

# Helping People in Times of Crisis

**Ron L. Deal, M.MFT.**

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, Licensed Professional Counselor  
www.RonDeal.org

Traumatic events extend beyond normal psychological stressors to the extent that casualties do not have a frame of reference for understanding the event or their own emotional, psychological, and spiritual reaction. This is a basic road map for providing “psychological first aid” and has been helpful to those engaged in “first response” counseling. This summary is general enough that it can be applied to a variety of traumatic situations (e.g.’s, natural disasters, accidental death, murder, etc.).

## **COMMON FIRST EMOTIONAL REACTIONS**

The following is a summary of common emotional responses seen in those impacted by the event. They are often experienced, just as a huge wave crashes against the sea shore, as an overwhelming feeling. Emotional waves come in and out, some staying longer than others, and vary in intensity. It is critical that the helper normalize the range of feelings and prepare the individual for more and different waves. While the following reactions are common, remember that children and adults will respond in a wide variety of ways. It’s important to validate their experience and listen with a safe, nonjudgmental attitude.

- **SHOCK and DISBELIEF:** Persons feel stunned by news of the event and are often unable to process the meaning of the new information.
- **CONFUSION:** Emotions are mixed including sadness, denial, anger, questioning, alarm, fear.
- **GUILT:** Perhaps they know something that they now deem important, but didn’t say anything about. Survivor’s guilt results when someone was hurt or killed and they weren’t. Parents might say, “How can I face my friend again, I still have my daughter, but hers is dead.”
- **LOSS OF PREDICTABILITY:** Basic assumptions of safety and security are shattered leading to an intense sense of vulnerability, helplessness, and insecurity. “Why did this happen here?” “What’s going to happen tomorrow?” “If it could happen to him, could it happen to me / someone else?”
- **INSECURITY and FEAR:** Persons tend to be fearful and scared when they normally feel safe.
- **COMPOUNDED STRESS:** Some people will have other stressful events (e.g., death in the family, parents divorcing, drug use) going on in their life resulting in compounded stress. These people need to be watched closely and checked on frequently.

- **RELIVING PAST TRAUMA:** The current event may resurrect feelings from an event earlier in life that is similar or seemingly unrelated (but the emotional impact is similar). Persons will then have to deal with both events.
- **EXPERIENCING “LAND MINES”:** Land mines or “triggers” are those unexpected events, sounds, and occurrences that cause the person to recall this incident or other similar incidents. Land mines usually have intense emotional feelings associated with them that can “flood” (or overwhelm) the individual without warning. Examples include seeing a picture, hearing words or phrases that remind them of something, and smelling certain odors. Most land mines will occur during the first few months. They will taper off as time passes, yet some can and will occur years later.
- **ANGER:** Anger may be expressed toward the offender, the victim, God, or others involved in the situation. Often times this comes out initially as blaming the victim (e.g., “How could he have hurt himself!” or “Why did you let him touch you like that, why didn’t you say something?”)

### **COMMON PHYSICAL EFFECTS**

Persons will experience physical effects such as loss of appetite, sleeplessness, physical illness, preoccupation with the event, difficulty concentrating (e.g., school or work), poor judgment, mood swings, avoidance of activities or situations connected to the event, and a strong desire to get closer to or distance themselves from loved ones.

### **FROM IMPACT TO RESOLUTION**

It’s important for people to know what lies ahead. The following five phases give some predictability to an unpredictable event.

1. **Outcry / Shock:** This refers to the range of initial emotional reactions and may lead to either denial or intrusiveness.
2. **Denial:** Blocking the impact is common as is emotional numbing, not thinking of what happened, or avoiding the subject. Some will respond as if the event did not occur (“They say he’s dead, but I know they’re wrong.”). A word of caution about forgiveness: some may demonstrate denial under the guise of quick forgiveness (“Let’s just forgive them and get on with our lives.”). Forgiveness is a goal, but make sure it’s the real thing.
3. **Intrusiveness:** This often comes in the form of intrusive-repetitive thoughts, images, emotions, and behaviors. Persons may be bothered by preoccupation, nightmares, hyper-vigilance, and confusion. Intense emotional states can be experienced including rage, major depression, guilt, shame, and anxiety. Children will likely display regression in academic performance and behavior.
4. **Working Through:** This is the longest period of recovery and will vary in length given the depth of impact on the individual and their family system. This requires that thoughts, feelings, and images of the crisis be identified, expressed, and aired. The grief process

includes integrating new “realities” into preexisting assumptions about life and accepting a “new path” for their life. Some people work through naturally on their own, others cannot without outside help. Families also need help coping together and knowing how to support each other.

5. Completion: This occurs when there has been a full integration of the event into the individual’s life. They experience restabilization and resolution of feelings. Recalling the event may still bring sadness, or disbelief, but the crisis state and intensity of emotions is diminished.

#### **WHAT YOU CAN DO: PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID**

1. Establish open reliable communication: Let them know its O.K. to talk about the event and their feelings. Inform them of the facts, as best you can. Stay in touch, communicate concern, and follow-up.
2. Normalize their response: Without a framework for understanding, persons need to be reassured that their reactions are normal given the situation. Talk about how their reaction is similar to others and let them know they aren’t going “crazy.” “For the next few days/weeks I don’t expect you’ll feel very good about this, I know I don’t. Take your time and we’ll work through it together.” Explain land mines and tell them to expect some in the days ahead.
3. Dialogue and Debrief: Let them talk about their feelings and concerns, even if they are angry or judgmental in nature. Don’t feel the need to agree or “set them straight,” just acknowledge the emotion behind the statement. Don’t be defensive about the circumstances or the behavior of those involved. Feel free to share your feelings and concerns, after all, you’re human, too. This helps to normalize their feelings and makes you a “fellow struggler.” Some will benefit from non-verbal expressions of emotion such as drawing, writing, creative works, symbols, and rituals (e.g., releasing a balloon, graffiti wall).
4. Ask what the event *means* to the person: Initially it is common for persons to focus on the “why?” of the event. Since you may never have a satisfactory answer to that question, try to steer away from “why?” questions to “what” has taken place. Then, be sure to focus on “who” we look to in times of distress. Ask:
  - “What does it mean to you that this happened?”
  - “How does this effect you or your family directly?”
  - “How are you making sense of this?”
  - “How do you think God feels / thinks about this?”
5. Establish ongoing contact & support: Call to see how they’re doing, don’t be afraid to ask. Don’t assume that because someone is “handling it O.K.,” they really are O.K.
6. God as a source of help! Pray with persons and try to usher them into the presence of God. Find appropriate scripture to share with them as a source of encouragement.

## Five Components of Psychological First Aid

<b>Component</b>	<b>Helper Behavior</b>	<b>Objective</b>
1. Make psychological and spiritual contact	<p>Open your <b>ARMS</b>:</p> <p><i>Accept</i> the person.  <i>Reflect</i> facts and feelings.  <i>Motivate</i> them to talk &amp; listen.  <i>Support</i> the person.</p> <p>Physically touch or hold if appropriate.            Bring "calm control" to an intense situation.            Pray and offer spiritual hope in God's power and concern, i.e., the God who heals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Person to feel heard, understood, accepted, supported.</li> <li>• Intensity of emotional distress reduced.</li> <li>• Problem-solving capabilities reactivated in some cases.</li> </ul>
2. Explore dimensions of the problem.	<p>Inquire about:</p> <p>Immediate past; Precipitating event;            Present:                Lethality; Resources – Spiritual; Personal; Social; Family.            Immediate Future:                Impending decisions–tonight, weekend, next few days/weeks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rank order:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Immediate needs; and</li> <li>b) Later needs.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
3. Examine possible solutions	<p>Ask what they've tried thus far;            Then provide <b>HELP</b>:</p> <p><i>How</i> would you like things to be? What will things look like when they're better?  <i>Evaluate</i> options and possibilities, include counseling as an option;  <i>Lend</i> ideas for consideration;            Develop an Action <b>Plan</b>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify one or more solutions to immediate needs and later needs.</li> </ul>
4. Assist in taking concrete action	<p><b>Option 1:</b> If a) Lethality is low, and b) person is capable of acting on own behalf, then:            Facilitative Stance – Ranges from listening to giving advice:                a) "We talk"; b) "You act"; and c) Contract for action is between helper and person.</p> <p><b>Option 2:</b> If a) Lethality is high or b) person is not capable of acting on own behalf, then:            Directive Stance – Ranges from actively mobilizing resources to controlling the situation:                a) "We talk"; b) "I may act on your behalf";                c) Contract for action might include family and other professional resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement immediate solutions intended to meet immediate needs.</li> </ul>
5. Follow-up	<p>Determine when recontact will take place;            Evaluate the solution outcomes;            Modify plan if necessary.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine if further discussion of the problem is needed or if a referral needs to be made.</li> <li>• If referral made: give reassurance of your continued support and follow-up regularly.</li> </ul>

# Helping Your Children Through A Crisis: Important Tips for Parents

**Ron L. Deal, M.MFT.**

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, Licensed Professional Counselor  
[www.RonDeal.org](http://www.RonDeal.org)

Here are some tips for helping you to help your child deal with the crisis:

1. Listen with interest, openness, and acceptance. Encourage them to tell you about their experience. Be prepared for your children to talk sporadically about the tragedy, displaying a need to have small conversations again and again.
2. Spend extra time with them yet balance togetherness with private time or time that isn't oriented around the crisis.
3. Reassure them that they are safe and the Lord will carry them (and your family) through this.
4. Help them with every day tasks and have extra patience, as concentration may be difficult.
5. Accept that life will go on and try to maintain a normal routine when possible.
6. Ask, "What can I do to be helpful?"
7. Try to accept their anger or other negative responses with understanding.
8. Acknowledge that family members will grieve and feel differently. Give one another permission to express differing, even opposing emotions.

This is not the time to argue or be critical. Avoid saying how lucky they are that it wasn't worse and don't push for significant decisions. Symptoms will usually subside and disappear in time without much effort, but persistent difficulties indicate a need for counseling. Do not focus on emotional or behavioral reactions and don't criticize your child because of them.

Your children will be vulnerable and hurt for a period of time. If these signs of stress do not begin to lessen within a few weeks, or if they intensify, seek further help. You may not understand what they are going through, but offer your support and love. You probably have a great deal in common with your son or daughter, but allow for differences within the family throughout the grief process.

Even though it is upsetting, this is an opportunity to nurture your child's faith. Talk about God, faith, sin, responsibility, forgiveness, and trust. Read Bible passages together (e.g. Psalms), pray, and ask questions of one another. Make God a central anchor in your family as together you ride out the storm.

## Ron L. Deal

Author, Speaker, Therapist, Remarriage & Blended Family Expert, and creator of Smart Stepfamilies (formerly called Successful Stepfamilies)

Empowers remarried couples and stepfamilies for successful family living and trains churches and professionals to help blended families

## Additional Resources

### School Permission Forms for Stepfamilies:

<http://www.smartstepfamilies.com/view/permission-forms>

1. **Stepparent Medical Permission** - gives permission to stepparents to make medical decisions when necessary for a stepchild.
2. **Grandparent Medical Permission** - gives permission for a grandparent to make medical decisions when necessary for a stepchild.
3. **Caretaker Medical Permission** - gives permission for a responsible adult (e.g., stepparent's father or mother) to make medical decisions when necessary for a stepchild.
4. **Travel Permission** - gives a stepparent permission to travel with stepchildren (acknowledges the biological parent's awareness of the travel).
5. **School Duplicate Information** - gives schools permission to share information about a child with both households, including parents and stepparents.

**Parenting After Divorce e-booklet:** <http://www.smartstepfamilies.com/view/parenting-after-divorce>

Parenting After Divorce - Formerly entitled Common Steps for Co-Parents, this **FREE** 50-page e-booklet features a pdf file (Adobe Acrobat Reader required) that outlines the key qualities of successful co-parent relationships. Taken directly from ***The Smart Stepfamily***, this booklet is being used throughout the world (used with permission).