

COPING with CRISIS

Can Anything Help?

Recently, several serious accidents and natural disasters have occurred around the world and right around the corner. The families and friends who have suddenly and senselessly lost their loved ones must find a way to go on even when the whole nightmare seems inconceivable. Turning on the news or picking up a newspaper can change your mood for the rest of the day. Not that I'm advising isolating yourself from what's going on in the world, however, perhaps there should be a warning - "This information may be dangerous to your Emotional Health."

When a crisis happens, we try to find some way to understand and explain it. Tragedies bring out a myriad of emotions ranging from sadness, disbelief and compassion, to anger, regrets, rage and revenge. We identify with the loss, knowing that we, too, could be the next victims to have our lives forever changed. These types of events challenge us and bring out the best, and unfortunately at times, the worst in human behavior. In the days and weeks following a tragedy, many people continue to talk about it and try to come up with someone or something to blame it on, in order to have a reason and some sense of closure. The question "WHY?" is not easy for us to leave unanswered. Saying it was "bad karma," "God's will," "fate," or "just rotten luck," isn't enough to ease the pain or soothe and heal the broken spirit. Loss is something we all will face at some point in our lives. Having experienced several losses in my own life, I was fortunately able to

draw upon a variety of psychological coping skills to get through the stages of grief that usually accompany an emotional loss.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a physician and researcher into the area of death and dying, identifies stages that people go through when they feel out of control and are faced with a death or significant loss of some kind. These stages consist of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then finally, acceptance. People seem to experience these feelings in their own timeframe and rarely move through the process in a predictable way. Other people who are not directly affected by the trauma can also feel the "shock waves" as they try to accept what has happened.

Fortunately, faith and a strong support system can provide helpful tools for dealing with events that could otherwise appear totally devastating. The events of 9/11 brought our country together and created a stronger sense of community in the months following the event. This spirit waned, as we no longer struggled to cope and moved on with our lives. Now the hurricane damage in Louisiana has prompted many people to want to get involved and find some way to help get through the devastation. Right here in our own community, we are still reeling from the tragedy that shocked the families of the Severna Park teenagers who died in an automobile accident through no fault of their own. In the months ahead there will be a need to heal and people will move awkwardly back into their lives out of necessity. We often feel



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powerless and don't really know what to do or say in order to be of help. There is a very basic need to try and manage or avoid things that threaten us. For some individuals, just taking some type of action is better than doing nothing, as they attempt to exercise control over an uncomfortable or paralyzing situation. However, not all events can be handled in the same way. Psychology 101 teaches us that we have choices to make when we are faced with a situation/relationship that is causing us problems. We may not be able to change the situation, or the other person in the relationship, but we can change our feelings or reaction to it.

At some point we are all forced to face disappointment, betrayal, loss, failure, rejection and perhaps even despair. The Serenity Prayer that is part of the many Twelve Step Programs may provide instructions and guidance for coping with difficult situations, including when to take action and when to opt for acceptance. It's a simple philosophy with a powerful message that can impact your life.

God, Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference.