

# EMOTIONAL WELLNESS IMATTERS

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## SURVIVING THE LIFE CRISIS

### The Bleakest Times of Our Lives Can Give Rise to Remarkably Positive Life Transformations



**A** life crisis is one of the inevitable features of our lives. Learning how to survive a crisis is a crucial skill, and one that we will probably need more than once throughout our lives. A crisis can occur when things begin to fall apart around us. The things that shape us – our marital status, job title, relationships with family and friends, health, or financial security – have disappeared and we find ourselves adrift without any clear guidelines that tell us what to do next. We feel lost. Do we hide? Do we deny this is happening? Do we rage? Do we fear the world? The answers may not be obvious. Nobody ever told us that the world would turn out this way. But one thing is clear – this is a crisis.

We all experience life transitions, such as the move from childhood into adolescence or the transition from working adulthood into retirement. Both involve substantial changes in the way we and others define us and the way we conduct our everyday lives. While these normal and expected life transitions can cause us some stress, we at least know what to expect when it is time to move into the new life stage. Our culture provides us with ample guidelines. If we fail to make our adaptations to the new stage, then we experience difficulty. Think of the child who has trouble moving into adolescence or the father or mother who cannot



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accept the responsibilities of parenthood. Another example is the adolescent who cannot make the move into working adulthood. Most of us adapt to new life stages fairly well, however, because we see others around us who have made the move successfully. We know what to do.

A life crisis is different, however, because it usually hits us unexpectedly and we feel unprepared to adapt to a set of circumstances that we never thought would happen. A life crisis can occur when there is a divorce, a financial setback, the loss of a job, the death of a family member or friend (or a pet), a house fire, a serious accident, an illness (including terminal illnesses), violence (including rape), or a natural disaster. The list seems endless. A life crisis can even occur when a problem we have been sitting on for years finally comes to the fore – like, “Am I really happy in the work that I do?” Or, “Do I have the chance to express my spiritual life to the degree that I want to?”

## How Do We Define Our “Self”?

Answer a question – “Who are you?”

If you’re like most people, you probably answered first in terms of the work you do. And you may have answered in terms of who you are in your family or other relationships.

If your answer included your work, what do you do when that work is no longer part of your life? What if you lost your job? What if you have a serious illness and are now disabled? What now is your definition of yourself? You may very well feel utterly lost – and in a crisis. If your definition of self includes your work and nothing else, and that work is now gone, you could very well end up in the swirl of a life crisis, feeling that you have no resources for working your way back to a normal life again.

If you are in a crisis, answer the “who are you?” question – but this time list all of your positive personal qualities. Get down to the core of who you really are. For example, your list might say, “I am caring, a good friend, creative, a hard worker, trustworthy, a good spouse, a parent, kind, fun, a good socializer, quiet at times, a dancer” – and the list can be anything at all that describes who you are.

When you know that you are more – much more – than your narrow definition, the crisis becomes more bearable. You know that you have qualities which give you the strength to endure your crisis and define your new self.

## An Enlightening Exercise

Answer these questions –

“What is the worst crisis you’ve ever been through?”

“What would your life be like now if that crisis had never occurred?”

“What did you gain from your crisis?”

Your new sense of self can be whatever you choose it to be. Now ask yourself the question, “Who do you want to be?” The answers to this question can be one of your roadmaps to the future.

## Letting Go and Building Anew

A life crisis can be a blessing in disguise because it forces us to respond to what we really need in our lives. It gets us down to the root of who we really are. The crisis allows us to let go of our old life and to create a new one that can be more fulfilling. Yet we resist the change because it forces us to challenge our definition of who we have always been. We need to let go. But we resist letting go because we feel the need to hold on to the illusion of control.

We must let go of those parts of our lives that are no longer appropriate for us to hold on to. They no longer work for us. But we can hold on to those things that we truly need and that will define who we want to be in the future.

“The pain of birth is the pain of death and the pain of death is the pain of birth.”

– Ram Dass

## Some Practical Steps for Getting Through a Life Crisis

- 1. Live in the moment.** A life crisis might feel like a permanent condition – a painful and lost existence. Take one step at a time as you go through each day. Try not to focus on the past, which can’t be changed, and let the future unfold as it will. For now, stay in the present and get your bearings. When your world is in turmoil, it is normal to feel confused. Your old tools for survival may not work any longer, and it is time to explore new ways of dealing with everyday problems.

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**2. Find support in other people.** It's difficult to endure a crisis alone. Identify your crisis (divorce, grieving, financial loss, a medical issue, etc.) and find other people who have been through a similar crisis. Try not to isolate and work this through by yourself, although this might seem the most comfortable option. A therapist is trained to help you in a confidential and professional way. A support group of people who have been through a similar experience can understand and accept your feelings. Find a trusted mentor who can help guide you through this period of confusion with practical advice.

**3. Draw on your full range of strengths.** Try to find a good balance between the various components of your personality – your ability to think, your emotions, your intuition, and your spiritual self. You may feel more comfortable, perhaps, as a thinker – but understand that this is limiting. A person cannot usually think their way through a life crisis. You also need your ability to feel, and sometimes your gut feelings give you the best course of action. A crisis is a time of growth and adapting to new situations, and for this tremendous challenge you need to use your whole self.

**4. Define your goals.** You may feel that your life is in disarray, so it helps to give yourself some direction. Set up a series of goals that you can easily achieve. When they are achieved, you will sense a feeling of success. These goals will constantly change as you wend your way through the crisis. For example, Monday will be the day to go to the grocery store alone. Tuesday you'll call a therapist. Wednesday you'll go to the gym or take a mile-long walk. Later on your goals will be loftier – like going on a weekend trip with a new friend, arranging a party at your house, or starting a new job.

**5. Take care of business.** Your life may be in crisis, but it must go on nevertheless. Pay your bills on time. Go to the doctor and dentist. Do your laundry. Bathe every day. Take your dog for a walk daily. Keep your house clean. Water the plants. These activities give you structure and serve as a good counterbalance to the chaos that characterizes life crisis.

**6. Nurture yourself.** The world may seem cruel when you are in crisis. Find at least one thing that you really enjoy doing – and then do it. Give yourself some pleasurable activities. Take a walk. Enjoy the sunset. Do a jigsaw puzzle. Eat

ice cream (but only as an occasional treat). While you engage in these activities, allow yourself to have pleasant thoughts. If negative thinking comes into the picture, observe that you're getting negative, and let it go.

There are a few things that you should avoid doing during a crisis because they are counterproductive and interfere with your ultimate goal, which is to build a new life that's true to who you really are. For example, during a crisis –

• **Avoid substance abuse.** You need to stay oriented in the present and use all of your faculties to meet the huge challenge of the crisis. Using drugs, including alcohol, replaces effective action with a temporary state of feeling good, which, when the drug wears off, leaves you still in the thrall of the crisis. Drinking or drugging your way through a crisis is a way of asking it to linger on in your life for a long time.

• **Observe when you have vengeful thoughts and work to let them go.** We may be angry when our crisis has been caused by someone else, and it is understandable that we may have thoughts about having the other person go through the same pain that we are experiencing. Holding on to retributive thinking sustains a negative cycle and prolongs the crisis. Frame your thinking in different terms – the other person has actually given you a wonderful gift that has allowed you to move into a new phase of your life. You are the winner, not the other person.

• **Change negative thoughts into positive ones.** Try turning your negative thinking, which we experience during periods of crisis, into positive thoughts. Do this by observing your negativity (“There I go again”) and then consciously telling yourself that you're now going to focus on the positives in your life. Positive thinking attracts positive experiences – and allows us to set the stage for a bright future, a future that we deserve.

## Recommended Reading



*Welcome to Your Crisis*, by Laura Day.  
Paperback, 2006, 270 pages, \$13.99.  
New York: Little, Brown and Company.  
ISBN – 0-316-11464-2.

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## HOW DO YOU REACT TO A CRISIS?

**P**eople have different ways of responding to sudden life changes. It is important to know which response style you typically use when you find yourself in crisis. A therapist can help you use your response style to your advantage and work on finding alternate ways of coping. Here are the responses that most people have, and some people use more than one of these types of responses –

**Depression** – People in depression tend to isolate themselves. They may notice changes in their sleep patterns and their appetite. They have trouble in finding pleasure in the activities they used to enjoy. They feel tired and find it difficult to complete ordinary daily activities. They may obsess about their life troubles, going over the same thoughts again and again. Their thinking tends to be negative and sometimes self-destructive. They may lose interest in caring for their appearance and taking care of their living space. People in depression may (but not always) become tearful frequently and cry uncontrollably.

**Anger** – People who use rage when they are

confronted with a life crisis may snap at others or even explode when they feel irritated. They are on a short fuse. They may struggle to hold back taking physical action against others. They feel a need to respond to irritants, and they may hurt themselves or others. They have the feeling that everyone is failing them. They often harbor revenge fantasies.

**Anxiety** – The person who reacts to crisis with anxiety has a need to be reassured by others. They may have trouble falling asleep or waking up in the middle of the night and their eating patterns may change during the crisis. They are forgetful and feel that they always have to take action. Their actions are often impulsive and ineffective. They may repeat themselves.

**Denial** – Those who use denial during a crisis go to great lengths to pretend that the crisis does not exist. Denial is a useful way of coping with crisis at first, but if the denial continues for a long time, the positive changes that crisis can generate will never occur. Those who deny bring out their very best qualities on the job or at home, as if they are functioning at their peak. They resist people who offer them concern or sympathy, and avoid friends who see things differently. Their emotions are kept in check (no crying, no yelling). They never let thoughts about the crisis into their consciousness and never appear vulnerable.

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