think it would do much good, so much had already happened between them.

However, she felt so guilty about her affair that she agreed to attend a few sessions.

The therapist didn't promise miracles; in fact, he said that, if their marriage was going to work, it would be because Frank and Cindy decided to find a way to make it happen. They talked during their sessions about the feelings of abandonment that Cindy had while Frank was so involved with his work. And they talked about the expectations Frank had about marriage and how open communication could allow each of them to be more clear about what they wanted in their relationship.

In one of the sessions, the therapist asked Frank and Cindy what kinds of support they had from friends. Cindy said that she had confided in a couple of close friends at church, but Frank said he didn't spend much time with friends, except at business functions or when Cindy would invite someone over to their house to play cards. That started Frank to thinking about how little time he spent with other men as friends. He decided to share some of what was going on in his life with a couple of men at church.

He called Tom, someone he really admired, and asked him to go to coffee with him the next morning. At

coffee, he told Tom he had been having trouble in his marriage and that Cindy had wanted a divorce. He also talked about Cindy's affair and his own feelings of being tempted to begin a relationship with another woman. It felt good to share with someone else and Tom seemed very supportive of both Frank and Cindy.

It was different when he talked to Everett. Everett was clearly uncomfortable with Frank as he talked about the problems he and Cindy were having. Everett gave Frank lots of advice about what Frank should be doing now and how to "handle" women in these situations. He also told Frank that there were a lot of people at church that seemed to know that something was going on in their marriage and it would be a long time before any of them felt comfortable around Frank and Cindy again.

There was at least one piece of truth to what Everett had said. Frank began to notice how others at church were avoiding him. No one sat with him and Cindy like they used to do. Others would try to say something but would just end up stumbling over their words. Still others ended up sounding a lot like Everett.

Frank kept in contact with Tom, even after Frank jumped at the chance to take a job in another state. He and Cindy were able to work out a lot of the problems they had together before they moved and they kept seeing a therapist in their new town for a few weeks to make sure they were "on track," as Frank liked to say. The couple has made a lot of new friends, but they still feel hurt by the ways they were treated by the friends in their old town. Frank likes to say that most of his old friends are good examples of the adage "We shoot our wounded!" In any case, he and Cindy now lead a support group for people experiencing divorce or separation. They also spend some time on a regular basis making sure they are communicating about the things that are important in their relationship and that each feels truly connected to the other. It's a good life again, but this time it's for real.

## CRISIS EFFECTS

Whatever kind of crisis might occur in the life of another person, we often feel disturbed by it. When we hear that a friend has filed for divorce or when the news reports that an earthquake has struck on the

coast, it is possible for us to be disturbed very deeply. Sometimes it seems to affect us as much as it does the person in crisis. This connection between people may have something to do with the reason we also have, at times, a lot of trouble dealing helpfully with people in crisis.

Why, if we are not directly affected by a crisis, should the problems of someone else make any difference to us, one way or the other? Why do we sometimes respond in ways that could make things worse, like Everett's response to Frank? Much of it may have to do with the fact that another person's crisis makes us deal with our own sense of vulnerability.

Maybe our house isn't in an earthquake-prone area, but natural disasters happen everywhere and we may feel just as vulnerable as the people whose devastated homes we see in the news. What would we do if we were faced with a similar kind of disaster in our own family? How would we react? Would we be able to handle the stress and the disruption of our lives?

It isn't just natural disasters. When we hear about another's divorce we may feel just as vulnerable and shaken as when we watch the earthquake on the news. Perhaps it is because a friend's divorce brings

out feelings of insecurity we have about our own relationships. How would we cope with the shattering of an important relationship in our own life? Would we ever be able to establish trust with another person again? Would it be hard to face our family or friends?

Our own sense of vulnerability can be a major factor in our response to others in crisis. We may also be disturbed by another's crisis because we just don't know what to do to help them. If the crisis is a natural disaster we can respond by sending some money to a relief agency; or, if the disaster is close to home, we can go work in the relief effort. When it comes to talking with someone in crisis it becomes personal and much more difficult and awkward. "I just don't know what to say!" is a common response. Unfortunately, our silence may do harm as well.

## FRIENDS AND CRISIS

John used to play basketball with Harvey and some other friends every Tuesday and Thursday over the lunch hour. When John and his wife Margaret decided to divorce, John felt uncomfortable talking about it with his basketball buddies. Harvey and the

others felt awkward about it, too. Another of Harvey's close friends had divorced about three years before and Harvey remembered how much pain he saw in his friend's life. Harvey didn't know what to say to John. Neither did the rest of his basketball buddies. Harvey wanted to say something like "Sorry to hear about you and Margaret," before one of their games, but it just seemed like it would focus attention on how uncomfortable everyone was with the subject. So, he kept quiet.

It seemed to John that things weren't the same at the Tuesday and Thursday basketball games. He missed a couple of times because he had appointments with his lawyer and, after a few weeks, it didn't seem very important to go to the trouble of getting to the games. About four months later one of the players asked Harvey if he heard from John lately. He hadn't.

Unfortunately, when we feel uncomfortable around people in crisis it alters our relationship with them. Whether that uncomfortable feeling comes from our own sense of vulnerability or just not knowing what to say, crisis can create distance between people because in avoiding the discomfort we avoid the person as well. And the distance we create comes at a time when

people in crisis need supportive relationships more than ever.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

In their book, *Family Stress, Coping, and Social Support*, McCubbin, Cauble, and Patterson[i] point out that studies show a "strong relationship between social support and the ability to adjust and to cope with crisis and change."). Karl Slaikeu[ii] says that a person's "response to crisis depends on several things, including the social resources available to the person." Each of us can make a difference for the better in the lives of others when we provide social support during a time of crisis. On the other hand, it is equally important to note that we can make things worse for the person in crisis by *not* being supportive during crisis. Umana, Gross, and McConville[iii] write that "Social networks have characteristic patterns of buffering and protecting, as well as disowning, (their members)." In the story of John and his basketball buddies, John felt disowned by his social network, even though it was not the intent of his friends to make him feel like an outcast.

## WHY GET INVOLVED?

Why is social support so important? Why can't people just deal with their crises by themselves? One explanation is that, during a crisis, a person is shaken to the very core of their being. Their very identity may be threatened by the crisis and they may depend on others to help maintain a sense of who they are and their own worth as a person. The person's vulnerability comes not just from what the crisis can do *to them* but what he or she may decide is true *about themselves* because of the crisis[iv].

John felt pretty vulnerable when his wife filed for divorce. He wondered if the cruel things his wife had said about him were really true. He didn't want to think so, but when it seemed clear that his basketball buddies were rejecting him, he wondered if he wasn't such a great guy after all. After a decade of adult life and feeling like he had things pretty much under control, he suddenly felt completely out of control. Since he wasn't getting any exercise anymore, he started feeling even worse about himself. He began seeing himself as a failure in every part of his life, in love, in work, in relationships. He started feeling it

was no wonder that his wife wanted out of their marriage and that his friends didn't care for him anymore. His performance at work started to slip and John ended up with a mediocre job evaluation, the first ever in his career.

For John the effect of his own personal crisis was far beyond the direct effect of divorce. The crisis affected how John saw himself in relationship to the people around him and how they saw him; for example, the poor job evaluation John received from his boss and his friends' awkwardness around him. In his case, the lack of support from people around John helped crystallize his own opinion of himself as unworthy, unlovable, and someone to be avoided.

Kalis[v] writes that "Individuals are more open to external influence during crisis." Obviously, that influence can be for the better or for the worse.

## HELP YOURSELF

Making a decision to be an influence for the better isn't just for the sake of helping others. Figley[vi] says that "We derive considerable pleasure from helping

others. For example, we may feel appreciated, needed; we may have more confidence that when we are in need those we are supporting will become our supporters."

Margaret had two very close friends, Joann and Beth. When she filed for divorce from John she thought it was the most difficult decision she had ever had to make in her life. Joann and Beth both seemed very supportive of Margaret. They never told her what to do, but they listened to Margaret as she talked about the frustration, pain, and fear she felt in her marriage. Joann was Margaret's walking partner and the two of them would talk at least three times a week around the city park. Sometimes Joann noticed that Margaret was saying the same things over and over, talking about the same feelings she had talked about before. But Joann realized that Margaret would probably need to talk about the same feelings many times before she was comfortable with them herself. Just as the two of them spent time walking the same path around the park every time and didn't think that it was a waste of time, Margaret needed to cover the same emotional ground many times without feeling like she was being tedious.

Beth wasn't much for walking in the park; she was Margaret's coffee partner. They would meet a couple of times a week at the coffee shop down the street from the park and talk. Beth was having some feelings not unlike Margaret's about her own marriage and it felt good to her to share with Margaret. Sometimes Margaret and Joann would meet Beth at the coffee shop after one of their walks and the three of them would have a great time talking together. They didn't always talk about problems, but it felt good to Margaret to know that these two important people in her life still thought she was worth having as a friend and that they enjoyed being with her, even though, at times, they talked about some difficult things. More than once Margaret told Joann and Beth that she didn't know what she would do without their friendship. Joann and Beth both said that they got just as much out of their relationship as Margaret did. That made Margaret feel really good about herself *and* her friends.

John and Margaret had very different experiences in dealing with what was basically the same crisis. The differences had much to do with the support they felt from the people around them in what was a very difficult time in each of their lives.

While it may somewhat miss the mark of accuracy, it has often been written that the Chinese symbol for crisis means "danger" and it also means "opportunity."[vii] Nonetheless, a crisis is a significant time in anyone's life and may result in great opportunity for change and improvement in one's life or it may result in the experience of danger. For John, his crisis was a time of danger: danger to his sense of self and danger to his relationships with others. For Margaret, her crisis was a time of opportunity: opportunity to feel better about herself and opportunity to exercise her relationships with her friends, making them stronger.

It is important to note that giving support to Margaret was not of benefit to Margaret alone. It gave confidence to Joann and Beth and strengthened their own lives. For Beth it was a chance to share her fears about her own marriage as well as a time for her to build her relationship with Margaret. For Joann it was a chance to feel needed and important, two things that made her feel better about herself as well. As Cobb[viii] writes, social support can make the world a healthier place.

Social support from friends is also important because it is a voluntary act of support. People in crisis may seek the assistance of helping professionals, such as marriage and family therapists, doctors, or psychologists, but the support they receive from friends has a different flavor from what professional helpers can do. While a therapist may help a person in many ways, such as sorting out an avalanche of conflicting feelings or getting a handle on how to approach a crisis, a person's friends can help by creating an atmosphere of support that gives the person in crisis the stability to accomplish that emotional work. A survey of 258 male farmers and ranchers in a midwest state showed that, in a time of crisis, half of the men would seek encouragement and support from friends, more than would go to family, ministers, or professional helpers[ix].

Because a crisis can have such a devastating effect, people often respond by becoming "closed."[x] There's more about being closed in the next chapter, but if social support is available during crisis and the person in crisis can make connection with that support, it's reasonable to believe that the person will have an easier time maintaining good relationships after the crisis is over. In the case of John and Margaret, John

will have a more difficult time establishing new friendships after his time of crisis than will Margaret, who maintained close, supportive relationships during the divorce. In their cases, the world was a safer place for Margaret than it was for John and there was less reason for Margaret to protect herself by becoming closed than there was for John to do so. To Margaret the world was a supportive, open place. To John it was a threatening, closed place.

It has been said that "After the verb 'To Love,' 'To Help' is the most beautiful verb in the world!"[xi] The willingness to be supportive and the desire to assist in helpful ways can be one of the most noble aspects of our lives. Furthermore, in helping we will find a benefit for ourselves as well.

# CHAPTER TWO: A SYSTEMIC VIEW

It's easy to see how relationships affect the ways in which people deal with crisis. In chapter one the effect John's and Margaret's friends had on their ability to cope was substantial. It seems logical, then, that if we want to make sense of how relationships can help, or hurt, people in crisis, we ought to find a good way of thinking about those relationships.

One of the best ways of looking at relationships is family systems theory. Family systems theory is more than just a way for therapists and scientists to describe and treat families. It is a way of looking at people, as individuals, as couples, and as families, that sees their emotional, behavioral, and mental processes in relationship to others.

As an example consider Tracy, a middle-aged middle manager in a medium-sized company in the Midwest. At work Tracy is very comfortable. He knows what is expected of him by those for whom he works, he knows what he expects of those who work for him, and he feels clear about who he is and where he fits in the organization. In short, Tracy is a confident person at work. At home, though, Tracy's life is a very different

story. He is anything but confident. Tracy tries to apply his office personality to his kids and his wife, but it rarely seems to work. It frustrates him when he can't seem to get his kids to do what he tells them and he can't understand why his wife says he doesn't understand her. Sometimes he wonders how he fits in at home and what his role should be. There are days when Tracy just thinks he'll never be an effective husband or father.

Tracy is a different person at home. Why? One of the biggest reasons is that Tracy has different relationships at home than he has at work. His "fit" with the people around him is different at home than at work. There may come a time when the tension in his home is strong enough that Tracy will decide to seek help to work out his frustrations. If that happens, it's likely that he will seek the help of a marriage and family therapist, a person who views human emotions, behavior, and thinking from a "relationship perspective."

Everyone has had experiences that show how reasonable it is to view people from a relationship perspective. Remember the first time you went back home after you became an adult? Remember how

different it felt? Maybe you were away at college or the military for a few weeks and you returned home to visit with your family. It probably felt different. That difference comes from a change in the relationships between you and your other family members. There was a change in the way your family related to you and a change in the way you related to them. If you're an adult living away from your parents' home and you take a trip to spend a few days with relatives, you feel different than you do when you spend time visiting with friends. A lot of the difference between those two feelings comes from the differences in your relationships with each of those groups of people.

## FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory springs in large part from "general systems theory"[xii] a concept that comes from engineering. General systems theory says that a system is "a set of units with relationships among them."

[xiii] Among human beings in family systems theory, the units can be individuals, families, societies, or even larger groups. The units can also be organizations, governments, churches, or other identifiable groups of people. In all kinds of different ways, people have relationships with people, either as individuals or as part of a group. You have relationships with others in your family while, as a family, you have relationships with other groups of people, such as your local government, the school system, your circle of close friends, and your church. Each of these relationships affects you and is affected by you.

It's easy to see how a person in crisis might be affected by his or her relationship with a "system" outside his or her family. For instance, a flood victim might get aid from the Red Cross or another disaster relief agency as well as from friends and family. How effectively that help is given could make a difference in how well the person is able to survive the crisis. You'll find more on that in Chapter Three.

Mental health professionals and students spend years studying family systems theory and there are many concepts that make up a good understanding of the field. Human relationships are complex and can be

interpreted in many different ways. However, the purpose of this book is not to explain every aspect of family systems theory. For our purpose there is one important, key idea from family systems theory that can help us as we help people in crisis. The concept is "boundaries."

## BOUNDARIES

Nichols[xiv] defines boundaries as "emotional barriers that protect and enhance the integrity of individuals, subsystems, and families." Our individual boundaries help us define who we are and, more importantly, where we end and another begins.

The easiest way to understand emotional boundaries is to start by looking at physical boundaries. When parents shut their bedroom door they have established a physical boundary over which they do not expect their children to cross. The boundary is placed around the couple and both protects and enhances the couple's relationship. If the boundary is frequently crossed without the permission of the parents (that is, the kids keep coming in the bedroom without knocking and asking permission) there is likely to be trouble in

the house. When a teenage daughter goes in her room and shuts her door she is sending a clear signal about the boundary she is placing around herself. The boundary gives her time to be alone and to think, to establish a sense of herself as separate from her family.

Even in these examples it is clear that boundaries are more than just physical things. They are emotional concepts as well. A family that sets a time aside for activities together (for example, a "family night") is establishing a physical and emotional boundary around the family as a whole. The boundary serves to enhance the emotional relationships within the family and it helps create an family identity for its members.

Boundaries can vary in their intensity[xv]. On one end of the spectrum are rigid boundaries, boundaries that are difficult, if not impossible, to cross. For instance, there may be things about himself or herself that a person never wants anyone else to know. An example might be a person whose parent committed a crime many years ago that they considered embarrassing and that they wanted to keep hidden. In that case the boundary around that issue would be considered very high, very strong. It would be a rigid boundary.

On the other end of the spectrum are diffuse boundaries, boundaries that are easy, sometimes too easy, to cross. For example, one sister might tell another about the details of a problem she is having in her marriage. In that case the boundary would be very low, very weak, very loose. It would be a diffuse boundary. People or families with rigid boundaries are considered "closed" while diffuse boundaries are related to being "open."[xvi]

There are times when diffuse boundaries are appropriate, such as the two sisters talking about a marriage problem. At other times, diffuse boundaries might be more of a problem; for example, the sister talking about her marriage problems to a stranger on an airplane. Similarly, rigid boundaries are also appropriate at times, such as when parents want to talk about an issue they don't want to share with their children. At other times, rigid boundaries can also cause problems, such as a person who refuses to talk to anyone, even his or her spouse, about something that is bothering them.

Most of us have boundaries that fall in between rigid and diffuse. These are "clear" boundaries. The majority of the boundaries we place around different

aspects of our lives fall into this category. Clear boundaries can be crossed when appropriate, but are clear enough to hold firm when necessary. For example, a person may discuss over coffee with their friend a problem in their marriage while at the coffee shop on Saturday morning but wouldn't talk about such problems with a casual acquaintance at the office water cooler. Clear boundaries are signs that a person is clear about themselves, who they are, the roles they play, and how they relate to others around them.

## BOUNDARIES IN CRISIS

In crisis, boundaries sometimes change very quickly; sometimes they are literally shaken from their foundations. An earthquake victim may find herself talking about personal details of her life with a disaster relief worker whom she hardly knows. The husband who has just found out his wife is filing for divorce may find himself going through intimate details of his marriage with a newly-hired lawyer.

It isn't uncommon for crisis workers to encounter people in crisis who are quite anxious to talk openly and frequently about their experiences. The

boundaries of these people have been made more diffuse by the crisis they are experiencing. It also isn't uncommon for crisis workers to encounter people who don't want to talk at all about their experience. The boundaries of these people have been made more rigid by their crisis.

There is more to come about boundaries and how they fit into our view of crisis, but the main points here are that boundaries are real, they can change, they serve a useful and important purpose, and they can work for us or against us.

## HIERARCHY

A closely related idea is "hierarchy."[xvii] Hierarchy has to do with who is in charge, that is, who has power and control. Parents are usually in a position in their family's hierarchy above, or in control of, their children. As with boundaries, such a hierarchical position can be rigid, clear, or diffuse. In fact, hierarchies are established by the boundaries between members of the different levels.

To illustrate this consider a family of father, mother, sister, and brother. If father and mother set rules for the children that can never be questioned and, when disobeyed, result in harsh punishment that tends to "distance" the parents from the children, you could consider that the hierarchical boundary between parents and kids is rigid. If father and mother set few, if any, rules (and what rules there are can be disobeyed without any thought of consequences), you could consider that the hierarchical boundary between parents and kids is diffuse. If father and mother set rules that change as the children mature, are open to some discussion at times, and result in clear consequences when disobeyed, you could consider that the hierarchical boundary between parents and kids is fairly clear.

## MONICA AND HER BOYS

Monica was a single mom who felt she was at her wit's end in dealing with her two young children, Scott and Steve. Her crisis began when the principal of the school her boys attended called to say he might have to suspend Scott for unacceptable behavior. At home the boys seemed to never obey Monica, except when

she would bribe them with the offer of buying them something they wanted.

Monica had been raised by parents who were rigid when it came to hierarchical boundaries and she wanted things to be different for Scott and Steve. Monica felt it was important to give her kids a great deal of freedom as they grew up. The problem she faced was that her lack of rules and related consequences caused her young family to be at the opposite extreme from the family in which she grew up. Since her kids had few rules, there was a lack of clarity about where they fit into the family hierarchy.

The result was close to chaos. Monica felt at times that her frustration level with her own kids was not that much different from the frustration and anger she felt at her own parents. She feared that, as her children grew up, they might have the same kinds of anger and frustrations that she had toward her own parents.

Boundaries and hierarchy combine to establish the places people take in relationship to others, not just in families. They define the roles of people at the office as well as establish the roles of members of a family. The

way people understand and define those boundaries and hierarchies is through communication.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication has two primary functions, transferring information and establishing and defining relationships.[xviii] The function of transferring information is easy to understand: one person wants another person to know something and so they find a way to communicate that information to the other person. The communication may be through a conversation, a text, a letter, a phone call, or some other method of transferring information.

Perhaps the more important function of communication is to establish and define relationships. When one person communicates with another, the way they communicate says as much about the relationship between the two as it gives specific information. Much of this communication is non-verbal. Non-verbal communication can include the posture of the person communicating, the tone of voice used, even the setting in which communication takes place.

For instance, in a classroom at school the teacher often stands in the front of the room talking while the students sit at desks looking at him or her. If a student wants to talk, he or she usually is expected to raise his or her hand or be given permission in some way to speak. Whereas in this situation there is hopefully a lot of information being passed between the teacher and the students, there is much being said about the relationship between the teacher and the students as well. The students are in a hierarchical position below the teacher; that is, they have less power and control, they are not in charge. The teacher is presumed to have information that the students want and they are, in turn, expected to behave in such a way as to make it possible for the teacher to give them that information. If the students talk out of turn or don't give their attention to the teacher, it is difficult for them to learn.

Another example is the message being communicated by a wife to her husband when she keeps busy at some task while her husband tries to tell her something he feels is important. By not giving her full attention to what he says, she communicates to him that what he is saying is not as important as what she is doing. She also communicates a message that she

isn't interested in what her husband is trying to tell her. Although the wife may not intend to communicate this message to her husband, he is likely to receive that message regardless of her intent.

In a crisis, how a helper communicates with a person in crisis says a great deal about their relationship. Through communication the helper can send the message that he or she is in a hierarchical position above the person in crisis or close to their same level. The helper can communicate a sense that the person's concerns, fears, and worries are worth hearing or that the helper has better things to do than listen to someone else's problems. If a crisis situation is particularly chaotic, the helper can create and communicate a sense of security by taking some control.

Margaret's friends (Chapter One) communicated to her that her crisis was important to them by listening to Margaret talk about her divorce. John's friends communicated to him that John's crisis was not something in which they wanted to be involved by avoiding the issue and, eventually, letting John avoid them.

## CHANGE

A final important element of family systems theory to explore here is change: how it happens, when it doesn't. In all human systems, change is inevitable and normal. Without change life would be a pretty dull experience. Despite that, family systems theory recognizes that change creates stress[xix] and that our natural reaction is to avoid change and stress. On occasion, we will prefer to remain in painful situations because the pain of staying is not as great as we believe the pain of changing will be. John and Margaret (from chapter one) lived in a painful marriage for a long time. Even though Margaret felt unhappy for years, she only recently took steps to change her situation. In her case, she chose to make a change by divorcing John. However, for a long time she preferred the predictability and familiarity of her marriage over the unpredictability and unfamiliarity of living after divorce.

It's not unusual in many situations, not just an unhappy marriage, for a person to require great pain before they decide to risk making a change. In a crisis, a person may learn to live with the pain of the crisis rather than make a change, even though an

outside observer would reasonably believe that the change could only make things better. Margaret seemed in her crisis to move through the pain of her loss to a sense of happiness and personal control. John, on the other hand, seemed in his crisis to remain in the pain of his loss. He had difficulty taking the risk of new relationships and instead became more and more isolated from others.

As we look at how crises affect people, we'll see how an awareness of boundaries and communication can help us support others as they live through the changes of crisis instead of contributing to their isolation and disconnection from those around them.

# CHAPTER THREE: SYMPTOMS AND EFFECTS OF CRISIS

Working with people in crisis from a professional, organized perspective began in 1942 when 493 people died in the Coconut Grove Club fire.[xx] After this major disaster a team of mental health professionals worked to help survivors and families deal with the effects of their loss. It was noted in this case that the influence of the community played a big part in helping the surviving victims of this event.[xxi]

Slaikeu[xxii] defines crisis as "a temporary state of upset and disorganization, characterized chiefly by an individual's inability to cope with a particular situation using customary methods of problem solving, and by the potential for a radically positive or negative outcome." The key concepts in this definition are the ideas of change and lack of experience in dealing with that change. This definition also points to the idea presented in chapter one that crisis is a time of both danger and opportunity. While no one would wish a crisis on another person, it can be that a crisis is a time when major, positive changes can occur in a person's life.

Crisis is worse the quicker it comes.[xxiii] It usually seems easier to deal with a crisis if you can "see it coming." People who are experienced with natural disasters, such as hurricanes on the coast or tornadoes in the Midwest, know better about what to expect when such a disaster strikes than a person new to the area. The experienced person knows what might happen next and will probably have less trouble dealing with the crisis if and when it occurs.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CRISIS

Puryear[xxiv] lists five characteristics of a state of crisis that help us identify when a person is in crisis and understand what that person is experiencing:

1. *Symptoms of stress.* These symptoms are both emotional and physical. They may include feeling depressed, feeling anxious, experiencing headaches, or other stress-related problems.

2. *Attitude of panic or defeat.* People feel helpless, inadequate, or overwhelmed. The result may be that the person becomes agitated or apathetic. Agitation serves to use up the excess energy that comes from feelings of panic. The person might pace the floor, get into frequent arguments, or fight to use up energy. Apathy is an expression of defeat. In apathy the person might retreat to bed or get drunk and try to stay that way.

3. *Focus on relief.* When a person is in the severe pain of a crisis, that person wants more than anything else for the pain to go away. Little else matters at the moment.

4. *Lowered efficiency.* With lessening of problem-solving skills, it is more difficult to be effective in making decisions compared to times of normal functioning. It is difficult to concentrate on anything except the pain of the crisis.

5. *Limited duration.* It is impossible to exist in a state of crisis for a long time. Eventually a person will settle into a pattern that lets he or she deal with the pain in some

way. That new pattern may not be a healthy one, but it will bring some relief.

Many writers[xxv] [xxvi] believe that the actual crisis period cannot last more than six to eight weeks. Even when the crisis is one that destroys a family's home, such as in the case of a flood, earthquake, or hurricane, it seems that people settle relatively quickly into a new environment. People even begin to arrange their lives around difficult living situations if there is little other choice. An example of this is the people that lived in tent cities months and even years after the occurrence of Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

To some extent, these five characteristics contain things that each of us experiences during the normal changes of our own lives. We all at times feel the effects of stress, sense in ourselves a feeling of panic or defeat, want desperately to find relief, etc. However, crisis is something quite different from our normal experience of change. Figley[xxvii] gives 11 differences between normal change and catastrophic crisis.

1. Little or no time to prepare.

2. Little or no previous experience with the crisis.

3. Few sources of guidance to give information about what to do.

4. Experienced by a relatively few number of people.

5. Difficult to know how long the crisis will last.

6. Lack of control or feelings of helplessness.

7. Sense of loss.

8. Disruption or destruction of life-style, often permanently.

9. Danger to life or physical or emotional health.

10. Emotional impact.

11. Medical problems.

## EFFECTS OF CRISIS

Slaikeu[xxviii] quotes Halpern as saying that people in crisis experience being tired and exhausted, helpless, and inadequate.

The fact that physical symptoms can result from stress has been clear for quite some time. Holmes and Rahe[xxix] developed a well-known scale tying stressor events to illness. While their "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" doesn't specifically address natural disaster, it does point out that the crisis of divorce is second only to the death of one's spouse in the chances that the stressor will produce serious illness.

In times of crisis, many of the familiar ways of dealing with everyday problems seem inadequate.[xxx] The feeling that a person can't seem to handle what's happening contributes to anxiety, frustration, and confusion.[xxxi] Time may seem to stand still.[xxxii] Crisis can lead to a feeling of loss of power and control.

However, remembering that crisis can be thought of as danger and opportunity, many people deal with crisis in a way that eventually gives them *more* personal power and control. It is the difference between being a "victim" and being a "survivor."[xxxiii] "A victim would

say, for example, 'I can't do it because of what I went through (during the catastrophe and its wake)!' In contrast a survivor would say, 'I can do it because of what I have survived!'"[xxxiv]

Now that we've seen a way of thinking about the dynamics of crisis and had a look at the symptoms and effects of crisis, let's take a look at a couple of specific crisis situations and how they can affect the individuals and families involved.

# CHAPTER FOUR: THE CRISIS OF DIVORCE

Now that we've taken a theoretical look at crisis and seen how family systems theory helps us understand some of what a person in crisis has to deal with, let's look at two specific crises and how each fits into the framework that's been described.

There are a lot of different ways to try to categorize crisis events. One simple way to put these events in groups is by location of the crisis' origin;[xxxv] that is, does the crisis come from outside the family or from within it? In these two categories a runaway child would be an internal crisis, the loss of a job would be an external crisis.

This way of putting crises in categories is not perfect. For instance, is a serious illness or disease such as AIDS an internal crisis or an external crisis? It shows up first within a family member, but the source of the disease is probably from outside the family. Flawed though it may be, grouping crises as internal and external is a reasonable approach for this study. In both cases there are both similarities and differences in the ways in which an individual or family deals with the crisis.

We'll look in this chapter at the crisis of divorce, a crisis that has its origin within the family. In chapter five we'll look at natural disaster, a crisis that has its origin outside the family. We'll see how people view the crisis while they are in it and see how the family system is affected by it.

## DIVORCE AND SELF-CONCEPT

Sprenkle and Cyrus[xxxvi] write that divorce is a very ambiguous state. When a friend divorces, we often don't know whether to congratulate them or say "we're sorry." They add that the net result is that quite often nothing is said. A therapist related a conversation with one of his friends after the therapist's own divorce: "(He) told me he hadn't called because he really didn't know how he was supposed to behave. As he said, 'Am I supposed to congratulate you or express my condolences?'"[xxxvii]

It is in this communications vacuum that the person in crisis "makes interpretations consistent with his or her diminished self-esteem."[xxxviii] In other words, if the person getting a divorce senses everyone's awkwardness around them and notices how people

begin to avoid her or him, he or she may assume it is because there is something wrong with himself or herself instead of realizing it is his or her own discomfort that has caused their behavior.

People in crisis interpret the people around them from their own framework of poor self-image. For instance, a person who before his or her divorce wouldn't think anything of a friend turning down an invitation to dinner, might, during the crisis of his or her divorce, interpret their friend's action as a rejection of them as a friend, that the friend no longer wanted anything to do with him or her.

From a system's perspective, it seems many people in divorce see the boundaries between them and the people around them as becoming very rigid. Contact with friends and other important people may become very difficult. Our now-divorced couple from chapter one, John and Margaret, are good examples. John found the boundaries between him and his friends becoming almost impenetrable. The result was that John didn't get the support he badly needed during his time of crisis.

It is often like that. Just at the time when people need the support of others, they find it more and more

difficult to obtain. Those around them feel uncomfortable or perhaps vulnerable themselves. Boundaries become rigid and help for the person in crisis is not available. Just as unfortunate is the fact that, when boundaries around a person in crisis are kept rigid, those who could be of help do not get the pleasure of doing so. They lose out as well.

Divorce is a time of tremendous stress, even if it comes as a release from an unhappy marriage. In a story called "Divorce Kills" in Forbes Magazine,[xxxix] a divorced New York man, who initiated his divorce, said, "There is loneliness. When you live with somebody for a long time, even if you're not getting along, you still see that person every day, you talk."

Sources of stress in divorce have been listed as:

1. Presence of children,
2. Attachment to the former spouse,
3. Perception of being a failure,
4. Social rejection,
5. Change in lifestyle and patterns, and

6. Shifts in social support systems.[xl]

The Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale,[xli] mentioned earlier, places divorce right behind the number one life stress: death of a spouse. It was reported in one study that marital separation, often a precursor to divorce, is often even more stressful than the death of a spouse, especially in the long term.[xlii] This may be due to the fact that separation and divorce may remove a spouse legally, but it doesn't remove a spouse physically. Also, death is final and the surviving spouse cannot usually blame himself or herself for it, except, perhaps, as a transient part of the grieving process.[xliii] In contrast, separation and divorce may bring guilty feelings to either spouse.[xliv]

The stress is present regardless of gender. Another study reported that "Men and women facing marital dissolution should be considered at equally high risk for depression and that, among individuals without a history of depression, marital disruption poses a greater risk for men."[xlv] Consequently, friends and other helpers should not make the assumption that "he'll be okay, divorce is always harder on the woman." Men's needs for social support in times of crisis are just as great as those of women. In fact, for those men

who fit the stereotype of having a difficult time connecting emotionally with others, the stress of divorce may be particularly hard, given their lack of access to the support of others.

The rejection of divorce tears down as much as the love of marriage can build up.[xlvi] Neuhaus and Neuhaus[xlvii] write that "the breakup of a marriage . . . leaves each of the partners with a feeling of failure or rejection." They note there are aftershocks of guilt, grief, resentment, self-pity, frustration, depression, and feelings of failure. If these aftershocks continue for a long period of time or impair other relationships of the divorced person, they may lead to isolation or other problems. In cases such as these, it is wise for the person in crisis to seek professional help, such as can be obtained from a marriage and family therapist.

## CHRIS' CONFUSION

Chris was a good example of the stress that occurs, even when divorce means the end of an unhappy marriage. Chris had been dissatisfied in her relationship with Robert for a long time. It seemed like a long time since they had been able to communicate

with each other. Robert's attention was directed more and more to his job and Chris couldn't seem to get him to give her the attention she wanted, no matter how hard she tried. It had gotten to the point that Robert was almost never around when Chris was at home. Evenings and weekends were always filled with a business meeting or a trip out of town. Even when Chris and Robert got to talk, it seemed to usually end in an argument. Even though Chris was unhappy, it still came as a shock when Robert told her he was leaving and filing for a divorce.

Chris felt she should have been happy. After all, she had thought many times about bringing up the subject of divorce herself. However, she had never actually done anything about it and now it seemed like her life was out of control. First she felt hurt, then she felt angry. She was angry at Robert for not trying harder to make their marriage work. She was angry at him for making her feel out of control. Then she was angry at herself for letting the whole situation bother her so much. As she looked back over her years of marriage, she felt confused as the happy times and the sad times seemed to get all mixed up together.

## CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

Often divorce has a direct effect on the lives of more than the husband and wife. As mentioned earlier, the presence of children when divorce occurs is a major stress-producing factor. Neuhaus and Neuhaus[xlviii] say that the effects on children when their parents divorce can include feelings of shock, anger, despair, grief, loss, emptiness, restlessness, possessive behavior, being bored, listlessness, and avoidance. Clearly children are in need of support from both inside and outside of the family as much, if not more than, their parents.

Although it is not the purpose of this book to go into great detail about the stress divorce places on children, it is important to note that divorce has a tremendous effect on them. Those effects are not always the same as those felt by the adults and the effects differ in children from situation to situation. Richard Gardner's book, *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce*, is a good place to start in exploring divorce from a child's perspective.

## DIVORCE AND GROWTH

Even in difficult marriages, divorce is not an easy thing to live through. Yet it can be, as depicted by the joining of danger and opportunity in the Chinese character for crisis, a time of growth.

The story of a magazine editor's divorce appeared in the New York Times Magazine. These excerpts show his struggle with pain and renewal.

> On a humid Sunday morning, over pancakes and coffee, my wife explained to me that we should live apart for several months. She needed, she said, time and space alone to decide the course of our marital fate. I said nothing; there were no words to describe the shock that shattered my peace of mind.
>
> Inwardly, I was reeling. I excused myself from the table, retreated to the bedroom and cried for a long time. In chaotic flashes, I reran our three years of life together. Yes, we had drifted from the charmed cove of a brand-new relationship to choppier waters. But I had expected that; the experts on wedlock said it was normal.

Of all the reasons my wife might have offered that day, the necessity for time and space was mercifully vague and thus easier for my tender psyche to digest. Without specifics--she didn't claim I was an intellectual dud, a macho clod or a sexual incompetent--I was spared pain but also denied the comfort of knowing for certain what had gone wrong. We held several late-night soul-searchings, with too much wine, while I tried to convince her of her tragic mistake. In vain.

. . . I embarked on a self-improvement regimen that neglected neither mind nor body. I took an array of English and philosophy courses, attended wine tasting classes, read the classics voraciously, consulted my dust-covered French tapes, went back to church and tried to have a thoughtful opinion on everything. The gym became my second home as I attempted to turn myself into a set of formidable muscles.

. . . My efforts to recapture my wife's affections were fruitless. Each time we met--which was less and less often--I unveiled a

> new accomplishment, the latest model of myself. . . . She resolved to turn separation into divorce.
>
> . . . And then . . . I came to see my problem as it was. From the start, I had viewed the unfortunate turn of events in the same way I used to perceive a high-school basketball game--winning and losing and all that. As my self-esteem returned, I was able to accept it all simply as one of life's unexplainable twists and turns.[xlix]

People in the crisis of divorce experience a great number of different emotions, each of which can be a source of stress. However, the stress can be used to motivate change and the change can be for the better. In the story above, the crisis caused a collapse in the writer's sense of control over events in his life. He tried to reestablish control by reconnecting with his wife, then by creating a new self through mental and physical gymnastics. In the end, he gained true control by understanding himself and the dynamics that affected his relationship with his wife. With that understanding came a renewed sense of self-worth and an acceptance of his new life.

## FUNCTIONAL RESPONSES

What may seem to be "dysfunctional" responses to divorce may actually be a way for the person in crisis to work through their pain.[1] If they don't persist too long, repression and denial (lasting for a short time), blaming something or someone for the divorce (lasting up to six months), and self-indulgence (perhaps lasting up to one year) can be ways for the person in crisis to protect themselves and deal with smaller portions of their pain at one time.

The first response, repression and denial, may be expressed by saying "I can't believe this is happening to me" or persistently thinking the partner will come back and the marriage will be put back together. This response helps the person "put away" the hurt for a while so that it can be dealt with when the world doesn't seem quite so chaotic a place. The second response, blaming something or someone else for the divorce, admits the reality of the breakup but keeps guilt from overwhelming the person in crisis. The third response, self-indulgence; like buying a new car, shopping for a whole new wardrobe, or taking an

extravagant vacation; may serve to soothe the person in crisis and relieve some of the pain.

Overall, Sprenkle and Cyrus[li] suggest that the total process of divorce adjustment takes about two to four years. In each of the responses given above it is a matter of degree and timing that indicate whether or not the response is helping or hurting the person. For instance, a person going through a divorce might be considered distressed if he or she was still denying the reality of the divorce even after the remarriage of their former spouse.

## SOCIAL SUPPORT

The support of friends and others can make a big difference in the way people are able to cope with divorce. Unfortunately, the people in crisis and the friends and others who could help do not always get together. One recently divorced man said "I would never say to my friends that it makes me nauseous to come home and see that no one is there."[lii] This man's boundaries were high, perhaps to protect himself in response to his heightened sense of vulnerability. His

high boundaries kept him from the support he might have received from friends.

One the other side, Sprenkle and Cyrus[liii] quote a report that says that for only two months following divorce do married friends remain supportive and spend considerable time with their divorced friends. Again, this may be because the friends feel vulnerable themselves in their relationship with divorced friends. "As one man later told me," a divorced therapist writes, "'We always thought your marriage was one of the perfect ones. If divorce could happen to you, what about the rest of us?'"[liv]

When friends do help, it is important for them to understand their role and to be clear about their own boundaries. There is more on how to help in chapter six, but it's important to note that helping people in divorce is not so much "healing" as it is "sustaining."[lv] The person needs affirmation and to know that someone cares. Sheresky and Mannes[lvi] caution against an all-too-familiar pattern among those helping people in divorce: taking sides.

> (Friends) may act as comforters and supporters, but never as co-litigants or judges. When they do, they engage in a

> process known as "taking sides." However gratifying this may be to the person whose side they espouse, they are doing them no good. They are merely enforcing attitudes--animosity and self-pity . . . --which ultimately do harm to the cause and life of their champion.

A friend can be supportive without taking sides. For instance, if a friend in divorce complains about his or her spouse, a helper can express understanding of the divorcing person's feelings without agreeing with the derogatory comments.

## JACK'S ANGER

Tracy was very angry about the actions his wife, Jill, had taken concerning their divorce. Her lawyer had claimed that the debts she accumulated in starting her business before they were married should be paid by Jack as part of the divorce settlement. Jack was having lunch with his friend Bob when he told Bob of his feelings.

"She's turned into a money-grubbing old hag," Jack said.

Wanting to be supportive of his friend yet not wanting to agree with what Jack was saying in anger, Bob said, "I can tell you're pretty upset about the divorce. I can imagine it would be really upsetting to feel like the whole world was being unfair to you."

As we'll see in greater detail later, there are very appropriate ways to be of tremendous help to people in the crisis of divorce. That help will be of great value to those in crisis.

# CHAPTER FIVE: THE CRISIS OF DISASTER

It seems that disasters strike more and more frequently these days. Between floods and tornadoes in the Midwest, earthquakes on the west coast, and hurricanes on the east coast, it seems very little time goes by before another unexpected event occurs.

Disasters are defined as "calamitous events, especially those occurring suddenly and causing great damage to property and hardships for human beings."[lvii] Almost no part of the world is immune to natural disaster of some type and we often think of the disasters faced by people in other locations as worse than our own. A Kansan might say he or she would never consider moving to California where there is the threat of earthquakes. A Californian might say he or she would never move to Florida where a hurricane is bound to strike.

Responses to disaster can be a mixed bag. News accounts of the 1993 flood in the Midwest showed signs of resilience, resignation, and numbness.[lviii]

When Des Moines, Iowa was hit hard by the flood in 1993, there were stories of tremendous resilience. Reporters commented on an almost festive mood in some parts of the city where workers fought to hold back the devastating waters. One of the most popular jokes going around town was a spoof on the state motto, "Iowa--A Place to Grow." Some said it should say "Iowa--A Place to Row!"[lix]

Victims at times become helpers themselves, an arrangement that serves a therapeutic purpose for many. In 1993, one man lost more than half his 2,000-acre crop to floodwater in St. Charles County, Missouri and feared he was about to lose his home. He worked piling up sandbags to combat the floods. His response to the disaster showed signs of both resilience and resignation as he said "All we can do is sandbag."[lx] Resignation can be a result of feeling helpless or of simply accepting the disaster and its effects.

Disaster victims can feel defeated by the magnitude of what is happening to them, even if they were previously confident people. They may react to the sense of defeat with numbness. They may change or eliminate things they used to do to take care of

themselves. A woman whose company lost $500,000 in inventory during a flood in 1991 was angry with herself for not having flood insurance. "I just felt like a failure" she said.[lxi] A normally athletic person, she stopped exercising and let her appearance decline in the months following the disaster.

Some people look for meaning in disaster. A retired nurse looked over the graveyard, washed out by the 1993 flood, where her two husbands had been buried and said, "It makes you think, 'What is God saying to us?' What is it we're doing that we shouldn't be doing? You look at that cemetery and you feel so helpless."[lxii]

Helplessness is a common feeling among victims of natural disaster. After the San Francisco earthquake in 1989 a father in Santa Cruz said he and his family "were prepared as much as anyone who isn't a fanatic. We had flashlights. We had a propane stove. We had the pool water to flush our toilets. I had batteries for our transistor radio and a little Sony Walkman TV. But the fact remains that the earthquake changed the lives of everyone who lives around here."[lxiii]

## CHANGE IN DISASTER

New patterns of relationships are created during a natural disaster. The San Francisco earthquake of 1989 created some unique opportunities for the city's residents. "Throughout the Bay Area the crisis created a bond between the city's indigent residents, who were veterans of the shelters, and the affluent, many of whom found themselves homeless for the first time."[lxiv]

Each of these people experienced abrupt changes in normal activities, a situation that can be very upsetting.[lxv] Routines help us establish boundaries by setting patterns. Those patterns help define who we are. A natural disaster alters or destroys those boundaries, creating stress as victims try to reestablish new boundaries. For instance, a business person who prided himself or herself on being to work promptly every morning at 8:00 a.m., might find getting to work is an unpredictable puzzle after an earthquake destroys his or her normal route.

Michael always considered himself a responsible individual. He was always on time for work and other commitments and he always got done what he said he was going to do. That was, until an earthquake destroyed most of his home and took away most of his

possessions. Michael's ordered life came to a sudden and unwelcome change. Instead of getting to work at 8:00 a.m. each morning, he had trouble at first even finding a way to get to work with the roads ruined by the quake. When he got to work he could barely keep his mind on the task at hand. He was almost constantly worried about how much time and how much money it would require to repair the damage to his home. He even wondered if it would be better for him to move to another state where there was less threat of earthquakes. Every aftershock reminded him of his own sense of powerlessness.

Michael's boss suggested he might be smart to include a coworker in one of his projects at work so the coworker could take some of the burden off Michael. Michael was more comfortable working alone so he was reluctant to follow his boss's suggestion. Eventually Michael became so distracted at work that his boss required him to include the coworker so the project could be completed. Michael found that, even though he had nothing against him, he was often harsh and quick with the coworker. The project suffered as Michael had a difficult time adjusting during this time of crisis to a change in his personal boundaries.

Disasters can point out our vulnerabilities and create a sense of vulnerability to future disasters.[lxvi] Earthquake victims may be easily upset by ground-shaking aftershocks, even if the aftershocks pose no physical threat.

## PHASES IN DISASTER RESPONSE

Smith[lxvii] describes four phases people go through in natural disaster. In the first phase, the heroic phase, much attention is placed on survival. In the second phase, the honeymoon phase, a lot of attention is given to the victims of the disaster and much physical support is given in food, clothing, shelter, and other needs during this phase. There is a great sense of community among survivors and there are promises of assistance from the government. In the third phase, the disillusionment phase, people become disappointed, bitter, angry, and resentful as outside agencies pull out of disaster relief roles and government aid does not arrive. The sense of community they had with other victims starts to subside. In the fourth phase, reconstruction, families and individuals take responsibility for their own recovery and begin to see they are capable of

rebuilding their own lives. These phases illustrate the dramatic effect a disaster has on the lives of those who live through it.

## VICTIM RESPONSES

Sometime early in the recovery period a person surviving a disaster is likely to start asking questions of himself or herself. These questions are:

1. What happened to me?
2. How did it happen?
3. Why me?
4. Why did I act as I did?
5. What will I do in another catastrophe?[lxviii]

These are not questions that can be answered by a friend. The survivor needs time to talk out loud about these questions and discover answers for himself or herself. As people discover the answers to these questions they may learn more about themselves. In fact, disaster can actually have a therapeutic effect on

the people who survive it as they learn their own strengths and weaknesses and that they have the power to recover from the event.[lxix]

Victims may need to talk through their traumatic experiences repeatedly.[lxx] They need a safe place and safe relationships in which to "grieve, to be angry, to be bitter, to go through the stages of adjustment." A mental health professional who lived through Hurricane Andrew in Florida said "One of the best things people can do is talk about (their experience) again and again and again, because each time you talk about it, you relive it with more mastery and control, and it helps the healing."[lxxi]

## FRIENDS IN DISASTER

The role of supportive friends and other helpers cannot be minimized. Survivors will cope better if they have an active network of friends.[lxxii] Unfortunately, for some, as in other crises, "The victim often finds it difficult to relate to others. Interpersonal relationships are impaired at a time when he or she desperately needs support and nurturing."

Being able to talk about the disaster experience will also help parents help their children. When the parents have fears that are not realized and talked about, the result can be increased fear in the children and difficulty for the parent in fulfilling their role.[lxxiii]

Sharon was really shaken up by the tornado that struck their home. While no one was injured, everyone had been at home when the storm struck. Her husband, Ted, had gotten everyone into the basement of their home when the warning sirens sounded and they had enough warning to be sure they were all safe before the winds destroyed the main floor of their house. Immediately after the disaster, Sharon began telling herself things like "I can handle this" and "I'm just glad no one was hurt." She fought hard to keep the fear of another storm out of her thoughts. The family was lucky to find a nice house to rent during the three months it took to rebuild their home.

Friends kept calling on Sharon to encourage her, but she would pass off their words of comfort by saying her situation wasn't all that bad. She focused a lot of her attention on working with the builders at their home and seemed to have less and less time with her children and almost no time with Ted. Whenever the

children talked about the tornado, Sharon would scold them and warn them that it wouldn't do any good to talk about it since it was over now and nobody got hurt.

When the time came to move back into their home Sharon thought the children were acting in a very unusual manner. Their typically cooperative attitudes had turned to fighting among themselves, bickering with Sharon, and making messes all over the house that they refused to clean up. With the newly rebuilt house, Sharon was nervous about keeping it looking nice and she didn't know what she would do to settle the kids down. The situation was chaotic. Sharon even thought once that it was almost as if her children had themselves become little tornadoes and that they might do as much damage to their new home as the tornado itself had done.

Sharon and Ted talked to a family therapist who suggested their family might be having difficulty because they hadn't yet talked openly about their fears concerning the tornado. The therapist suggested that if Sharon and Ted could start to admit their own fears, perhaps that would make it easier for the children to discuss their fears. If the fears were brought out into

the open they could be dealt with openly, rather than keeping them hidden, and that the energy being spent on keeping them hidden, which played out in the children's misbehavior, could be used for something more constructive.

People in crisis need to know that it's OK to feel the way they do and to talk about it. A survivor attending a group session at her work after the Los Angeles earthquake of 1994, said of the session and the psychologist leading it, "These sessions can be so much gobbledy-gook. But he's telling me it's OK that I'm feeling this way."[lxxiv]

# CHAPTER SIX: HOW TO HELP WHEN CRISIS STRIKES

We've already looked at two major reasons people do not get involved in helping others in crisis: a sense of vulnerability and a lack of knowing what to do or say. Could these two issues actually have some connection with each other? It seems likely that they do.

What frightens us about not knowing what to do or say to help someone in crisis? Part of the answer lies in our own emotional boundaries. A person in crisis has needs that cry out to be met. If our own emotional boundaries are weak, we may fear that we will be overwhelmed by those cries for help. It would be a natural response in that situation to protect ourselves by strengthening our emotional boundaries, becoming more rigid or closed. However, rigid boundaries are hard to cross in both directions and they make it more difficult to reach out to help someone else. Raising or strengthening boundaries stems from our own sense of vulnerability, giving us a connection between these two reasons that people do not help others in crisis.

So, what's the solution? If boundary issues are the problem, then boundary issues can be the answer. If

helpers are clear about their own emotional boundaries and feel confident in that clarity, the chances of having those boundaries crossed inappropriately are minimized. If there is less chance of having boundaries violated, there can be greater comfort in being emotionally available to help a person in crisis.

## A CASE OF LOW BOUNDARIES

Sally volunteered to help at the disaster relief center after a summer flood forced three dozen families from their homes. One family, the Washingtons, really caught her attention. Mrs. Washington was a single mom with three young children, two in grade school and one not yet ready for preschool. Sally, a grade school teacher with the summer off, helped the mom by watching the kids at the center while Mrs. Washington drove over to check out her house and Sally sat for hours with the family while the mom talked about her experiences during the flood.

Sally was doing all the helpful things she could for the Washington family and Mrs. Washington seemed to be regaining some control of her life as she worked

through the paperwork of applying for government assistance and as she began to make plans for repairing her house. As the days went by, Sally found herself thinking about Mrs. Washington and her kids almost all the time, when she was at home, when she was at work, even during the movie she went to with her family that weekend. Sally felt that her reaction was justified; after all, the Washington family had been through a terrible ordeal and she wanted so much to help.

After a week at the shelter, the Washington kids were complaining about there being nothing to do at the shelter. A local store had provided video games and the shelter workers had taken a couple of field trips with the kids to an amusement park just outside of town. But the routine of living away from home in unfamiliar surroundings with little privacy was clearly beginning to wear on the children. It wasn't all that great for Mrs. Washington either and she complained to Sally that she just didn't know what she would do next. Sally felt that she just had to do something to help this family. Then she made a decision. She would invite the Washington family to her house for a few days. That way Sally's kids could help entertain the Washington kids, Mrs. Washington could take a

little more time away from the family without worrying about how her kids were getting along at the shelter, and Sally could feel like she was really doing something special to help this family. Mrs. Washington thought the idea was great and moved out of the shelter with her children that evening, against the recommendation of the shelter director.

That night and all the next day the two families had a grand time together. The kids played fairly well and Mrs. Washington had time to spend a whole afternoon cleaning at her home. The second morning, however, Mrs. Washington's preschooler woke up with a high fever and she and Sally spent the morning getting medical attention from the relief center for the child. When the moms got home, Mrs. Washington's kids had spilled red fruit drink all over the family room carpet and Sally's kids were trying to clean it up. Stress started to mount as other signs of tension began to show up. Two days later Sally found herself arguing with Mrs. Washington about who should clean up the kitchen. Afterwards she felt terribly guilty for having raised her voice to this woman whom she knew needed so much help.

Sally and her husband talked that night about asking the Washingtons to return to the shelter. Sally knew she couldn't go much longer with both families living in her house, but her stomach was in knots as she thought about bringing the subject up to Mrs. Washington. After all, the Washingtons were ejected from their home by the flood and now she was going to eject them from her home as well.

The next morning, before they had a chance to talk, Mrs. Washington left to spend a couple of hours washing walls at her home. When she returned she told Sally that a rental home had opened up just down the street from her house, just outside the flood area, and that the disaster service people had helped her arrange for her family to move in there while the clean up and repairs at her house was being completed. She thanked Sally profusely for all her help and for graciously opening her home to her and her kids. By late that afternoon, the Washingtons and all their belongings were moved to the rental home. That evening Sally felt a little empty.

What caused the turmoil Sally went through? Sally needed to be very helpful to someone during this period of natural disaster. Her intentions were

admirable, but her need to help went a little too far. Sally's emotional boundaries became diffuse as she tried to take care of the Washingtons. As the physical boundaries of Sally's home were crossed, so too were her emotional boundaries. At the same time the emotional boundaries of the Washingtons were being crossed as well. One example is Sally's taking too much responsibility for the comfort of the Washington family. Mrs. Washington showed the ability to do many things to take care of herself and her own family without the intrusion of Sally. Although Sally was just trying to be helpful, the consequence was that personal, emotional boundaries were crossed at a time when each woman needed to have help becoming more clear about emotional boundaries. The result was anxiety in the two family systems. By moving out of Sally's house, Mrs. Washington began again to establish clear boundaries around her family, a move that was of tremendous benefit to her and her children emotionally. In doing so, she also helped Sally and her family to reestablish their boundaries.

One of the most interesting things about emotional boundaries is that being clear about them doesn't push people apart, it allows them to be closer together. You might assume that moving from diffuse to clear

boundaries would separate people from one another. In practice, however, the opposite is much more likely to be true.

Clear boundaries allow people to feel safe while close. Rigid boundaries become like emotional walls that work to keep others out. Diffuse boundaries can cause tension as each person feels their own sense of personal control has been violated or becomes uncomfortable with their lack of privacy or personal space. Clear boundaries act to protect people from those possibilities.

People in relationships with diffuse boundaries often find themselves trying desperately to artificially create boundaries by being distant. For example, a husband may act withdrawn from his wife when he feels like she is overwhelming him with questions about the feelings he has over their daughter's engagement. Then the distance begins feeling uncomfortable and the two move closer together. "You're right," he says. "I should be able to tell you how I feel about this." The wife may take this as an opportunity to find out how her husband feels about a lot of things and, so, begins asking a lot of questions about other issues. Once again, the diffuse boundaries make this closeness feel

uncomfortable and the cycle starts all over again. In some cases, this dance of distance and closeness can continue for a lifetime. In contrast, clear boundaries allow people to be more comfortable in closeness without as great a need for constant distance adjustments.

## HELPFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Figley[lxxv] lists five ways that family members can help other family members during crisis. Certain examples of these elements are more appropriate within the family than with friends and so the descriptive examples have been altered to fit. These five elements can be helpful in any crisis situation, internal or external. Each element allows the maintenance of clear boundaries between the helper and the person in crisis.

1. *Emotional support*, or providing care, affection, comfort, sympathy, and the sense that the supporter is on the side of the person in crisis.

2. *Encouragement*, or a sense that the supporter makes the person in crisis feel important; helps the person understand his or her strengths with fair praise and compliments.

3. *Advice*, or help with solving specific problems with useful information; knowing where to go for help. This is different than giving unwanted advice or telling a person what to do when the person can work out the solution for themselves.

4. *Companionship*, or a social relationship; taking the thoughts of the person in crisis off of their problems for a time; being fun to be with.

5. *Tangible aid*, or help with specific tasks such as finding shelter, providing transportation, providing babysitting.

## GOING TOO FAR

As in the example of Sally, in each of these suggestions lies the possibility of going too far, of becoming too

loose with personal, emotional boundaries and ending up doing more harm than good. So how do you know when you're in danger of going too far? Perhaps the best way is to be very aware of your own feelings. Puryear[lxxvi] says he tries not to control his feelings but to "be aware of them, to accept them, and, to some extent, to understand why I am having them." If Sally had been more aware of her own feelings, she would have seen how intense her own need to be of help was becoming. She could have sensed that her need was becoming too great as she found herself thinking almost constantly about the Washington family. Such thoughts were an indication that important boundaries were being crossed in her own mind.

Because crisis situations can be so intense and boundaries can be crossed so easily at times, many people become upset when they see other people upset. Puryear[lxxvii] says the natural reaction to that is to try to make the person in crisis stop being upset. Sometimes the need to stop the other person becomes so great that the person outside the crisis resorts to inappropriate means to make the other person stop being upset. He lists medication, empty reassurance, exhortation, and criticism as some of those inappropriate means. Among medical doctors there is

controversy over when to use medications such as sedatives and antidepressants when a person is in crisis. Does a physician prescribe a psychoactive drug when his or her patient complains of feeling down while going through a divorce or does the physician suggest the person see a therapist to work through the difficult time? Not all doctors agree on the answer.

Although medication may not be as easy a trap for non-medical people to fall into, it isn't uncommon for people in crisis to use alcohol, sleeping pills, or other available substances to medicate themselves. At the same time, it is remarkably easy to get in the trap of using the last three methods Puryear lists.

Empty reassurance is telling a person in crisis not to worry and that it will all work out just fine, even when the person helping doesn't know how it will turn out. Puryear[lxxviii] says that such reassurance "implies either that you're lying, since you can't know the future, or that you haven't listened to (the person in crisis), because he feels things are hopeless. Empty reassurance, in fact, can usually be translated 'Listening to your problems and feelings makes me feel bad and uncomfortable; I don't know what to do

either, I feel just as helpless as you do, and I wish you'd just stop talking to me about it.'"

Exhortation is telling a person what to do. It's different than just answering questions that are asked. It is taking the initiative to give instructions to the person in crisis about what they should do. It acts to create distance by saying "I'm telling you what to do because you can't figure it out for yourself."

Criticism works in a similar fashion to create distance, making boundaries rigid. The message is "I'm better than you are and I want to tell you how much!"

## HOW TO HELP

If those are the things to avoid, what, specifically, should we do to help? Slaikeu[lxxix] has given several practical suggestions for providing support to people in crisis. They are listed here with explanations of how each suggestion works in the context of clear boundaries.

1. *Invite the person to talk.* By offering the invitation instead of commanding that they talk, the helper leaves the person in crisis with power and

control, something they probably feel like they've lost in their experience.

2. *Listen for facts and feelings.* To be able to really hear someone, you must be able to move beyond mere facts to an understanding of how the other person feels about the crisis. In many crisis situations it is easy to get lost in the facts of the event and fail to attend to the emotional reaction of the person in crisis.

3. *Summarize or reflect the facts and feelings.* This is part of what Gordon[lxxx] calls "active listening." It provides proof to the person in crisis that you are actually hearing and understanding what they are saying and provides support for them to go further in talking about their emotional reaction.[lxxxi] For instance, the person in the crisis of divorce might say "After all I've done for her, she tosses me out of the house!" The helper could reflect the facts and feelings by saying "When she shut the door on your relationship you felt hurt and angry." This approach also lets you show understanding of a person's feelings without necessarily saying you agree with them. For instance, a person in crisis might say, "That disaster center director is such an idiot!" It isn't necessary, or helpful, to say "Yeah, you're right." It's better to reflect

the feelings of frustration with a response such as "You're really getting frustrated with all the confusion at the center."

4. *Make empathic statements.* This isn't the trite "I know how you feel," a statement that can be dismissed with "How can you know how I feel!?" Rather, "I can tell you feel confused," a statement that implies understanding and acceptance of the other person's feelings. Katz[lxxxii] lists four phases of empathy. The first is identification, in which the helper is absorbed in thinking about the other person's experience, similar to the "I know how you feel" statement. The second is incorporation, making another's experience your own as you take the experience of the other into yourself, in a sense, experiencing what the other person is feeling. The third is reverberation, in which the feelings of the other person begin to awaken feelings of your own, such as the sense of vulnerability discussed in chapter one. Fourth, there is detachment, the final phase, in which reason and scrutiny prevail in such a way as to keep the boundaries clear between the helper and the person in crisis. The result is an empathic relationship that allows the helper to truly understand, and thereby support, the person in crisis while maintaining each

person's personal identity. The person in crisis feels like the helper really does understand how he or she feels.

5. *Communicate concern.* The person in crisis needs to know you really care.

6. *Physically touch or hold.* Appropriate touching gives a message of caring and support. Physical touch is an area in our society, however, often filled with anxiety. Touch crosses boundaries in a dramatic way and so the helper needs to be aware of how both the helper and the person in crisis are responding to the touch. In almost any case a firm handshake or a touch on the arm can be comforting and are considered acceptable in most situations in our society.

The result of these acts is to bring a "calm control"[lxxxiii] to an intense situation, reducing the emotional distress, and helping people regain enough composure to begin problem-solving.

The helper's attitude should be one of empathy, genuineness, and warmth.[lxxxiv] This attitude can act to instill a sense of hope, something that a person in crisis needs as much as anything else.[lxxxv]

## WHEN IT WORKS

Susie could tell that Ann was in a bad mood. At work, Ann was always the one that kept everyone else's spirits up. Even when the work load got heavy and there was more to do than anyone thought they could get done, Ann always kept a smile on her face. Today, however, Ann sat somber and unusually quiet at her desk. As she went through the papers on her desk, Susie could tell that Ann's hands were shaking. Susie was so used to seeing Ann as the "rock" of the office, it was odd to see her looking so vulnerable. Susie wasn't sure what she could do to help, but Ann was her friend and she decided to do whatever she could.

Susie invited Ann to go with her to lunch. She picked a quiet place where she knew they wouldn't be interrupted, a place that she and Ann had gone to many times before. Ann seemed a little distracted, but accepted Susie's invitation.

At lunch, Susie mentioned to Ann that she thought something was bothering Ann and offered to talk about whatever might be the matter. Ann didn't say anything about it right away, the two friends just

talked over events at the office and other safe topics. Then Ann started looking as though she might cry. Susie's initial reaction was panic. What should she say? What should she do? She had never seen Ann like this and she felt uneasy about her own reaction to Ann's obvious pain. At that moment Susie remembered something she had read about helping people in crisis and realized her own feelings were feelings of vulnerability as Ann began to open up to her. She also remembered that moments like this could be thought of as danger and opportunity. She decided to take the risk of being open to Ann's crisis and offered again to listen as Ann talked.

Through many tears, Ann told Susie about the crisis she was going through in her marriage. Just last night, Ann's husband, Don, had told her he was no longer in love with her and wanted a divorce. He said the life had gone out of their marriage and he wanted out. Ann had always been strong in her relationships with others, but now it seemed her strength was completely drained. She couldn't believe Don wanted a divorce; it was hard just to speak the word. Susie listened as Ann told of her anger at Don and her fear of what the future might hold. As Ann spoke, Susie would let her know she was listening by reflecting

Ann's feelings back to her. "You're really feeling hurt and afraid," Susie said.

"I just don't know what to do," Ann responded.

For a moment, Susie thought Ann was asking for her advice, but then decided it would be better to wait for Ann to ask her specifically for that kind of help. It was more likely that Ann was expressing a feeling rather than asking for a suggestion. Susie reached for Ann's hand across the table and said, "I can tell it's really confusing to have this happen so suddenly."

"Yes," said Ann. "I know I'll figure out what to do eventually, but it helps to know someone understands how I feel right now."

As they finished their lunch, Susie told Ann that she cared about her and wanted to do whatever she could to help. "How about us planning to go to lunch next Tuesday?" Susie asked. She also asked if she could help Ann with her work at home on Saturday so Ann could have some time for herself.

On their way to Susie's car, Ann gave Susie a hug and told her what a great listener she was. "I feel a lot better just telling someone about it," Ann said.

Susie thought how good it felt to do something so important for someone else and how much she looked forward to talking with Ann again. She felt confident that Ann would be able to handle the rough waters ahead, with a little help from her friends. She also felt confident about her own ability to be truly helpful in a clear, supportive manner.

Guerney[lxxxvi] says that "the helper is often (himself or herself) changed for the better as a consequence of (his or her) efforts." Positive helping with clear boundaries builds confidence, power, and control in both the helper and the person in crisis. The relationship is a two-way street. Done wisely and well it can be the silver lining in the dark clouds of crisis.

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