

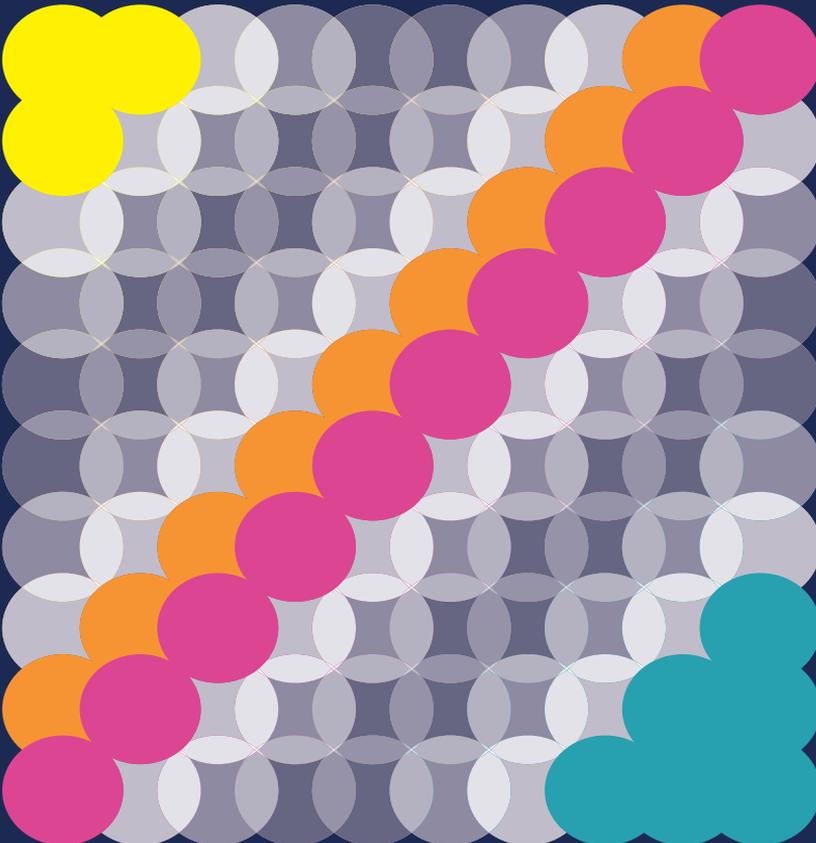
# Our journey through crisis

*What do we need to know and what can we learn?*

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# What is a crisis?

Human beings are amazing. We have tried and trusted ways of dealing with all sorts of complicated, even dangerous situations. Sometimes we come across a threatening situation where we do not have any way of knowing what to do. We need to respond urgently to the danger, but all our learned problem solving does not help us. That moment is a crisis.

This means that while one person or group might call something a crisis, this might not be the case for someone else. If I accidentally set my wastepaper bin on fire, for me that is a crisis. I need to respond now. My attention focusses on the fire. I know I don't want the fire to spread. Do I try to put it out or move the bin? My head is in a spin.

If I happened to be a firefighter, I would know how to respond. I would have lots of expertise about fires, about the risks and would probably have more than one option about how to deal with it safely. I would also have practiced being around fire, so flames in themselves would not interrupt my ability to think straight.

Some crises are smaller one-off events like my fire in the bin. Some are larger, longer term and involving more people. When a crisis occurs, people tend to go through a number of phases, just because we are human.

Some people have been using the change curve to understand their psychological and emotional reactions to the current crisis, and that has some useful things to tell us about human adaptation. But this situation is not about change, this is a crisis. And a crisis has its own dynamic and its own curve.

If we become aware of the phases of the crisis curve, this can help us. We will still go through all the complexities of the experience, but this knowledge can support us and we can become skilled at going through a crisis.

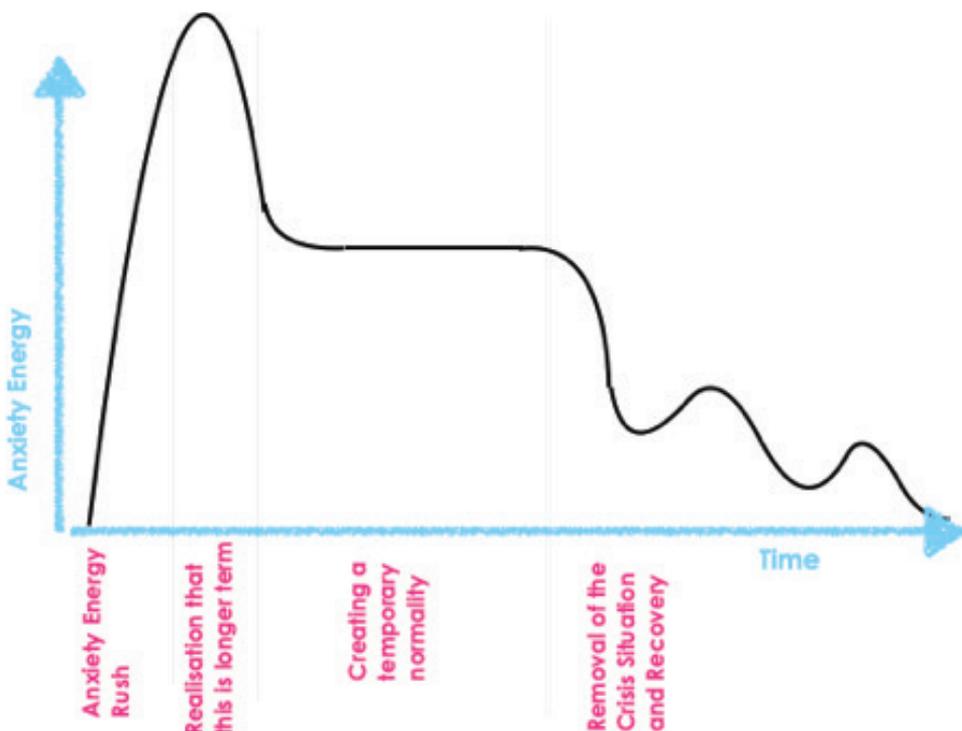
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# Anxiety Energy Rush

Once we notice that there is a crisis, we go into a crisis mode. Our bodies prepare us to deal with the emergency. Lots of adrenalin is sent to our limbs so that we are ready to act. Instead of being aware of the wider world around us, our attention focusses on what we perceive as a threat or a solution. We are ready to respond quickly. We are not doing elaborate problem solving but are ready to go to our well-known ways of sorting things out. Our primary focus is survival.

This is often called the Fight/Flight response (or fight/fight/freeze). It is an animal survival function. It enables us to react quickly and often allows us to get out of danger. While it can enable survival, in our modern world it can also have complex up and down sides.

On the up side, our response means that we are filled with the need to act. We want to do something. This can lead to people acting generously, helping each other out or raising



money. We can go into mega problem solving or organising. We may also go into mega defensive mode, doing things which we believe will keep us or our loved ones safe. Because this phase tends to rely on our trusted habits each of us is likely to do the thing we tend to do, but more. If we can notice where our preoccupation for action goes, we can learn a lot (good and bad) about ourselves.

On the down side, our perception becomes blinkered. We become focussed on the issue we perceive to be most pressing. We tend to block out other issues, often to the point of not seeing them at all. We focus on the immediate and find it very challenging to take even a slightly longer-term view. This means we may be effective in problem solving where we are focussed, but we may miss or disregard factors that have wider implications, or impact on what needs to happen longer term. And where someone else's blinkered preoccupation is different to mine, instead of problem-solving together I may see them as a threat.

The short-term problem solving can be effective in dealing with the immanent emergency. In longer term crises, as the situation alters very quickly, short-term thinking can leave me behind the speed at which events are changing. I may look back at a decision and realise that it did not prepare me for the next issue. It is important to evaluate this but to not be too hard on myself. Getting on top of the pace in a crisis is very difficult.

We are most likely to become less self-aware. Our attention is on the threat and our immediate safety. We are therefore a bit out of touch with our emotions and wellbeing. We expect to deal with that when the crisis is over. This means we are likely to be unaware of how our anxiety is driving our thinking. We fully believe we are right and rational when our hidden anxiety has driven our thinking. We can become unaware of how we are relating to others. This can lead to a deterioration of relationships, personal or professional during a time when co-operation would be most helpful. When we know that this is likely to happen, we can just take that extra bit of care to notice how anxiety impacts us.

There is a lot of emotion and human reaction going on as we move up the crisis curve. We are in a heightened state because of the threat and the energy kick. There is quite a lot of anxiety (a general over arousal as opposed to an anxiety attack). We will experience this in our own way and according to our own skill in handling our personal reactions, but there are some key responses of which to be aware. We are likely to feel a sense of threat and a need to be active. We will feel jangled with an overactive head and not at ease. We may notice a sense of things not being right or even fear. We are quite likely to find it difficult to stop while also feeling tired.

This is all to do with that experience of being 'too ready to act'. Having reactions is not bad or dangerous. If we can give ourselves some time, take a breath, just to have the feelings, it can help us get through. If we can not work through them at the time, we will need to allow time to deal with it later.

It may seem counter intuitive, but in this stage, there is an opportunity for creativity, new ideas and original solutions. Because all the usual ways of coping are thrown in the air we can be freed from the habitual or practiced responses.

It may be very difficult to do this in the initial rush of anxiety energy, but if we can notice the phase we are in it is very helpful to be open to the question "What are we learning, here?" We may not be able to get an answer to that until later, but asking it now helps with this creativity.

Things that you can do in this phase:

- Notice you are in this phase.
- Take a breath, a pause
- Give your reactions and emotions some time and space
- Work to widen perception
- Try to look to the 2, 3 or 4 issues ahead
- Work on building co-operative relationships
- Do what you need to do to get through

In a short term or smaller crisis, the threat ends and we can begin to return to normal. The heightened anxiety energy begins to drop and we go into recovery. In a longer-term crisis situation, however, we will reach a point at which we can not keep going at this pitch as we reach a peak of anxiety energy.

In a long – chronic – crisis there comes a realisation that this situation is not going away.

## Realisation that this longer term

We had hoped that the crisis would end, and we could all go back to normality. Then we come to terms with the crisis going on for a while. Yet we cannot maintain the immediate rush of energy and anxiety. Instead, we need to see this as an on-going situation.

This is a very complicated time for our heads. While we are at the beginning of getting on top of things, our brains are still being driven by the crisis and the anxiety energy. We are quite uptight and exhausted. Our emotions are still jangled. The move to a different phase is as much driven by not being able to go on like this, as it is by the rational perspective that the crisis situation is longer term. We really need a cross, grumpy and tired day to settle down.

Where many people are involved, they don't all hit this phase at the same time and there may be some difficult conversations as people settle a bit.

Our perception begins to take in the wider picture. We begin to pay attention to what is helping us and what is not. We want to get on top of things. With this realisation we begin to think, "What we need around here is some ways of doing things". We begin to search for structure.

# Creating a temporary normality

If we can work through the immediate rush, we can begin to create ways of working with the acceptance that we are going to be in crisis mode for a longer time.

We are still a bit anxious but getting on top of it. We can take a wider perspective and we can see further ahead. We are more likely to tune into the perceptions of other people. We are aware that our normal practices don't quite fit. We move from immediate short term response to creating a pattern that works. "While this is going on, I will timetable my day like this...". "While this is going on, this is how we can focus our meeting time..." We can be open to new and creative ideas.

It is helpful if we can be pragmatic rather than perfectionist in this phase. What will work well enough? What will deal with the important issues? If we put that to one side in this phase, will it really cause difficulty?

There is the amazing human potential here to come up with original solutions. They are not only creative ways of responding to the here and now but may provide new options for when the crisis situation stops. It is really worth stepping back from time to time and ask what we are learning from all this.

Our reaction to this is a bit of relief. We can have some stability even though it is temporary. On the other side, however, the general background level of anxiety is still quite high. We may expect the stability to make us feel better, but first we hit the result of being in high anxiety energy. We hit the cross, grumpy and inordinately tired feelings. This is a very important stage for recovering from the chaos. We have to give ourselves time to withdraw from the adrenalin rush, and to let our mind and emotions recover a bit.

Having moved into some temporary structures and worked through our cross and grumpy reactions, we are more able to live with the crisis situation. Our problem solving becomes more long term, and we can pay attention to our wellbeing, and our working and personal relationships.

We will most likely have good and bad times during this. We can celebrate the great solutions we are coming up with. We can enjoy the times of increased problem solving coming from the still increased anxiety energy. We will also have down times when we will be a bit more cross, grumpy and tired.

# The removal of the crisis situation & recovery

This is a weird and confusing time for us humans. The crisis situation has stopped. It should all go back to normal and we should feel relieved and happy. Er... It's not quite that simple. Relief and celebration is one aspect of what happens.

Just like coming off the top of the curve, we have to work through our reactions. As we relax from a heightened state of preparedness there can be a sense of a gap, a stair missing, and a feeling that we ought to be doing something. Immediately after a crisis it can be too easy to use all this tension to find another crisis. Emotionally this can be a flatness or depressive low. All of this is the healthy recovery from crisis mode. We are most likely to go up and down for a bit while we adjust. These reactions are normal. We need to give ourselves permission and time to go through them and recuperate.

Then we sort of expect to go back to how it was, but actually things have moved on.

While the actual threat has moved on, we will carry a heightened sense that it could happen

again. We are most likely to be overly sensitive to issues around the crisis for some time afterwards. We may find it difficult to give up behaviours that we have learned to protect us. This usually diminishes over time.

There will be some clearing up to do. While we have been in temporary structures there will have been some day to day tasks that have not been so important to do. There will need to be a reassessment of where we are up to. Families may need to catch up with missed contact or events. Businesses will need to see how the crisis has impacted on both their internal processes and the external environment. Some of the things we always did before may not fit this new situation.

We are most likely to have tried new structures and habits. Now we need to see what fits. If we are going back to old structures and habits we will have to go through a period of adjustment and previously familiar things may feel a bit odd. Some of the new things we have tried may have opened out new possibilities and we may find it useful to incorporate new solutions into this post crisis situation.

We are pulled between a hope to get back to the familiar and safe, while having the opportunity to incorporate the new. Different people will find themselves at different places on this continuum and that will have to be worked through.

Sometimes, quite serious things have happened and we need to mourn losses, respond quickly to issues that are now arising, or mend some damage. This will extend the length and complexity of the recovery.

There is a looking back over what happened. This has helpful and unhelpful aspects.

The natural human response to chat over the experience is a really effective and natural way of working through the reactions and emotions, the bumpy up and down of this phase. “Do you remember when...?” “And then that happened...” “I look back and think I did that really well.” “I made a right pig’s ear of such and such.” “You know, that bit was great fun.”

The unhelpful version is to muddle this with evaluation. Because we are really working through our reactions this is not a good time to rely on our thinking to be objective or creatively critical. If we try to evaluate at this point it often gets lost in the search for blame, or into a plan to “stop it ever happening again”. At this stage when emotions run high, we will get emotively driven reactions and not cool analysis. It’s important to give ourselves time to recuperate.

Some crises are too big and over-stretch our coping strategy. They can leave us fixed in the heightened anxiety energy phase long after the events. We can feel we are still living through them and continue to experience severe reactions. In these situations, we may need extra or professional help to work through the damage a crisis has done to us. It is helpful to access counselling and other specialist support.

## When it has all moved on

We will know we are here because we will no longer be preoccupied with the crisis and recovering from it. We will have relocated the experience to a memory rather than something live in our thinking and emotions. Our attention will probably be with the next and unrelated pressing issue. In fact, this is the best time to do the proper evaluation of what occurred. It can be difficult to drag our attention back to it. If we can, we are more likely to get a more cool and objective analysis of what we can learn from the experience.

Questions to ask at this stage are:-

- What are the stages the crisis moved through?
- What warnings signs did we see and miss?
- What were our responses and how effective were they?
- Are there likely to be other crises like this?
- What can we do to be prepared?
- How skilled are we at responding to a crisis and what can we learn?
- What do I learn about myself from this?

Eventually we land with some new learning, some security in the way things are, and the crisis is relocated to memory, the past, something we say, “Do you remember when...?” maybe with horror, maybe with laughter.

At the end we are different because we have gone through this. We have all had our own crises before. We have come through them and learned from them. There will be new crises to come; things that are beyond our current ways of coping. We will not be able to prepare for every situation that may occur. Instead, with each crisis you face, I invite you to become more aware of the phases of the crisis curve and more skilled in dealing with them than the last time.