

Crisis Survival

A crisis is a terrible situation without a ready solution. There are four basic steps to surviving a crisis:

Step 1. Look for solutions

You may not be able to fully fix the problem, but look for partial solutions. There may also be solutions in the future, but the wait is long, like an upcoming medical appointment to determine whether a new mass is cancerous. If there's truly nothing more you can do in the meanwhile, don't frustrate yourself by trying to fix what can't be fixed.

Step 2. Accept your emotions

Allow your emotions to come and go. Visualization can help. Picture your thoughts and emotions floating down a stream like leaves on the water. Some of those leaves are rotted and ugly, some look like they're on fire, and some look strangely beautiful. Rather than trying to stop the stream, allow it to flow, changing on its own. With this technique you can put a little space between you and your emotions, while still acknowledging their reality. It works better than trying to change them, getting caught up in them, or shutting them down entirely.

Step 3. Improve the moment

You may not be able to change your emotions, but you can improve the moment while you wait for solutions to come. Do something different, something that will distract you from the worry at hand. If you're indoors, try walking in a forest. Outside? Come in, light some candles, and cozy up in a blanket. Try out activities from the "ACCEPTS" worksheet (page 122) or the "Antidepressant Activities" section of this chapter (page 123). Most of them can be done whether you're in a crisis or not.

Step 4. Don't make it worse

When there's nothing you can do to improve a crisis, focus instead on how you can keep it from getting worse. Self-medicating, binge eating, sending angry emails, and letting go of the anchors that keep your mood stable are all examples of behaviors that make a crisis worse. The anchors that help stabilize mood are different for each person, but often include sleep, regular wake times, exercise, social supports, medication, and a healthy diet.

There are many possibilities to explore in those four steps. If something doesn't work for you, then move on to the next strategy. Keep a running list of strategies that work and those that make things worse (see **Sample Crisis Survival Guide**).

The goal here is not to solve the crisis or end the distress. Time fixes many problems that we can't fix ourselves, and it would be nice to be able to fast-forward to that better place. Short of that, improve the moments in that long wait, avoid the frustration of wrestling with problems that can't be solved, and stay away from things that make it worse.

Sample Crisis Survival Guide

Distracting Activities:

- Visit an animal shelter and spend time with dogs or cats
- Go for a walk
- Clean out some clutter
- Plan my next vacation
- Play *Words with Friends*®
- Shop for something inexpensive, and spend a long time looking for it
- Go to the movies

Soothing and Distracting Sensations:

- Go swimming
- Aromatherapy
- Stand on one foot
- Chew on a strong flavor, like ginger, mint, citrus, or pepper

What to Avoid:

- Breaking things
- Ranting on social media
- Staying in bed during the day
- Going to places where I'd be tempted to drink

ACCEPTS: Seven Strategies to Survive a Crisis

When you are stuck with troubles that you can't resolve, these seven steps will help preserve some peace of mind and mental sanity.

Activities. Engage in activities that are easy and engrossing (see "Antidepressant Activities" for ideas).

Contribute to others. Doing things for other people gets you out of your head.

Comparisons. Think of a time when things were worse, or of someone else whose problems are bigger.

Emotions. Change your surroundings to promote positive emotions. Play your favorite music, engage with nature, watch a comedy, cook your favorite meal, or reminisce over positive memories.

Passing by. If you can't get negative thoughts out of your head, visualize them passing by like leaves floating down a stream.

Thoughts. Find a simple, comforting thought and repeat it in your head, such as "This too shall pass," "Roll with it," "I will survive," or a spiritual text, poem, or song.

Sensations that soothe. Soothe your senses by taking a hot bath or shower, getting a massage, stretching, using aromatherapy, or savoring a piece of fruit.