

Crisis, Tragedy and Uncertainty:

Putting the Pieces Back Together



By

Michael A. Hinz, Ph.D.

Personal Life Coach

September 18, 2001

www.hinzdocs.com

Crisis, Tragedy and Uncertainty: Putting the Pieces Back Together

This is being written in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States in New York City, Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania. These are trying times for all, no matter where in the world you live, regardless of nationality, religion, race, creed, or age. No one is spared from having feelings, thoughts, reactions and from feeling personally connected to these tragic events. All have been affected.

Some may have a very personal connection with the tragedy by being there when it happened, by personally knowing one of the victims or by being related to someone who was directly impacted. Yet, no one is spared, because anyone who has followed and watched the events unfold on the television is personally connected to all that has happened.

It is heartening to see the show of support around the world for all those who have been victimized by these tragic events. It is heart warming to see the patriotism within the United States. As members of God's family, there are no boundaries to separate one from another. These family ties have been drawn closer together for many people following the tragedy. For others, the boundaries have been more clearly defined and set apart – perhaps not for the better.

Normal Reactions to Tragedy

In the aftermath of a crisis or tragic events, many people will feel quite differently from their normal selves. Some may feel: shocked, numbness, confused, dazed, dismayed, distracted, inattentive, angry, sad, frightened, terrified and so on. Some may also experience a wide range of physical symptoms such as: headaches, bodily aches and pains, upset stomach, diarrhea, appetite changes, sleep changes, anxiety symptoms, grief symptoms, depression symptoms, or a worsening of the various physical ailments they may have had prior (such as worsening of asthma, blood pressure, cold symptoms, etc.). Some feel extremely tired, drained or exhausted. Some may have a “revved” up feeling like they have to keep busy doing something, but may not know for sure what to do. Some might have crying fits come out of the blue. Rest assured that all of these are NORMAL reactions to a crisis and tragic events. In fact if an individual who has experienced such a crisis is not experiencing some of these symptoms, they may not be responding normally. They may be suppressing their reactions which is not particularly healthy in the long run. Or another possibility is that they just have not become personally involved in the events and have somehow managed to escape the circumstances.

In case you missed it the first time, I said that such feelings and reactions are normal. They are a normal reaction to an extremely abnormal situation. You are not supposed to feel good about something that is terrible, and likewise you should not feel bad about something that is good. So when someone is faced with a crisis or tragedy, they are supposed to feel differently. However, they should return to their normal way of life and feelings at some point. Depending upon the circumstances, the length of time to do this varies greatly, and also varies from individual to individual.

One prominent symptom that affects many in times of tragedy is that of anger. This normal feeling is a very important one in the grieving process that one goes through after suffering a loss. We have all suffered losses in this tragedy. Even if you have not suffered a personal loss of family or in knowing someone who died in the tragic events, we have all suffered a loss of some innocence. Some may never feel quite safe again. Some have vowed to never fly again. Others feel insecure as they go to work in their skyscraper offices. Some people of certain religions and nationalities are extremely fearful

of unwarranted vengeful and angry attacks on them or their families. For many, their way of living their lives will never quite be the same again.

Anyone who has suffered a loss will most likely feel some degree of anger. The feeling of anger is felt when an individual believes that an injustice of some kind has been done. Anger is felt when an individual believes that something that happened was unfair. Certainly in the case of this tragedy, a great injustice has been done and therefore a great deal of angry feelings is an appropriate and expected reaction for people to be having. However, that does not in any way whatsoever, excuse anyone to use angry feelings inappropriately. One injustice does not warrant another.

Angry feelings, like any of our feelings, need to be controlled appropriately. Sadly, some individuals have angrily lashed out at other innocent people, doing great harm, even murder. They have followed one injustice with an even greater injustice. That is not by any stretch of the imagination okay, excusable or appropriate. Thoughts of revenge frequently flow directly out of one's anger in tragic events. We must remember that revenge is not an emotion, it is a choice, it is an action. Yes, anger is an appropriate emotion to these tragic events, but what we do with our anger can be either good or bad. We can make good and appropriate choices to increase security and safety, to protect people, to directly correct injustices in appropriate ways in appropriate degrees. We can also allow the anger to misguide our decisions and actions and then do inappropriate things like to take revenge and hurt others unfairly. We all know that that is not okay and not to be sanctioned by any of us.

Taking Control of Normal Reactions

Okay, so we have all of these “normal” feelings and reactions, what do we do about them? All of these normal reactions that I have already mentioned are our body's built in coping and survival mechanisms to help us get through emergency situations. Emergencies are normally time limited, short lived and then things return to normal again. Our bodies cannot physically stay at an emergency level of readiness on a permanent basis, it is not designed for that purpose. It has to return to normal to remain healthy and strong. You see these “normal” feelings and reactions are normal only during the ‘emergency’ phase and then we should return to our prior feelings and the lives that we lived day in and day out before the crisis occurred.

One thing that anyone who is coping with crisis events should be on guard for is the natural tendency to withdraw or isolate themselves. This is an automatic defense mechanism. When feeling threatened or unsure, many people will pull back, withdraw or attempt to isolate themselves from that which they are frightened of. In an emergency crisis situation, we tend to isolate our feelings and reactions. In part, this is an attempt to maintain a sense of control. We are creatures of habit and we strive to maintain our daily routines and not let these strange feelings and reactions overrun our routine daily activities and schedules. In a sense, this self-protective mechanism is a good thing, but it sometimes causes unnecessary harm. Because as one pulls back or withdraws, one also pulls back from other coping mechanisms that could be very instrumental in helping them return to their normal lives.

Most people have strong traits of independence and autonomy, thinking they have to take care of themselves and their families all by themselves. They are reluctant to ask for help, seeing that as a sign of weakness. It doesn't make much sense, because such individuals are frequently the first ones to jump in to help someone else in times of need. Apparently, it is okay for them to offer assistance to someone else but they somehow don't rate the same kind of treatment. Doesn't make sense, but that is how it is for many people. We must remember that it is healthy to seek professional assistance to aid in one's healing and grieving.

At the same time, while everyone is pulling back and attempting to isolate themselves from those strange feelings and reactions, they likely are also working hard to put on a mask so that no one else can see their personal struggles. That helps protect them from others who might offer assistance. Many people are much more comfortable offering to help rather than accepting assistance from someone else. So in other words, they might be struggling horrifically with coping with the tragedy and no one else might even be able to tell.

Yes, most of us are excellent at bottling up all of these uncomfortable feelings and reactions. We stuff them in a bottle, cork it and put it on the shelf some place. Then we think every thing is okay and back to normal and under control again, but probably not. Over time these bottles tend to get filled up and then begin to spill over, or sometimes even get knocked off the shelf and then they really make a mess. In other words, frequently we stuff our feelings and reactions so that we can cope and deal with the emergency and then we try to forget about them. However, if we have not really addressed them and if they are significant enough, they tend to crop up again some time in the future when we least expect them. They come out of the blue again some time in the future when we are weakened by some other emergency, stressed out by life events, on anniversary dates, etc. It is almost as if they were in hiding all that time just waiting for something to release them (kind of like taking the cork out of the bottle).

Releasing the Backlog of Emotion

What should we do instead? People by design are very social beings. That is a great thing, because it happens to be a great coping resource in times of emergency. One of the best things a person can do for themselves in times of crisis is talk about it. Get it out of their system. That's difficult to do at times because we often don't want to burden or 'traumatize' some one else, so we keep it to ourselves. The helping professionals, healthcare workers, emergency personal such as police, firemen, rescuers, etc. are extremely good at bottling their feelings and thoughts up so as to not burden any one and so that they can continue to be effective at doing their jobs. The bad thing is that many forget to go back after the emergency is over and deal with the tragic impact it has had upon their lives. Remember, since no one else, including the person him or herself can see any external injuries, everyone thinks that they are just fine when perhaps they are not.

Find someone that you can talk to about it. Talk about your feelings, about being scared, about not knowing what to do, about whatever comes to mind to talk about. It is amazing what healing power this talking process can have for an individual. For one thing, when a person begins to talk to someone else, they don't have to carry the burden all alone any more. They know that someone else cares and that they are not all alone in this crisis. This also tends to empower the person to take the necessary steps to deal more effectively with the situation. I sometimes find that the analogy of a dam holding back flood waters can be helpful in understanding this process. A dam is built to hold back water for various purposes, but when there is too much rain or a flood or just too much water for the dam to hold – then there needs to be a controlled release. Some of the excess water is released so that the dam does not break. With this controlled release, everything can get back to normal again. So instead of holding all of that emotion inside, it is important to talk to someone. Talk to someone.

Talking to someone about your experience and feelings that may seem out of control to you, helps to return things to normal and reinstate your sense of control. The more horrendous the situation, the more time and talking it may take to stem the tide. But bottling it all up inside is not the answer, that is just like asking for the dam to break and that is not a good thing. I mentioned 'controlled release' in terms of the dam, but that applies to the individual in crisis, too. It is important for the individual to find someone to talk to and to find some way to release the back log of emotion. However, some control is appropriate. For instance, it would be inappropriate for a parent to talk to his or her children and

therefore, overwhelm and unnecessarily frighten them in the process. So it is important to find an appropriate peer or helping professional to talk to, but the release of the emotion and talking about the experience is an important part of the process of returning to normal again.

Talking to Children

Many parents wonder how much to tell their children or what to tell them when tragedy strikes. There are no simple and easy answers to this question. That all depends upon the situation's circumstances and also on the particular child. For example, with this terrorist attack, it is inappropriate to tell young children very much about it and certainly inappropriate to allow them to be glued to the television watching everything that happens. This will unnecessarily frighten and traumatize the average young child. A parent or adult must make some kind of decision how much to tell the child and how to tell them. A good rule of thumb is to tell the child on a "need to know basis". What I mean is that you tell the child just as much as they need to know to safeguard them and protect them. It is not healthy for children to be over protected and completely naïve about what is going on in the world, but depending upon their age and maturity level, there really are a lot of details of daily events that most children really have little need to know. Of course, the older the child is the more appropriate for them to know more. However, it should always be communicated at a level the child can understand and comprehend and in such a way to not unduly stress, overwhelm or traumatize the child. They also need to have you, someone that they trust, be available to them to talk about their thoughts, fears and feelings.

There are no hard and fast rules that work for every single child. You must use your own judgment and don't be afraid to ask for advice from other parents, friends or professionals. Generally, many young children might not even show much interest in events unless they see mom or dad falling apart or getting frightened – then they will pay attention too, but mostly to their frightened parents. Parents are the child's most important security blanket. Most younger children will feel okay as long as their "security blanket" is okay. So it is important to reassure and comfort the children and really screen how much and what kind of information is given to them.

Many children will receive information from other sources, such as school, the television, computer, radio, friends, etc. and they will sometimes get more information than they can handle. Again, parents and other adults must reassure them and bolster their sense of stability and security. Be available to listen and to answer questions. Remember that they just want to have things back to normal again and to know that they are loved and safe. Parents and adults who are probably wrapped up in the emergency themselves must make sure they take ample time to be with their children and to be available to them. Coincidentally, children are a great resource to help adults get their lives back to normal too.

Teenagers generally have access to the most information resources and yet, maturity wise, don't always have the necessary resources to cope effectively with tragic events. They will frequently turn to their peers before seeking out an adult, but it is important for parents and significant adults to make themselves available to teens who are struggling to cope with events. Be willing to listen without judgment or criticism. Be willing to share your own thoughts and feelings appropriately. Reassure them that you will do your best to care for them and to protect them and that you are there for them. Teenagers frequently want to do something and look for ways to contribute – encourage them and support them in appropriate endeavors.

Returning to Normalcy

Getting back to normal means you have to sleep, eat, work, play, etc. -- do all the things you would normally do. In emergency situations many things tend to be forgotten or left out. Your health demands that you get good sleep and eat properly. These are not luxuries, they are necessities. Maintain your normal eating and sleeping habits as much as possible. This is very important to cope effectively. Exercise or some kind of physical activity is also very important. Even if you don't normally exercise, some kind of activity whether it be to walk or ride a bicycle or doing anything else physical, helps your body to switch off the emergency systems and return to normal. Pull yourself away from the television and get back to living your life. Reliving the carnage over and over by watching the television is probably not helping to return to a normal daily routine and may be promoting more trauma than healing. Yes, it is normal to be curious and to want to know what is happening, but try to maintain a good balance.

As I mentioned earlier, your body goes into an emergency status which gears you up to do something physical like to run away from the danger or to fight off the danger, etc. Adrenaline and other chemicals released into your body allow you to react immediately to the emergency so that you survive. If you are letting all your normal routines go by the wayside and are glued to the television, you are not doing any physical activity to burn off the chemicals dumped into your body in reaction to the emergency. This is responsible for some of the physical symptoms that you may experience following an emergency, such as the revved up feeling, the higher blood pressure, the upset stomach, the loss of appetite, fatigue, headaches, sleeplessness, etc. These are associated with normal bodily functions that are triggered in reaction to the emergency. These need to be turned off so that your body can return to its normal state. Exercise or some kind of physical activity is best for turning off this emergency response.

What else can one do? In emergency situations, our lives seem to be put on hold. It is like hitting the pause button on the VCR but the VCR happens to be our very lives. Unlike a VCR, our lives cannot remain on hold for very long. So a return to normal living is an important part of the recovery process. It tells us that things are okay and puts the situation back into perspective. An individual who may not know how to handle a crisis situation is much more comfortable handling the details of their daily life. It is important for them to get back to those routines that they know how to handle, feel more comfortable with and feel empowered to do something about. So it is important to return to those normal day in day out routines and to not just put everything on hold indefinitely.

Try to return to your normal schedule as much as possible as soon as possible. This helps you feel more in control again. For example, if you normally exercise, then get back to it. Attend the sports event you planned to go to, etc. Try to do those things that you were looking forward to instead of just focusing exclusively on the tragedy. This is especially important if children are involved. Children are more affected by this upheaval than adults sometimes are because their normal routine and schedule creates a sense of stability and safety that children need in order to thrive. So it is generally very important for children to return to a sense of normalcy and routine as soon as possible.

Maintain Your Values and Beliefs

Sometimes when people get wrapped up in an emergency situation, they might forget some of the values, beliefs and code of morality that normally directs their daily behavior. This happens when the individual gets carried along in the tide of powerful emotions. One example is becoming overly consumed in the anger of the situation. It is difficult to think when one is very angry. As a result, some individuals end up making inappropriate choices and acting in ways that they would not normally. This sometimes spawns hate crimes against innocent people. It brings out the worst impulses of the individual who acts upon them irrationally without due consideration or restraint. Two wrongs certainly don't make a right.

In emergencies, one should rely on their values, belief systems, morality, spirituality and every resource at their disposal to return to normalcy. It is some of these very tenets that make each individual so uniquely who they are and forms the foundations of the lives they live. Such a foundation is a source of great strength and fortitude in times of trials and tribulations. It is there for constancy in both the good times and the bad. Use them wisely and consistently.

When a Normal Reaction Becomes Problematic

A normal reaction to an emergency situation is resolved in an appropriate amount of time following the end to the emergency. This amount of time varies greatly depending upon the type and extent of the emergency and upon the individuals coping with it. However, sometimes one's response does not return to normal. When this happens, the normal reaction becomes problematic and needs to be addressed with professional assistance.

A tragedy by definition is a disastrous event that is likely to be overwhelming to the average person. Appropriate professional assistance can be a tremendous aid in recovering from such an emotional injury. The individual who 'bottles' or 'stuffs' it all, is much more likely to need such assistance at some time in the future, than is the individual who talks about it, shares the responsibility and the burden with someone else, continues to take very good care of themselves and to take appropriate proactive steps to cope with the trauma.

Here are some of the signs that indicate an individual should seek professional assistance to help them recover from a traumatic experience: reliving or re-experiencing over and over the traumatic event in their thoughts and dreams, having the sense that it is still ongoing, experiencing great distress when reminded of it by certain triggering cues, persistent avoidance of certain activities that were a regular part of their daily routine, not being able to return to normal sleeping and eating patterns, repeated emotional outbursts of anger, unable to concentrate, a state of hypervigilance, uncontrollable crying jags, feeling detached from others, restricted feelings, sense of a foreshortened future, and experiencing impairment in ability to function in social, occupational or other important areas of their life.

Remember that a person can feel this way as an initial reaction to the crisis or tragedy and that would be considered a normal reaction. However, it ceases to be a normal reaction when there is no return of the person to a sense of normalcy following the cessation of the tragedy. When a person remains stuck almost as if they were frozen in time, that is definitely not normal and must be addressed with professional healthcare resources. If anyone has doubts or questions, it is always safest and best to talk to someone, ask for some advice, be willing to seek help.

Conclusion

Tragedies happen and cannot always be avoided. If tragedy strikes your life, remember your coping resources are there to help you survive. Your values, beliefs, spirituality, family and friends are very important resources for you to utilize in surviving and recovering. Don't be afraid to accept assistance. Be willing to talk, to listen, to share. Don't withdraw and isolate yourself from the resources that will help you return to normalcy. Be willing to seek professional assistance. Talk to someone. Talk to someone.

Remember that you must return your life to normalcy, NOT as if nothing has happened but in spite of what has happened.

Get To Know Mike



I am a life coach and counseling psychologist with over 14 years of professional counseling experience, including five years in the US Air Force, two years as the clinical director of an agency that provided counseling services to children and families, and over six years of graduate level training. But all my life I have been engaged in coach-like activities with the people I have had contact.

I am married and have two children. I enjoy reading, watching movies, camping and the outdoors. I am a handyman and like the challenge of building and fixing things. I have been a draftsman, both of house plans and of factory machinery. I have been a fast food store manager, school maintenance man, school bus driver and self-employed. I am interested in computers, electronic technology and all aspects related to building construction, including solar energy and earth contact housing. I have been active in the Boy Scouts for over 13 years. I am an Eagle Scout and I am currently a Cub Scout leader.



I am active in my Catholic parish and am on the school board of the Catholic school that my children attend. I spent two of the most rewarding and challenging years of my life at Conception Seminary College (1984-86). I was a volunteer child-care worker at Covenant House in NYC (a crisis center for homeless and runaway children).

As you can see, I have been called to travel in many different directions so far in my life. My interests are all over the place. That has made it very challenging for me to figure out what my true purpose and direction should be in life. But, it is interesting and challenging to see how my life continues to unfold. Through it all, one of my greatest enjoyments has always been working with "ideas" and helping others "create" with their ideas. Creativity is a wonderful thing and it is truly wonderful to share in it with others.

My Life experience helps me be a great Life Coach

My broad base of life experiences helps me to connect with other's ideas, challenges, struggles and gives me a deeper understanding of their personal experience. My idealistic thinking coupled with my grounded, realistic, hands-on practicality help me to see both the big picture as well as the details. It gives me a unique ability to think abstractly in creating hopes, visions and dreams, and then turn them into concrete, detailed, very practical, organized and planned strategies to get the job done.

I have been blessed with many talents, abilities and skills, which has made me keenly aware of that struggle in our lives of discovering our 'true' purpose. I take great pleasure in sharing in that discovery process with others. I also have a sometimes, very dry, sense of humor. I have often found that some of the most important things in life are very subtle.

My Personal Life Mission

I enjoy inspiring a person to step into their greatness. I believe we all have greatness hiding within, just waiting to bust out and do wonderful things. It is a great pleasure to help someone to do that and see the wonderful changes that unfold in their life.



My mission is to serve others. Sometimes I forget that and get wrapped up in the nitty gritty of life. But somehow I get back on track and the energy flows back and Life springs forth again from within. That is a wonderful feeling. I want you to live that feeling, too. All my life I have felt I was called to do something great. I think that I am able to connect to that greatness when I am able to help someone else connect to their greatness within.