

Need for Coping with Life Crises: Implications for the Quality of Life

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The paper explores how various life crises play a very prominent role in shaping our lives. There is an underlying emphasis on the need to cope with crises as it has implications for our well-being and quality of life. The role of negative emotions and its influence on cognition are viewed within the perspective of growth. Various theoretical insights exemplify the need to develop a preventative focus. The necessity to enhance the quality of life.

Keywords: Coping, Quality of Life

The concept of crises is an essential component in the understanding of human growth and development. It has important implications for quality of life and subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Crises situations are viewed as unusual, mostly negative events, which tend to disrupt the normal life of a person. However, crisis plays an important role in our major life transitions. It is very difficult to avoid crises. One cannot even imagine life without crises. Erick Erickson's developmental psychology suggests that crises and major life transitions are similar in their components, though they vary in their, degree and intensity. The way we cope with various life crises (whether it is surviving trauma, (Khosla & Makkar, 2007) or parental divorce or a personal loss) has a very significant role to play in determining our quality of life. When we successfully learn to understand, deal and overcome various crises situations in our lives, we evolve as a healthier and happier personality. Hence, it is very essential to cope with any kind of crises and to go on with the life in an optimistic way.

Negative Emotions and Cognitions

When crises overwhelm our lives, it causes extremely dire consequences for our lives, both physically and psychologically. Inability to resolve life crises can cause long-range psychic damage (Caplan, 1964). If the crises are not resolved successfully, it can cause frustration and aggression. In this state of instability, rage, discontentment, frustration, one feels hopeless. This disrupts present state of existence as well as future adjustment too. Unable to think logically as to how, what is right or wrong, or what decision to make, what action to take, and emotion overwhelms cognitive processes. These negative emotions disrupt various cognitive processes as thinking, memory, reasoning, decision making etc. This may also instigate behaviors, which may be both physically as well as psychologically harmful. One may cause injury to oneself or the loved one in an attempt to overcome the crises. However, instead of resolving the situation, one may fall deeper into the problem.

Sometimes, insurmountable problems and life stresses build to such an extent that

one feels trapped from all sides. All personal defenses break down and the vulnerability to psychological and physical problems increases. Various kinds of negative feelings are experienced such as irritability, guilt, distrust, grief, anxiety, rage, fear, helpless etc. Such negative feelings influence cognitions negatively. There are negative cognitive biases in the thinking processes, which predispose one towards depression (Beck, 1967), lethargy, pessimism (Carver & Scheier, 1994), discontentment, unhappiness, misery, etc. Such negative feelings predispose one towards negative, aggressive action tendencies directed either inwards or outwards. When aggression is done to oneself, the person may develop poor eating habits, may become lonely, withdraw from all social interaction, and prefer to be in seclusion from the outside world. This leads to a vicious circle and one is further trapped into his depressive feelings and thoughts. In extreme states of vulnerability all defenses may break down and one may attempt suicide or may cause physical injury to one self. When frustration is directed outwards, the suffering person may physically harm family members, friends or even strangers. Hence, whether aggression is directed inwards or outwards it can result in a very tragic result.

The Need to Cope

Exposure to various life crises causes psychological as well as physiological problems over time. It can increase the vulnerability to certain health problems as infectious diseases, allergies, asthma, endocrine problems, respiratory infections, cardiac problems, diabetes etc. At the psychological level it may cause tensions, depression, anxiety, distress, anger, insomnia, bulimia, etc. Harmful effects of crises can be mitigated if we are able to cope with stress well. Coping has been defined as the process of managing external and internal demands that are perceived as taxing or

exceeding a person's resources. Hence, the way in which one copes with the crises situation has important implications for well-being. Coping can be achieved by altering thoughts and behavior patterns to manage distress (emotion focused coping) or by managing the problems underlying distress (problem focused coping) in context of stressful situations (Folkman, 1997a). People differ greatly in their ability to cope with stressful life events successfully, and some coping strategies are much more effective than others when faced with a particular life-changing event (Folkman, 1997). Effective coping is positively associated with subjective well being (McCrae & Costa, 1986).

During any stressful life experience, both positive and negative affect co-occurs. There is a need to engage and access the positive side as soon as possible. This is so because positive affect has been shown to have adaptational significance. It helps to deal with stress effectively and overcome its harmful consequences quickly (Khosla, 2006b). Positive affect predisposes one to appraise the stressful situation as challenging, fostering hope, and belief that it may be beneficial in some way. By finding meaning in simple life events, moments, objects, induces happiness for a moment. This brief state of happiness provides immense source of energy to fight back from any life-threatening situation effectively. In the midst of trauma, merely looking at a beautiful flower, or playing with a child or having any pleasant diversion in eating something deviates our attention from the stressful situation for a while. This momentary relief from extremely sad, negative, threatening, worrying thoughts help replenish our energy resources to deal with the present crises more effectively.

Affect phobias develop when unbearable emotions become overwhelming. There is fear to feel. People tend to avoid social contact, feel safe in numbing their senses, and withdraw from any emotional attachment.

Being hurt, betrayed, or discarded by the loved one reinforces feeling of isolation and dejection. People then become afraid of loving or trusting any relationship. They feel safety in isolation, detachment, and self-reliance. Hence in this process they actually withdraw into their shell. However, it is important to realize that emotions and attachments are important for our existence as well as well being. They act as defense mechanisms to protect us from being out of control, or a target to further victimization or at a risk of becoming a victimizer. Counseling helps to restore the capacity to feel and relate, so that attachment and emotion have a chance to optimize an individuals' adaptation (Fosha, 2002a).

Whenever there is crises, previous means of coping and dealing with problems seem meaningless in face of new threats and challenges. It is important to reorganize our selves and restore the state of equilibrium in order to survive the crises situation. Though it takes time, some people are able to overcome pain and discomfort more easily than others, yet an attempt must be made towards growth. Social support systems, as family members, peers, relatives, counselors all help mediate the harmful effects of crises on human mind and body. The way one adopts to deal with any crises situation would determine whether his future development would be healthy or unhealthy, positive or negative, normal or impaired psychologically and physically. Sometimes when personal defenses breakdown and help is also refused, death may result due to severe psychological impairment and physical malfunctioning. Hence it is important to understand the ill consequences of crises on the general well being and functioning. Various helping organizations need to spread awareness and information, and extend help towards people's lives when there are crises. Emphasis must be to promote various techniques to confront or protect one self

from any kind of difficult life situations at the grass root levels, to the underprivileged.

It is important to understand the concept of crises in a comprehensive way. Crises can also result in positive consequences. It can be taken as an indication of danger as well as an opportunity for growth. It can be a turning point in ones life where it can be good or ill, better or worse. This view of crises became very apparent in 1970s, creating tremendous public interest in the developmental crises or passages through expected life events (Sheehy, 1976). Mid life crises took its place alongside adolescent identity crisis as a stage, which, if properly understood, would help explain seemingly unexplainable behavior. This would also help families cope with difficult life events. Hence, crisis can either result in growth or in immediate harm or subsequent psychological problems. An initial consideration is to judge and understand the severity of the event causing the crisis. Some occurrences, such as a personal loss, death of a loved one, or personal injury, financial or work related problems etc., have the potential to create crisis in ones life. Individuals resources play a very important part in dealing and overcoming various crisis situations either by birth or by exposure to various kinds of life experiences, some people are more resilient towards crisis. They are able to cope with various stressful experiences of their life more affectively so that their psychological and physical functioning is not harmed. It is very important to develop resilience, which may make one hardy so that difficult life threatening situations do not adversely affect them. Hence one can learn to cope with crisis situations by utilizing his or her personal resources optimally (Khosla & Hangal, 2004) as and when required and have the ability to resume normal life as soon as possible with full determination and constructive energy.

Facing and overcoming various life stresses enforces resilience towards

extremely threatening life situations. Resilience enables one to protect oneself and bounce back from stressful circumstances more easily (Fridrickson, 2001). For sometimes, traumatic life experiences awaken extraordinary capacities that would otherwise lie dormant, unknown and often untapped. Hence viewing crises as an opportunity for growth would create psychic fluidity and hence an unequaled opportunity for change (Fosha, 2002a). The ability to regulate mood intelligently (Omaha, 2004) by appraising the crises situation more optimistically (Isen, 1993; Sanna, 1998) has important implications for well-being. Trauma may be viewed as a transformational opportunity. Each crises situation has a huge transformational potential. If this massive source of energy were dealt positively and creatively it would not only transform the felt trauma but also promote well being. Inability to overcome crises for a long time may cause extremely negative, self-defeating, depressive feelings. The rumination period may be short or very long depending upon how the crises situation is dealt with. By rearranging our cognitions, and shifting the focus from negative self defeating thoughts towards positive ones would help overcome crises more effectively.

The social resources that are available at the time of crisis play an important role in the coping process. During crisis situation the people who provide help, emotional support, and assistance, have a very significant impact on the coping mechanisms of the sufferer. Crises are characterized by a breakdown of cognitive functioning, decision-making abilities, or problem-solving capabilities. Social support systems provide help, which is very critical in determining how one negotiates these turning points in ones' life. The emotional pain and suffering in response to crises is time limited. It holds potential for both positive and negative long-range outcomes. There is a need to avoid

pessimistic, devaluing and invalidating approach. One must view crisis as a part of normal development. There is an increased emphasis on positive coping rather than negative defensive maneuvers (Viney, 1976). Various community mental health centers, counseling centers, private practitioners provide crises resolutions, which allow for growth as well as regression.

Crisis intervention programs developed in the sixties and seventies. Number of case reports on how to help individuals and families in crisis appeared in the psychiatry, psychology, nursing, and social work journals. Numerous practical instructional books on "how to" do crisis intervention were published. With its reliance on short-term treatment, crisis intervention became even more valued as economic constraints led to an emphasis on diligent use of scarce resources. Innovative short-term therapy was found to be (Cummings, 1977) more effective than long-term psychotherapy. Crisis intervention hence plays an important role in comprehensive health services packages.

Theoretical Influences

Various theoretical influences on crisis theory were identified by Moos (1976). Charles Darwin's theory on the evolution and adaptation of animals to their environment was the first one. Darwin's ideas led to the development of human ecology whose distinctive hypothesis is that human beings are adaptive in relation to the environment.

Further influence came from concerns about human growth. Freud emphasized that motivation is an attempt to reduce tension and based on aggressive and sexual drive. Later Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1954) emphasized positive growth and fulfillment. They focused on human being's tendency towards self-actualization and an urge to enrich experiences and expand horizons. Buhler (1962) suggested that human behavior is intentional; it is constantly oriented towards

seeking and restructuring goals. Crisis is a time when goals seem to be blocked or unreachable.

Erickson's (1963) view of the eight stages of the developmental life cycle was a very significant attempt to understand the need to cope with crisis. Each of the stages represents a new challenge, transition or crisis. Unlike classical psychoanalysis, Erickson's theory stated that with each transition, subsequent development was "on the line". An adolescent, who could not resolve the crisis of identity versus role confusion by making choices about career or beliefs, could be more confused in later adult life about making decisions. It is very important to resolve the earlier conflict before proceeding on successfully to the next one.

There have been number of studies examining how people cope with various traumatic situations in their lives. For e.g., death of a family member, major injury, war effects, and cyclone or earthquake disaster effects. The way one copes with their traumatic life experiences have a very significant role to play in their health and disease and well being (Khosla, 2005; Khosla & Dokania, 2007; Khosla & Kapur, 2007;). It also depends upon the person's ability to realize and utilize his or her inner capacities to face life crises as opportunities in one's environment. Quality of life depends upon the livability of the environment, wherein good life is seen as a fruit of human intervention (Veenhoven, 1996). Also emphasizing on the life- ability of the person, suggesting how well people are equipped to cope with the problems of their lives.

Preventative Focus

There is always a critical need to cope with any crisis situation. This is so because it has implications on various psychological as well as physical outcomes of our lives. By properly working through the grief process, the possibility of maladjustment in later life

can be prevented. Generally most intervention programs aim at assisting people in managing life crisis (Caplan, 1964). This might help prevent some kind of psychopathology, which may result later in life. Coping appropriately with any life stressor can not only reduce the incidence of disorders, but also minimize the harmful effects of events that have already taken place. Coping processes occur after the crisis has taken place. An attempt is made to reduce the harmful impact of the crisis on psychological or physical functioning. Hence, coping helps to improve one's existence, alter maladaptive thoughts, change negative feelings and attitudes and foster a more positive vision for future.

Religion, meditation, art of living, yoga, is various attempts to rejuvenate our resources to deal with life crisis successfully. They not only provide relaxation, but also enlighten one about various aspects of life and wellness. There is a more optimistic and positive approach towards life crises, and how one can benefit from coping. The impact of various disasters, immigration problems, accidents, loss, injury etc., can be reduced depending upon how the event is viewed and dealt with. A positive view of painful experiences, to find meaning in simple life situations, events, or experiences, or reexamine the stressful situation realistically can help resolve stress more easily. The extent, to which one positively re interprets the crisis situation, will have crucial effect on subsequent psychological and physical health. It is important to resolve and move on in our life before it gets too late. The sooner we are able to make an attempt to overcome the emotional turmoil associated with the crisis event the sooner we are able to evolve into a healthier and happier personality.

Growth results only when previous maladaptive patterns have been destroyed and the rebuilding process takes place. The

broad and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) explains how one can broaden the thinking patterns to facilitate more positive feelings and approach towards life. To overcome the pain as soon as possible, by positive meaning, reappraisal and finding benefit in coping with crisis. Hence timely coping is what is required before it gets too late.

There is a need to evolve and restore the state of balance, which has been disturbed due to the difficult, threatening life crisis. This is so because it serves as the basis for future growth, development and progress. Crisis resolution has a major impact on the mental health and quality of life. In striving to achieve stability during crisis, the coping process itself can result in the achievement of qualitatively different "stability" (Caplan, 1964). Hence contrary to the view that crises are destructive, they may initiate a restructuring process towards growth. Coping with the crises may give one insight into the various feelings one has to be born, to live. In short one may learn to appreciate life more often resulting in a state of peace and bliss. Crises can result in either positive or negative outcomes depending upon how one deal with them. If one is able to deal constructively with crises their lives can be more meaningful and satisfied lives. Wherein crises can be viewed as opportunities for enhancement of self-growth. The possibilities of leading a good life can be ascertained by evaluating the outcomes of our lives. To what extent we value the changes in our environment will determine the extent to which we are happy. As suggested by Veenhoven (1996), the quality of life is determined with respect to its outcomes. These outcomes are judged by their value for oneself and his or her environment. How one conceptualizes the crisis, i.e., interprets it in light of various life expectancies and long-range goals, is critical to future development. Hence, the aim is to provide techniques of crisis intervention to

reduce the probability of debilitating effects of crisis and to overcoming any kind of crisis successfully to enhance self growth. Hence attempting to focus not on specific qualities of life but the overall quality of life and to lead a happy and healthier life.

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