

Crisis as an Opportunity for Growth and Change

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The concept of crisis in mental health is an interesting one. In spite of the fact that many traditional theorists have viewed crisis as an opportunity for growth and as an essential experience in the context of one's development (Erikson, 1976), we in mental health want to medicate it, lock it up, and restrain it. We have forgotten that perhaps there is something we can learn from this experience, something that will enable us to "do" it differently and understand ourselves in new ways.

Many of us, at times have felt out of control, that our pain was more than we could manage and even that life was not worth living. It has left us feeling isolated, alone, different and "crazy." It is not something that most of us want to go through again and again. And yet, we have been told and have come to believe that it is something that "happens" to us because of our illness. We are told that we are "decompensating" and that the goal is to return to a "pre-morbid" state. And so we go through life afraid of when "it" will happen next, believing that we must be careful not to get "stressed." Believing that we are fragile and out of control without our medications and our services. Instead of living life we learn to avoid it as if it were dangerous. We have come to believe this because our experiences have been named for us. We are no longer individuals with unique perspectives but rather a set of generic symptoms that need a generic treatment. Though being labeled has been helpful to some, others of us have found it debilitating and limiting.

Peer support can offer a fundamentally different approach to crisis in that there are fewer assumptions about what it is people are experiencing. People may compare stories and strategies and ways of making meaning, but in the end, no one person has the power to name or to treat. Following is a way of thinking about being with people even through very difficult times that honors crisis as an opportunity to learn and grow and, most importantly, stay connected.

- 1. Building Mutual Relationships** It is only in relationships that are constantly negotiated that we build mutual respect and trust. When we consider that both of us have needs and expertise, we learn from each other while taking chances in becoming more vulnerable and consequently more "whole." As we take new risks in relationship, we find ourselves breaking out of old roles and assumptions, opening doors to self and relational discoveries that we never before knew existed.

2. **Being with “big” feelings** We are not a culture that has a lot of tolerance for intensity or “big” feelings.’ We tend to want to calm people down or make it stop because we are uncomfortable. In peer support we can recognize that people have a lot of big feelings and they aren’t all dangerous, they are in fact, rich with information.
3. **Understanding the “story”** I’ve always thought it was interesting that when people were having tough times they were always asked what was wrong with them. What if, for example we asked, “What happened to you?” Could we begin to understand the ways in which people’s versions of their own stories impact the way they make meaning of their experiences now?
4. **Sharing ways that “stories” are understood** One of the most valuable aspects of peer support is our ability to share our stories with each other. It’s amazing to me what happens the first time we realize that we’re not the only person who’s been through some of these things. We can hear how each of us has learned to think about ourselves and can share strategies that take our whole story into account.
5. **Challenging the current story** When trusting relationships develop and when both people are in control of the relationship, we can gently begin to challenge the ways each of us have learned to make meaning of our experiences. We can let each other know what works for us and what doesn’t. Perhaps we are not de-compensating...maybe we’re justifiably angry and we don’t know ways to express it. Perhaps we’re not in suicidal depression; maybe we just feel tremendous shame and guilt for things we learned to believe were “our fault.” When people compare and share, inevitably new stories are created and relationships deepen.
6. **Creating a new, shared story** As relationships deepen we tend to take more risks, share our vulnerabilities and try on ways of “seeing” that were not previously available to us. We find ourselves in the process of examining our own beliefs and assumptions and we continuously try these out in relationship. We find that we are growing through the context of relationship. There are no limits to the possibilities because there are no static roles. We have the opportunity to be vulnerable and strong, helper and helped. We find that others are finding hope through our successes and that they are taking new risks.

Peer support is a culture of healing. As people practice new ways of “being” through even the most difficult times, possibilities for breaking old patterns and creating new opportunities are endless. Crisis then just becomes another word for re-defining our experience and ourselves and instead of needing to be locked up we can begin to break free.

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