



Facilitator — October/November 2010



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Keeping Cool During a Crisis A Guide to Stress Management

It's hard to keep cool and think clearly in times of crisis. When things fall apart, emotions run high, which can hijack our normal ability to make good decisions and handle challenging situations.

Here are five tips that can help during a crisis:

1. Take deep breaths.

When we're under stress, we tend to take shallow breaths. Instead, take deep breaths—lots of them. Remind yourself that you can deal with the situation, even when the challenge as a whole seems overwhelming. Deep breaths are calming in any situation.

2. Ask yourself, "What are the things about this situation that I can control or influence? What is outside of my control?"

In crises, we sometimes focus on aspects of the situation that are out of our control. This only serves to intensify anxiety. Instead, make a list of what you can and cannot control or influence. Remind yourself that it doesn't help to mull over what has already happened. Instead, focus on the list of what you can do something about.

3. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling?"

It is a simple—but very important—question to ask yourself during a crisis situation. Our answer to this question is often uncomplicated. We might recognize "I'm feeling panicky," "I'm feeling overwhelmed" or "I'm feeling confused." These are not earth-shattering insights. Recognizing what we are feeling can make a big difference. In fact, recent brain research shows that simply stepping back and figuring out what we're feeling—labeling the emotion—is calming.

4. Ask yourself, "What do I/we need?"

This is another simple question that can be extraordinarily helpful. For example, you might realize "I need to talk to someone with more experience," "I need to talk to the home office" or "I need to get the police or fire department involved." It's especially crucial to recognize that what you need may be assistance from others—and then ask for that help.

5. Shift from panic to problem solving.

Shift your focus away from emotions and think instead about what your next step should be, even in tense emergency situations. One fire chief routinely sets his watch alarm to go off every 15 minutes when he's at the scene of a fire. When the alarm goes off, he stops for a moment to think about what needs to happen next. Sometimes he'll realize something as simple as "It's been a couple of hours, I need to get the firefighters to drink some water so they don't get dehydrated."

Shifting to questions like "What's the most important thing to do next?" is helpful. When you think about ways to solve the problem, you'll find that your emotional response quiets down.

6. Ask yourself, "What do I know for sure?"

Often in a crisis, we react as much to what may be true (but hasn't yet been established) as we are to what we know for a fact. This increases our anxiety. Similarly, much of our worry is about what might happen in the future. Remind yourself that much of what you are concerned about may be based on false rumors or inaccurate information. Remind yourself that you don't know for sure what the whole picture is or what the future holds. Tell yourself, "I'm going to wait until I find out for sure about that problem, and if it is a problem, I'll deal with it then."

If you can focus your attention on what you are feeling and what you need to do to deal with the problems, and away from issues that might not exist or which you have no control, you'll be better able to handle any crisis.

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