

## FAMILY CRISES

Families have experienced crises from the time that families were first initiated. It is probable that the family itself was formed in an attempt to reduce some of the factors which caused individual crises. While the number and type of crises will vary, depending upon the circumstances of the family and the events which occur, Gerald Caplan believes that the concept of crisis embodies the notion of a problem faced by an individual or a family for which its regular problem-solving methods are ineffective, as he explains in *Principles of preventative psychiatry*. (...)

Thomas McMurrain in *Intervention in human crisis*, described three categories of events which precipitate crisis: maturational events, exhaustion, and shock. *Maturational events* are transitional points which naturally occur as the family moves through its life cycle. Jay Haley, in an article called "Family therapy," states that family stress peaks at transition points in the life cycle. At these points the family is likely to become "stuck" and require therapeutic intervention to ease transit from one phase to the next. Carter and McGoldrick, in *The Family life cycle: A framework for family therapy*, divide life cycle stressors into vertical and horizontal elements. Vertical stressors are passed to a family from a previous generation and include family patterns, myths, and issues. Horizontal stressors are what the family experiences as it transits from one stage of development to another. Supporting this point is a study by Boyd Rollins and Harold Feldman (1970) indicating that marital satisfaction varied during pre- and postchildbearing stages in an inverse relationship to satisfaction with parenthood. Husbands appeared to be less affected by the stages of the life cycle than were wives. For males, the most critical portion of the life cycle occurred immediately prior to retirement. (...)

*Exhaustion—McMurrain's* second crisis producer—results from an extended period of coping which eventually produces crisis arising from persistent stress. Some examples include long-term illness, marital incompatibility in which the parents choose to stay together to raise the children, and poverty-level existence over an extended period of time. The effects of exhaustion crisis are less dramatic in their precipitation. They may often be mistaken by those in the helping professions as

unwillingness to cooperate or as irresponsibility to follow through, when the response may in fact result from the disorganization associated with exhaustion crisis.

*Shock crisis* is characterized by an event which occurs over a relatively short period of time and results in a sudden shock to the family, rendering it temporarily unable to cope. The crisis includes both profound and dramatic tragedies which occur unexpectedly, regardless of the mental health and stability of the family. Examples of shock crisis would be death, loss of house or household through fire, or perhaps a natural disaster such as an earthquake or flood.

The second factor in Hill's theory of stress involves the resources available to the family to deal with crisis. These resources include the individual strengths of the family members, the effectiveness of the problem-solving methods used by the family, and the extended support systems available to the family.

The individual strength of each family member is important, in that the family is a composite of its individual members. Leonard Pearlin and Carmi Schooler (1978) found that the more well-adjusted, competent, and productive each individual member of the family is, the more likely the family will be to solve its crises.

The problem-solving methods and coping strategies of the family are likewise important in the family's response to crisis. David Reiss and his associates (Westin & Reiss, 1979) found that the family's method of problem solving could predict whether the family would become involved in a rehabilitation program for one of its members. Often the family with well-developed problem-solving abilities is able to handle a problem successfully, and in so doing precludes the occurrence of crisis.

Social support networks include neighborhood, family, kin, and mutual self-help groups. The use of neighborhood networks in treating both individuals and families is discussed by Ross Speck and Carolyn Attneave in *Family network*, Neighborhoods which are cohesive and aware of crises among its members are more likely to respond in a helpful manner when a family is in crisis.

**Reference:** Kappenberg, R. P. (1994). *Family Crises*. In. Corsini, R. J. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology*. Vol. 2. (pp. 8-9). 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons.